

# **Creative Democracy:** an Anthropology of and by means of Design

Paola Pierri



**University of the Arts London**  
London College of Communication

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**Supervisory Team:**

Director of Study: Dr. Alison Prendiville, London College of Communication  
Supervisor: Dr. Adam Drazin, University College London

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To Ferdinando

# Abstract

This is a theory-based research which I intend to be a contribution to all practice of design that are, in one way or another, concerned with the question of democracy. Building on the critical accounts raised by scholars within the field of design for '*making publics*' I propose, in this work, a departure from the thinking of John Dewey and an exploration into another strand of thought, that also investigates the link between democracy and social creativity, and which is based on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis.

Dewey and Castoriadis moved from very similar concerns but the two thinkers also differed on key points, and the main difference between their two strands of thought could be found in the fact that whilst Dewey attempted to '*socialise the political*', Castoriadis aim was rather to '*politicise the social*'.

I open this monograph articulating the reasons for design practitioners and scholars to look into the work of Cornelius Castoriadis and I continue in my writing to describe what I have learnt by exploring how and if design has a role to play - through its repertoire of creative tactics - in order to advance creative democracy as an everyday practice. I will describe the issues I encountered in my two field-works within the area of design for mental health and I will articulate what I discovered about the limitations of current conceptions of creativity, as elaborated and practiced within neo-liberal modes of design practices.

Through this work I will advance as my main contribution to knowledge a proposal for a renovated mode of design, which I have called '*Design for the Radical Imagination*' and which has - as its main ambition - the creation and the nurturing of a collective subject that can interpret and change the world politically.

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# Creative Democracy: an Anthropology *of* and *by means of* Design

*“If complexity presently outstrips humanity’s capacities to think and control, there are two options: one is to reduce complexity down to a human scale; the other is to expand humanity’s capacities. We endorse the latter position.”*

(Srnicsek and Williams, 2016)

## Introduction: Design and Democracy

Anyone interested in Design and Democracy will probably be familiar with the work of the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and the way in which his thinking has been used in design (Di Salvo, 2009, Le Dantec. 2012, Le Dantec and Di Salvo, 2013).

Pressed by the urge of his present historical conditions and the rise of the Nazis, in the last years of his life Dewey wrote, in an essay called “Creative Democracy – The task before us”, the following words:

*“(...) the depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically; as if our ancestors had succeeded in setting up a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics. We acted as if democracy were something that took place mainly at Washington and Albany – or some other state capital – under the impetus of what happened when men and women went to the polls once a year or so – which is a somewhat extreme way of saying that we have had the habit of thinking of democracy as a kind of political mechanism that will work as long as citizens were reasonably faithful in performing political duties.”*

(Dewey 1939 in Bodyston 1988, p. 225)

The current times of renewed crisis of democracy and crisis of the democratic life are the context in which my work unfolds, as my research and practice aim at functioning as a reminder again that democracy does not perpetuate itself mechanically, but that it requires individuals to renew it and re-create it *by design*.



To do an analysis of what this crisis of democracy is really about, we should start by asking ourselves the difficult question of whether what we are witnessing is actually a rejection against liberal democracy (Appadurai, 2017), or in other words, whether citizens are “*merely disappointed with existing political elites, or are they actually becoming open to authoritarian alternatives to democracy?*” (Mounk, 2018 p. 99). In the countries where populists and authoritarian parties are in Government, in fact, this happened through the process of democratic elections as supportive citizens voted in high numbers. What does this say to us about the state of our democracies? Should we try to defend democracy from itself? And what would it mean to do so?

In order to grapple with these questions and what I would define an apparent *democratic paradox* (as less democracy might seem to be the solution to the democratic crisis) we need to distinguish the *form* from the *effect*. Formally, in fact, right wing and populist parties' surge is a democratic result. But in practice, what characterises these populist and right wings Governments is their attempt, once in power, to dismantle the check and balances of the liberal State, attack the minorities and concentrate authority in their hands (Krastev, 2017). These democracies (which are notwithstanding democratic in their form) are illiberal in practice. The question becomes therefore a question of quality of democracy and of which principles and values we want a democratic Government to embrace. In order to understand how (and whether) democracy can be saved, we need therefore to look at the different conceptions of democracy, their qualities and challenges (Della Porta, 2013). In her book “Can Democracy be saved?” Donatella Della Porta identifies four models of democracy: liberal, participatory, deliberative and e-democracy and theorises that the crisis we are living is a crisis of the liberal model of democracy (which had been for long hegemonic in Western countries). She suggests therefore that a possible way out of this crisis might be to experiment with combinations of the other modes of democratic participation: “*Critical citizens are not necessarily disaffected citizens. Many of them could become (...) committed citizen, willing to invest their time, energy and knowledge in the attempt to find solutions to complex problems.*” (Della Porta, 2013 p. 188). I still believe – even in time of populisms - this to be a possibility.

I share in fact the belief of Cornelius Castoriadis (who I am going to properly introduce in a moment), who during a lecture in 1986 said: *“We know that the people decide, or rather, we want the people to decide. And we know, or should know, that what the people decides isn’t the ultimate truth; it can be wrong, but there is no other solution. We will never be able to save the people against its will; what we can do is give it the institutional means to correct itself if it made a mistake (...)”*

(Castoriadis in Escobar *et al*, 2010 p.126). In line with his thought, I believe the crisis of democracy that we are facing to be a crisis of those means to correct and improve democratic participation. Moreover, I believe this to be due to what Franco Berardi Bifo recently called the impotence of the will, as in fact: *“Impotence and the rage that impotence provokes - especially among white men - is (...) the deep and current return of fascism”* (Berardi Bifo, 2018 p. 12).

This impotence and humiliation of which Bifo talks about could help us explaining the otherwise paradoxical situation in which the poor are voting together with the rich *“a serial liar and tax dodger”* (Mishra, 2017 p. 112), reminding us once again that humans can operate independently – and even opposingly I would say – to their self-interest or the interests of their peers.

I felt the urge to investigate these contradictions in more details: is democracy really to be saved? And from what enemies? Is an undemocratic choice the only option against this crisis of democracy? What could we respond to the rage and humiliation of an increased number of people? And what to do of humiliation as a political category to be used for political analysis and action? It is with these concerns in mind that I embarked in my doctoral journey, with the social policy and community sector as my field of reflection and action, and design as a new and promising tool.

### **i) Design as a ‘double headed monster’**

I started looking into design around 2009, coming from a background in social work and previous research and personal engagement in social movements. I was at that time searching for new practices that could reinvigorate the landscape of political actions and get disenfranchised subjects close to politics again, and I was impressed after my first ‘encounter’ with design (in its activist and socially embedded applications) by the sense of positivity and the opening up of possibilities that the discipline seemed to be bringing. I saw its practice to be

accessible and refreshing, therefore potentially adaptable to be used as a *proxy* to engage subjects - who had been left out - into political discourses again.

As I started reading more about design, initially through the work of Nigel Whiteley (1993) and Victor Papanek (1985), I learnt about the long history of design social engagement (from the work of William Morris, to Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus School, through the Italian design radicals, and others) and I was pleased to see there was a long tradition of design's entanglement with society and social struggles.

From that time, I have never stopped searching and reading about design and, in a disordered quest for new tools and methods that could refine and reinvigorate my own practice working in civil society organisations, I discovered part of the literature around service design (Sangiorgi and Prendiville, 2017), social design (Armstrong *et al*, 2014) - or design for social innovation (Manzini, 2015) - and I learnt about the tradition of participatory design (Schuler and Namioka, 1993) and of course activist and critical design (Di Salvo, 2012). I felt I had found my place. After few years of using design in different projects for social inclusion and justice, I started my personal and intellectual journey from being a 'design enthusiast', to become a more *critical designer*, in the sense that Dunne and Raby originally intended (2014): exploring how to use design to offer alternatives to how things are; to embrace a more positive and idealistic stance in order to challenge and change values, ideas and beliefs. This period also corresponded to when I started becoming at times *critical* of design practice itself, questioning its capacity to really deal with the task of the programmatic transformation of social realities and the promotion of democratic values. This was happening at a time in which designers were asked to "Stand up for democracy"<sup>1</sup> and to put their skills and profession at the fore-front of the struggles to defend our democratic principles and institutions. I felt I was going, perhaps counter-intuitively, in the opposite direction and my faith into the role of design started fading. I started seeing everywhere the *frictions* between, on one hand, the overly optimistic tone of prevalent discourses around the use of design in the public realm (Design Commission, 2015 and 2013,

<sup>1</sup> "Stand up for democracy" was an initiative launched by Ezio Manzini and Victor Margolin in 2017 that called designers and design educators to commit to protecting democracy from de-democratizing processes. The statements and the contributions of what has later become a community-based project are available here <http://www.democracy-design.org/>. The page appears to have not been updated since November 2019.

Mulgan, 2014, Bason, 2014) and on the other, the reality of my direct experience of using design collaboratively with different actors in social projects in the UK during times of *austerity* in social services (from 2011 to 2016), when funding had been squeezed to the minimum, conflicts and divergent visions of social care were evident, and diverse political views polarized and clashed.

Even on the theme of democracy, design was proving itself to be insufficient, with some scholars starting to highlight almost a tension at the level of values and principles between design and democracy (Tonkinwise, 2019). Personally, the more I looked at the new ideas that design was promoting to address the most pressing social challenges, the more I struggled to see where the value of design in reality was. Mainly based on an a-critical use of technology and digital solutions; often invoking acts of *disruption* for the sake of disruption; permeated of *solutionism*, which rarely questioned the ways problems were portrayed in the first place, design was rather *designing out* problems and their complexity (Blyth and Kimbell, 2011) by telling a single story of social services and social arrangements. Moreover these examples of design never elaborated a critic of the founding conditions of the status quo (Julier, 2013) and consequently, they were '*politically inert*' (Kiem, 2013 p. 214) and lacked the '*ability to galvanise action against structural unsustainability*.' (idem)

From this moment onwards, I started thinking of design as a "double-headed monster" (Borka as cited in Bieling, 2019 p.12), one side powerful and progressive, the other side dangerous and potentially conservative. Therefore my practice and research became focused on investigating how to maximise one side (the powerful and progressive) over the other, by exploring different ways for design to take an explicit political stance that could listen to the voices of dissent, expose the conflicts in the system, and reveal the root causes of the social problems (Prado, de O. Martins and de Oliveira, 2016). Although from a critical stance, I continued in the years that followed to explore and use design in new ways and for new purposes. I started looking for instance at how to embed design at the core of civil society organisations and as a practice that could be hybridised with more traditional techniques that this sector had been using for years. I also started framing my work with design as being about re-invigorating democracy and

democratic practices, by dealing with the everyday making of alternative models of social services and social justice. By working in these ways, I became much more interested in the field of design for ‘making publics’ and new social assemblages inspired by the work of John Dewey (and specifically “The Public and its problems” from 1927).

### **ii) Design and the Deweyan tradition**

The question of the role of design to ‘*make publics*’ has been mainly addressed within the participatory design scholarly tradition (Le Dantec, 2016; Le Dantec and Di Salvo, 2013), although it is relevant to many different approaches to design – and namely speculative design, critical design, adversarial design, design fiction – which all share the common purpose of seeing design as a process of inquiry to critique and reformulate social and political norms by practicing alternative ways of doing politics. As argued by Hansson *et al* (2018), what all these approaches have in common is ‘*an underlying commitment to viewing design as embedded in the production of publics and to making political and social issues, and shared struggles, visible.*’ (p. 3).

Starting from the assumptions, made by Dewey, that publics are not given as they assemble around issues and continuously evolve (Dewey, 1927), several scholars have started interrogating the role of design in this process of ‘making’ publics. The questions raised by Dewey have been considered for design studies to be both relevant and productive (Di Salvo, 2009). Relevant as presenting a vision of the public, which is in line with the predominant academic views of publics being multiple, inclusive and plural. It is productive, because it gives to design (both theoretically and practically) a clear role to play in the question of the public sphere - next to other disciplines that have traditionally dealt with the topic - through its focus on the material aspects of public formation and the process of *making*.

But issues with design for making publics have also been raised, as scholars have been questioning the effect of these practices, sometimes relegated to the space of art galleries, whose impact on action is rarely (if ever) assessed (Di Salvo, 2009).

An interesting contribution to the field of design for making publics comes from the work of Noortje Marres, who has been drawing extensively on Dewey to

address the question of 'how are publics made with things' and conceptualise the idea of *material participation* (2012). The next pages are devoted to the presentation and analysis of her work.

Moving away from a more liberal interpretation of the work of the pragmatist author as traditionally used within design studies (Birbak *et al*, 2018), Marres interestingly presents a new reading of John Dewey. She traces a clear distinction between the issue of *affectedness* (usually raised within liberal tradition – and also very much highlighted in design studies), and the issue of *relevance*, which is, according to her, the central point in the pragmatist view of publics. Looking at *publics* only through the lens of affectedness means – Marres states - to mainly focus on the question of how actors perceive to be affected by an issue, and to explore the disjuncture between those who are affected and those who actively take part in the fora where those issues become 'public issues'. In this view, the problem becomes a problem of representation (and of who is under-represented), which, once identified, could be solved by simply putting in place procedures to include the voices of those who are left out of a public debate. This view is usually present in design discourses which tend to adopt a problem-solving and proceduralist view of participation in democracy.

In contrast to this view, and drawing on the work of John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, Marres proposes to address the problem of *relevance* instead, which tackles the different question of how to deal with publics who are '*located at a remove from sites of issue formation, but are also intimately affected by these issues (...)*' (2012, p. 55). Putting at the centre the question of issue formation immediately shifts our attention to the problem of 'access' to the platforms where issues are made. The problem according to this view becomes therefore a problem of the *instruments* that are needed to affirm the relevance of certain groups to deal with issue formation, over others. From this distinction, according to Marres, it follows a further one: whilst in the liberal view the problem is defined in a way that makes possible its own resolution (those who are currently outside of the problem definition process could be later included), the pragmatist view sees the insider/outsider dynamic as having a formative role. This dynamic is in fact not problematic at all, but rather it is what constitute the public in its essence and in its own contradictions:

*“The impossibility of a straightforward resolution of the insider/outsider conundrum has consequences for how we judge the material public. It means that it would be misguided to criticize publics for failing to perceive the relevance of issues that so intimately affect them, as this is to fail to take seriously their status as outsiders to platforms of issue formation. But the opposite suggestion, that publics should simply accept their status as outsiders – and, for instance, just let the stake-holders and other professionals get on with it – is equally inappropriate, as it fails to consider the intimate modes of issue entanglements that mark material publics.”*

(Marres, 2012 p. 55)

This passage is very relevant for the purpose of articulating Marres critique of certain understanding of the question of the publics, as it warns us against the risk of what she calls *externalisation* or *internalisation*. The first (externalisation) would assume that the issues are simply ‘out there’ and the only thing that is needed is an understanding of these issues by the people involved; the second (internalisation), on the other hand, seems also to mistakenly assume that an intimate understanding of the issue is the only thing that is needed, hence underplaying the role of access to the platform where publics are organised and conflictual opinions can be voiced.

In other words: *“In Dewey’s sense of the term, a public comes into existence when persons, having become conscious of and sufficiently affected by the consequences of associative behaviour (habits) to deem it unacceptable, form a collective group or movement with a common interest in having such consequences systematically controlled or cared for.”* (Narayan, 2016 p. 24) For Dewey, in fact, the organising and achieving access to platforms of recognition is the primary task for the public to achieve, and the dynamics of achieving (or not) this task are the dynamics that explain the inclusion or exclusion of certain subjects from society as a consequence. Gaining access to recognition, therefore, requires that the new interests are understood directly by those affected, then articulated in order to become visible outside of the small circle where these interests have initially formed, and finally to get access to the platforms where publics are organised, so that the opinions of the new forming publics can be voiced.

Although I might not fully agree with Marres and her partaking in the ‘material turn’ in political theory (Coole and Frost, 2010) and its origins and impact on

democracy (Honig, 2017)<sup>2</sup>, I do in fact agree with her critique that the political architecture, the language and the institutional procedures for the participation of implicated social actors cannot be un-problematically assumed, but need to be posed as the contested object of political practice.

Critiques to these practices of design which deal with making publics visible have also been raised and I want to highlight two of them: one regarding the role of the designer, and the other addressing the conception of the public itself.

The first critique raises the concern that the whole process of ‘making’ publics might end up attributing to the latter the quality of a commodity (Di Salvo, 2009), a new sort of product that design can make. As Di Salvo also reminds us (2009), even if we assume that the publics could be made, their actions cannot be engineered, as the role of design stops at the point of discovery and articulation of an issue, as the endeavour of facilitating action should not be a role for design to play. On this point, as Marres also highlighted, the wider problem of the role of the experts (including then the designers) comes into question, as publics cannot be ‘made’ externally, by the judgement of an actor - who might also not be directly affected by the issue – who assumes the task of deciding who among those who are affected should or should not be included and heard. As some scholars have noted, in fact, publics are already there (Birbak *et al*, 2018) and they are already busy defining their issues, modes of engagement, and tactics to make themselves relevant. I will come back to the question of expertise as something potentially problematic later in more details (*cfr. Section 3.2*) The Asset Based Approach: ‘Use what you have to secure what you have not’).

The second critique runs even on a deeper level, as it deals with the fundamental question of who is the public in the pragmatist tradition. We should not overlook the fact that in the work of Dewey the definition of the public emerges from the need to explain the existence of the State. Dewey describes the public in fact, as persons that acquire some awareness of their condition and their needs and, considering these not to be acceptable or not being sufficiently represented, look

<sup>2</sup> I am not going to expand on this theme as this is a huge scholarly debate that would fall out of the remit of this work but I am aware of the debate as articulated in Coole and Frost (2010). My main objection to the *new-materialist* turn regards the affirmation of the symmetry of agency between humans and nonhumans (or other than humans). For a critique to this point see Tim Ingold “When SPIDER meets ANT” (Ingold, 2011).



outside for agencies that could represent them and give them access to platforms of relevance. These agencies and officials, appointed by the public, are the institutions and the servants that make the State. This explanation of the mechanisms of public formation does tell us very little about what is going on *within* the public, on things like individuals' different opinions, feelings of belonging, awareness, frustrations, conflicts.

In my field-work - as I will articulate better later - this last point of critique becomes particularly relevant. Understanding the public only from the two dimensions of affectedness and relevance in fact proved in my cases inadequate. Although both these instances were present - as *my* publics struggled to perceive themselves as being affected by certain issues and they did not have access to those platforms where issues were formed in the first place - none of these two dimensions on its own (or combined) would give the full picture of what the issues of *my* publics were. Questions of affectedness, I would argue, also present the limitation of articulating the question of publics too narrowly. They only consider affectedness as being about the personal experience of being affected, whilst overlooking the question of solidarity from those who do not experience the same issues directly. These people - I believe - can still perceive certain issues as being unjust and even if they are not affected directly can still decide to join forces in the process of making a public. Questions of relevance, on the other hand, simply assume that given a platform the public will some-how manage to make the best use of this and for its own interests, and do not consider possible issues of manipulation or misuse of these platforms. As I have briefly articulated before in the Introduction in fact (through the case of those people from lower economic backgrounds voting for a *'tax dodger and a liar'*), the publics might even be misguided in the formulation of what is their best interest (and I will come back to this point later in Chapter 1).

In my thesis I intend to build on the previous points: on one hand, by bringing the existing critique to the role of design one step further by proposing an alternative practice that questions the role of the designer as an expert (I will illustrate this in Chapter 2); on the other hand, I am going to articulate in this manuscript a further critique to the work of Di Salvo and Le Dantec on design for making publics by

developing a component that is perhaps overlooked in their work. I would in fact expand on the creative part of the creative democracy concept on which Dewey's work is based. The literature on design for making publics in fact currently focuses on the following points: the role of the inquiry, the process of issues articulation, the role of attachments and the process of 'infrastructuring' (all topics I will deal with in this work). What I believe is currently missing in this literature is a detailed articulation of how the public understand itself in practice and as a collective, and what is the role of building a shared *imaginary* that can motivate collective action. This thesis aims in fact at contributing to the design research on Design for making publics by adding to that literature and practice a clear focus on the role of creativity in design and its contribute to the political formation of the subject, as it explores how people can imagine together a different future and enact that future in the present.

In the next section I will go back directly to the work of John Dewey – as the main theoretical inspirator of Design for making publics– and present some of the critiques that have been addressed towards the work of the philosopher and, based on these, propose a departure from his thinking and an exploration into another strand of thought, which has also investigated the link between democracy and social creativity, and is based on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis.

### **iii) To *Politicise* the social**

Dewey and Castoriadis moved from very similar concerns: a commitment towards the renewal of radical democratic projects, the critique of hierarchy, the trust in the subject to determine the social conditions of life, the affirmation of the subject autonomy and the endeavour to link radical democracy with social creativity. But the two thinkers also differed on other key points, and the main difference between their two strands of thought on social creativity and democracy could be found in the idea that whilst Dewey attempted '*socialising the political*', Castoriadis aim was rather '*politicising the social*' (Browne, 2014 p. 197). This could be firstly explained if we look at the different philosophical theories that underpin the authors' thinking (Pragmatism, in the case of Dewey, and Marxism – although he later moved away from it - for Castoriadis). But let me go into the different levels of critique in more details.

Although it might not be accurate to critique Dewey for affirming the primacy of society on the individual (Narayan, 2016 p. 22), still we might struggle to find in “The Public and its Problems” an account of the tensions generated by the interplay between society (the structure) and the individual (the agent). In Dewey the account of this relationship is left in the background and barely articulated, rather than being brought forward. As his theory has the domain of the social at the centre, it risks to overlook other key domains (like the cultural, the political, the economic). A further critique to Dewey’s theory in fact - which has been brought forward by many distinct scholars including the likes of Mumford, the Frankfurt School and others (Nayan, 2016 p. 75; Hildreth, 2009 p. 781) - is the accuse of having failed to elaborate an account of the dynamics and structures of power in the capitalist order of his time. Referencing the analysis of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (cited in Hildreth, 2009 p. 783) we could in fact identify three further arguments in support of this critique, which are shared by other scholars as well (Hewitt, 2002) and namely: first, that the problem-solving model is *impotent* against structured hierarchies of power; second, that Dewey’s faith in the scientific model is ill suited to respond politically to political issues; third, the fact that Dewey assumes a homogeneous society giving so little attention to the questions of difference (for instance of class, race and gender) within society. All these points of theoretical critique will be brought to life later in their everyday practical meanings, as I move to describe my field-work in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.

A further critique concerns the question of how change actually takes place in society. In reading the work of Dewey and his scholars, one could ask herself the following question: if social norms are prevalent within a homogeneous model of society, then how could something critical of these social norms appear, and divergence be theorised? In Dewey’s own words:

*“To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instituting change. The public which generated political forms is passing away, but the power and the lust of possession remains in the hand of the officers and agencies which the dying publics instituted. This is why change of the form of state is so often affected only by revolution.”*

(Dewey as cited in Narayan, 2016 p.30)

Despite the fact that Dewey seems to elaborate a theory for changing the status quo within society that seems to allude to the need for revolutions to break with the existing political forms, later he describes violent revolution as something to be avoided at any cost. The question for Dewey in fact is the question of how to find ways to manage social change without the necessity of recurring to violent revolution (Narayan, 2016 p. 31). Dewey's real concern is the instituting of a model of society that is flexible enough to accommodate tensions and to change itself, without the risk of destabilisation. He finds to this question a simple (and potentially not effective) answer by putting forward democracy - or better *democracy as a way of life* (Narayan, 2016 p.32) – as a way to deal with conflict, where a democratic community finds cooperative ways to deal with tension and mediates during moments of change. In the words of Ingerid S. Straume:

*“Dewey’s conception of democracy as ‘internal and external communication’, ‘shared interests’ and a ‘mode of associated living’ provides a rather meagre conception of democracy, especially in political terms.”*

(Straume 2013, p. 208)

The fact that Castoriadis formative years (both for his actions and thinking) happened in the communist and Marxist context, although he later departed from Marxism and became a critical of Marx work both theoretically and in its practical implications, makes his vision for a creative democracy quite different from that of Dewey in distinctive ways. Differently from Dewey, for instance, Castoriadis elaborated a central role for conflict in democracy to the point of affirming that the *“dissimulation of conflict lessens and undermines democracy.”* (Browne, 2014 p. 199). Even in his moment of most profound critique of Marxism, Castoriadis in fact never lost his faith into the revolutionary project (Joas and Knöbl, 2009 p. 409), which in this vision extends to all sphere of social action and the everyday life. In his own words: *“(…) one must break with the imperialist conception that revolutionary activity is the doing of revolutionary militants alone. One cannot speak of a (italic in the original) revolutionary activity, of one type (italic in the original) of revolutionary activity”* (Castoriadis, 1974 p.29).

We need to turn to Castoriadis also to find a clear critique of the capitalist system, which is depicted by the author as based on the creation of a division between

those who direct and the majority who have to execute: “*If a thousand individuals have among them a given capacity for self-organisation, capitalism consists in more or less arbitrarily choosing fifty of these individuals, vesting them with managerial authority, and deciding that the others should be cogs.*” (Castoriadis, 1974 p.52). Capitalism is therefore an irrational and contradictory project, because based on the principle of limiting and suppressing majority of people’s aspiration, capacities and dreams. For the author the revolutionary project is the answer to this irrationality of capitalism. Through Castoriadis’ analysis, we learn that conflict is central, that capitalism and its bureaucracy are responsible for this, and that when people’s creative faculties are not allowed to work on *behalf* of a social system that rejects them, these will be sooner or later used *against* that system (Castoriadis, 1974 p. 53). I will devote Chapter 1 to introduce the work of Cornelius Castoriadis in more depth through the exploration of his thinking, his work and some of his critical concepts.

As I have briefly stated in the Abstract, this is a theory-based work which has used design *practice* but starting from a theoretical standpoint and with the ultimate intention to produce new knowledge that could inform new practice as a result. I have been developing this text with a multiplicity of audiences in mind, as I will articulate in more details later in this text (cfr. page 77), as I wanted this work to be of interest for social theories involved with practices of civic engagement, scholars from community and social work research, as well as political theory and political philosophy. Of course, designers – both scholars of design and design practitioners – were the main and most obvious audience of this work, and in this respect I will try to address them directly at the end of each chapters (whenever relevant) by clearly identifying the possible contribution of my work to their practice and research in concrete ways.

I have described so far how my research moved from a deep concern with the current crisis of democracy, and how I frame this to be a crisis of those means to correct and improve democratic participation. I started in this Introduction developing two key critiques of current practices of design for making publics and

advanced a proposal – in order to address these critiques - to move away from John Dewey and look into the work of Cornelius Castoriadis instead.

In this monograph, I intend to advance as novel contribution to knowledge a new understanding of the value of creativity in design, by reframing creativity through the lens of Castoriadis and as a tool for democratic participation. My field-work in fact could be understood as a way of putting the thinking from Castoriadis into practice in order to test its boundaries and learn more about it *through* design. Given these premises, I would like to make one final clarification: what I will present here as a more linear account was instead an intricate – at point even tense - conversation between Castoriadis' theory and my practice, as I was reading more about this author and getting at times more frustrated about the inherent contradictions in his thinking and the difficulties putting his theory into practice. Whilst some of these tensions and contradictions might not be visible anymore in my final and polished writing, I wanted to acknowledge them anyway as I came later to understand them not as problematic but very much the essence of the value of using Cornelius Castoriadis in design.

# Chapter 1 - Creative Democracy in Cornelius Castoriadis

*"I believe that the imaginative and creative capacities of society will allow it to resolve problems that today may appear to us insoluble, and other whose formulation we cannot even suspect at this time."*

(Castoriadis 1974 in Curtis, 1997)

Cornelius Castoriadis was born in 1922 (1922-1997) in what was then still known as Constantinople, from a Greek family. He soon emigrated to Greece, where he spent his young adult life during the troubled political times between the World Wars. For most of his life and career he was based in Paris, where he emigrated thanks to a French scholarship in 1945, and where he co-founded the radical group – which became later a Journal - '*Socialism ou Barbarie*'<sup>3</sup>. Eclectic and neglected figure of the critical thinking landscape, Castoriadis was an economist, a practicing psychoanalyst, an activist and a philosopher. He published extensively and for some of his initial works he used pseudonyms as well, as he was at that time an immigrant and could not officially be involved in political activities in France (he only in 1970 became a French citizen). As scholars of Castoriadis noted '*The use of pseudonyms together with his late inclusion in academia and the belated translation of his work into English (...) may explain why his work is not as widely known as could be expected for a thinker of his calibre.*' (Adams and Straume, 2012 p.290).

*"Interestingly, where his work found fertile ground and interest since the early 1970s was in the Nordic countries. This, has been argued, reflected the fact that "Castoriadis's thought offers a set of ideals that come rather close to*

<sup>3</sup> *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (in English "Socialism or Barbarism") was first the name of a radical group of intellectuals and workers who elaborated a critic of Capitalism as well as Stalinism (or what they called State Capitalism). It became in 1948 a Journal founded by Cornelius Castoriadis (who also wrote in the Journal under the pseudonyms of Pierre Chaulieu or Paul Cardan) and Claude Lefort. The name was taken from a phrase (probably misattributed) from Rosa Luxemburg. The Journal existed from 1948 until 1967.

*traditional Nordic ideals, such as egalitarianism, but also the questioning of established authorities and dogma.”*

(Straume and Baruchello, 2013 p.14)

The current interest that seems to be re-emerging around the work of this author in various scholarship across Europe – and namely in Nordic countries (Straume and Baruchello, 2013 p.13) but also Germany, France and in minor terms in the UK (Adams and Straume, 2012) - has possibly to do with the recent political developments and the trends of de-politicisation, on one hand, and the raise of anti-political sentiments, on the other (Straume and Baruchello, 2013 p. 15). In this vein, I argue that it might be time for design theories as well to discover this author and to look for what might be available in his thought in order to address the present crisis of the democratic project. I believe this discovery should be related to his central concepts and namely: the concept of *creativity* (and its *modus operandi* of imagination) and the project of the *autonomous subject*. I am going to introduce these concepts in the following sections.

But before moving to explore the work of the Greek-French philosopher, I would like to conclude this part with a little caveat, as a plea for mercy to the critical reader of this thesis. Cornelius Castoriadis work is, in fact, very extensive and at points quite arduous to access, for instance in its psychoanalytic turns. Among the characteristics of Castoriadis’ writing – has been argued (Joas and Knöbl, 2009) - is a high level of ambiguity and abstraction, where analytical precision might sometimes be absent. This makes it very problematic to present neat arguments or selected concepts to allowing access to his work, without losing meaning. Castoriadis’ thought is, as we will see in the following pages, a circular thought – like the symbol of the *Ouroboros*<sup>4</sup> – that refuses to rest or to come to an end, as it generates and re-generates from itself. His work could be described through the metaphor of the labyrinth, a metaphor Castoriadis himself frequently uses, and which I would like to use *about* his work. The labyrinth he builds with his, at

<sup>4</sup> The Ouroboros is an ancient symbol that we can find in different cultures, which represents a dragon - or a snake - eating its own tail. Apparently static, the Ouroboros is in fact in perennial movement and it is said to represent the power that devours and re-generates itself, the universal energy and the cyclic nature of events. A stylisation of the Ouroboros is depicted on the cover of this thesis.



points, convoluted thinking means that we can open a way forward in a direction that would prove later to be a dead-end in a series of intricate and fascinating puzzles (Gourgouris, 2013 p. 264).

Moreover, it is worth noting that Cornelius Castoriadis, although very much an activist of his time, was ultimately a philosopher. This means - as Johann P. Arnason (eminent scholar of Castoriadis) also suggested - that although Castoriadis had pushed the theoretical boundaries of the possibilities open to human action, he “(...) *made less progress with conceptualising the elementary patterns of action.* (Arnason, 2017 p. xxvii). He in fact brilliantly addressed the questions of the what and why and rarely indulged on the issue of the *how*, or when he did it, it was either from the perspective of the working class of his time, or from the examples he learnt from the ancient Greece. Both contexts arguably will need some work of adaptation to be able to speak to our present conditions. Nevertheless, I agree with some of his readers that “*despite their bad syntax, endless conditionals, incomprehensible hypotactic structure and dense arguments, (his writings) present strong and forceful ideas about many important questions (...)*” and therefore, I will try in the next pages to provide a sort of an introduction to his thinking, that without pretending to serve as a full analysis and study of the extensive *oeuvre* of the author, still could function as an inspiration and provide guiding principles for new modes of action for a renovated practice of design.

The main element that attracted me to the work of Castoriadis is his intimate and profound confidence (almost a belief I would say) that change *will* happen, and that the individual *will* mobilise as she has a sort of primordial power (he calls this the *infra-power*) that societal norms cannot smoothly - neither brutally - control (Wolf, 2013 p. 190). Therefore, we need to find ways to make this *infra-power* visible (like we could do with the *infra-red* light by wearing special glasses - as Wolf himself reminds us). This work is an attempt to provide us with these special glasses that can see and nurture the *infra-power* of the creative individuals. I move in the next sections of this chapter to dig deeper into Castoriadis' thought and while exploring its key concepts, also expanding on them, by departing sometimes from Castoriadis himself and drawing on other scholars, who have been treating the same questions, and whose work I believe could complement, reinforce or

elucidate the work of the Greek-French philosopher.

### *1.1) The Radical Imagination: How can Imagination Translate into Action*

Let me start this section with a quote:

*“Even though it is evident that Castoriadis was engaged with themes that engaged many other thinkers of his time, it is also true that no other thinker treated these themes in the way Castoriadis did. This is especially the case for what he calls the creative imagination (as opposed to the productive imagination) which, in many ways, formed the lynchpin of his work.”*

(Adams and Straume, 2012 p. 290)

Through his theoretical and political writing on this subject, which I am going to elucidate in a moment, Castoriadis positions himself as the author than more than others has focused on the attempt to link the notions of democracy to the notion of social creativity (or social imagination). He developed this thinking in what could be considered his Magnum Opus (Curtis, 1997), *“The Imaginary Institution of Society”*, published in French in 1975 and in English in 1987 and which I accessed through a re-edition from 2005 (here referenced with the original year of publication, 1987). Central to Castoriadis’ philosophy is the idea that democracy is a socio-historical creation, and an exemplification of the radical creative power of what he calls the ‘social imagination’, the power of giving forms to social conditions that are unprecedented. These forms, in fact, although being related to the present conditions of their emergence, cannot be reduced to their present conditions alone. An example from Castoriadis might exemplify what I mean:

*“The Athenians did not find democracy amidst the other wild flowers growing on the Pnyx, nor did the Parisian workers unearth the Commune when they dug up the boulevards. Nor did either of them ‘discover’ these institutions in the heaven of ideas, after inspecting all the forms of governments, existing there from all eternity, places in their well-ordered showcase. They invented something, which, to be sure, proved to be viable in particular circumstances, but which also, moreover, 25 centuries or 100 years later, continue to be ‘present’ in history.”*

(Castoriadis, 1987 p. 133)

According to Castoriadis creation is ultimately the political act of *instituting* the conditions of the social life anew. It derives, therefore, that politics is the domain of

human creation, where human freedom takes shape in the act of instituting the social life (Mouzakitis, 2013 p. 31). According to his readers, the motto *'I create, therefore I am'* could be considered the main legacy of his original thought (Karalis, 2014 p. xv), together with his faith in the creative power of the large masses of people (idem, p. 1).

In elaborating on the tensions between imagining and reality, the subject and the collective, the norm and the deviance, Castoriadis builds a clear distinction between different 'modes of imagination'. He talks about an imagination that can be *radical*, as opposed to the *secondary* imagination - which is either reproductive or combinatory, and which can therefore not create *ex-nihilo* (like the first). He uses the term *radical* to perform two things. First, to perform the (radical) act of breaching the distinction between real and fictitious, as for Castoriadis imagination is radical as reality exists because imagination exists, as the imagination is the *radix* (the root) behind the fact that our social arrangements are made in one way and not another. Even more interestingly, Castoriadis carves a role for creativity and creative behaviours that can radically affect reality and its social condition, as the individual somehow develops the capacity to do something that would be simply impossible to deduce from previous situations, which is then an *emergence*, something *radical* that comes out *ex-nihilo* (this is the second way in which his imagination is *radical*). Through this act of creativity the social individual is then formed, and she recognises herself by recognising the others:

*"The creative role of the radical imagination of subjects (...) is their contribution to the positing of forms - types / eide other than those that already exist and are in force for the society, an essential, inexpungible contribution, but one that always presupposes the instituted social field and the means that it supplies, and that effectively becomes a contribution (something other than daydreams, whimsy, delirium) only to the extent that it is taken up again on the social level in the form of the modification of the institution of the positing of another institution. The conditions for its being taken up in this way, not simply the 'formal' ones but the 'material' ones as well, extend indefinitely beyond what can be provided by the individual imagination."*

(Castoriadis, 1987 p. 264)

Without going too much into the psychoanalytical side of his work, as this would not be the place for it and as I do not have the theoretical tools for undertaking this

task, in this passage the distinction between the individual, the social and the radical imagination becomes sharper, as it becomes clearer that it is precisely in this dialectic conversation between the three levels, that the subject can be formed. The first – the individual imagination - only happens in the individual subject and by being individualised, poses the subject outside of its social dimension. When the individual imagination radically differs from the way societies have organised and represented reality for themselves, the process of subject formation becomes dysfunctional and, in the words of Castoriadis (citing Hegel) *‘that man is a sick animal (...) totally unfit for life, a species which would have disappeared as soon as it emerged, if it had not proven itself capable, at the collective level, of another creation’* (1994, p. 148). The second level – the one of the social imagination – is that collective process of imagining and making society *by itself*, which by being at the same time generative and prescriptive ends up creating a friction between the established social meanings and norms, and how these resonate (or do not) with different individuals. It is only through the third element though – the radical imagination – that the tensions between the individual and the social can be resolved, where the individual imagines something new that is an inauguration - a creation *ex-nihilo*, but not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*, as Castoriadis explains (1994, p. 138) – and that becomes more than just an individual dream or hallucination, as it becomes relevant to the level of the social again. It is in that re-composition, of the individual and the social in a given historical moment (therefore not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*) that the creative power of the radical social imagination resides. And is through this re-composition – between an individual and a collective social imaginary - that the individual becomes politically formed as she can perceive herself first, perceive the connections with others (even those who might live different lives and have different interests), and perceive the social arrangements in which she lives as just and fair, but above all as mutable and porous to demands for change, which might be coming from those who might perceive themselves as unfairly treated or excluded. An interesting example of this process is given by Castoriadis himself and is about the women’s movement:

*“For about a century, women have been gradually modifying their situation – and men’s situation as well, by the same token – through their everyday, anonymous, largely subterranean activity. They have destroyed ageless taboos, shaken attitudes, and customs (...). That is due neither to ‘political’*

*organizations nor to specific organizations (...) but to the immense number of women whose attitudes had changed and who more or less imposed that change on men too, and who therefore positively created (italic in the original) something, who modified the established institution of relations between men and women."*

(Castoriadis in Escobar *et al*, 2010 p. 118)

Castoriadis work is incredibly rich and inspiring, especially in his intellectual elaboration of the radical imagination and his understanding of the social dimension of imagination as something that unfolds through the dialectic process between the individual subject and the collective one. There is much more in Castoriadis that could be said about imagination and I will come back to some key points in his work later. But for now, I would like to provide a quick summary of the way in which Castoriadis talks about imagination, because this might prove useful as a reference when I will build and expand on his concepts later:

<b>Key Concepts</b>	
<b>Imagination</b>	This is the faculty of creating images (not in the visual sense but as forms and symbols)
<b>Imaginary</b>	The imaginary is where forms are connected with affect and emotions. It has the function of explaining the world to ourselves
<b>Modes of Imagination</b>	
<b>Radical Social Imagination</b>	Imagination is the <i>radix</i> of reality (reality exists because imagination exists). This type of imagination is <i>ex-nihilo</i> as it inaugurates what was not there before This imagination as a role in the formation of the political subject
<b>Secondary Imagination</b>	This is imagination that imitates reality, recombining its elements or reproducing them. This is the type of imagination mostly used
<b>Levels of the Imagination</b>	
<b>Individual</b>	This develops in the psyche but is always in relation with others in society. When the individual imagination radically differs from the social one the process of subject formation becomes dysfunctional
<b>Social</b>	This is the collective process of imagining and making society (both generative and prescriptive). This is where frictions with individual ways of imagining might be created
<b>Radical</b>	This level exists when the individual and the social imagination are recomposed to work together collaboratively

**TABLE 1:** SUMMARY OF THE MODES OF IMAGINATION IN CASTORIADIS

In this monograph I will use the terms ‘imagination’ and ‘creativity’ interchangeably as, although these are technically two different processes,<sup>5</sup> connections between the two have been identified (Stokes, 2014 p. 157), for instance as imagination provides the cognitive freedom for creative thought and creative action to exist. Before moving to the next section I would like to further clarify how I see the distinction between the social imagination and creativity. Creativity – as understood in the work of Castoriadis – is the practical act of putting imagination into practice, but is the *social imagination* that determines what course of action this practice should be taken (from the point of view of the collective). The social imagination is in fact what provides the motivations and the desire for the creative act to be performed in one sense or the other; it is the space where the horizon is shaped that influences what is conceivable as to be possible for the creative act, and what is not. Most importantly the social imagination, as I take it from Castoriadis, is the *collective* and *political* imagination that people do together within social assemblages. What it produces is a special kind of product of creativity, which is not visual or material (as in the production of images or objects) but meaningful, as it produces the different ways in which social groups and institutions perceive and organise themselves.

We could say – to summarise- that whilst not all creativity is social imagination (in the sense just articulated) – all social imagination has to be creative, in the sense of having practical implications in the social worlds, but creative in a certain mode (as I will illustrate later in Chapter 5).

In the following section, I will start exploring in more details the central concept of imagination, expanding from Castoriadis by turning to other scholars as well. These authors have in fact been working on the concept of imagination from different but complementary viewpoints and they can help us investigate what this is, and its relationship with reality, how it is linked to our actions, and its role on the formation of the political collective subject.

<sup>5</sup> According to Stokes (2014) imagination could be understood as the free speculation of the mind which might perform no immediate function, while creativity refers to the practical ways in which our images are put into action and into use.

### 1.1.1) What imagination is

Let me start with a quote from Castoriadis again:

*“When deaf, Beethoven heard—imagined—in his head. A true composer writes and hears chords, chordal progressions, as I, in closing my eyes, can review some scene or imagine some scene, bringing into mutual presence characters who have never really been present to each other. Mozart explains that the piece composes itself in his head, and he says the following hallucinatory thing: when the piece is finished, it is all laid out simultaneously before him in its progression. He hears in one moment the beginning, the middle, the end of the first movement of the sonata. (...) That is an imagination. (...) That appears incomprehensible to us because our musical imagination is rather poor: to be able to hear simultaneously the beginning of the symphony in G minor and the minuet. Nor is there anything Visual in the social imaginary. The social imaginary is not the creation of images in society; it is not the fact that one paints the walls of towns. A fundamental creation of the social imaginary, the gods or rules of behaviour are neither visible nor even audible but signifiable”*

(Castoriadis, 1997c pp. 182-3)

Castoriadis returned many times on defining and clarifying his concept of the social imaginary, but although all incredibly rich and suggestive, not always his clarifications proved effective in illuminating a concept that remains, I believe, at the same time both very opaque and luminous.

To try and unpack what Castoriadis meant when defining imagination as *signifiable*, I propose to turn to Maurice Godelier, a French anthropologist who in his book “L’imaginé, l’imaginaire et le symbolique” (2015) explores ways in which the imagined (*l’imaginé*), the imagination (*l’imaginaire*), the symbolic and the real relate to each other. The reason to turn to Godelier at this point is that his work very well aligns with the dimension of the individual, the social and the radical imagination, as Castoriadis describes them, but it provides us in addition with examples and practical instances, which could help us making the theoretical work of Castoriadis perhaps more accessible.

According to Godelier, we could recognise eight forms for how imagination works, and these are presented in the table below, which is my adaptation of his work and translation from French.

*“The imagined “reality”:*

<b>1. Has really existed but does not exist anymore</b>	I picture every day the face of my mother
<b>2. Has really existed but elsewhere</b>	I can picture in my head very well the place where they live
<b>3. It will definitely exist in the future</b>	Next year I am going to be retired and I will make the most of it
<b>4. It might exist in the future</b>	One day I would like to visit the south of India
<b>5. It never existed in the past</b>	Up to the XX century no man had flew into the sky
<b>6. It might have existed in the past</b>	I think that the Chinese Emperor could have had knowledge of the existence of the Roman Empire
<b>7. It cannot and will not ever existed</b>	No man will ever jump over 40meters of high
<b>8. It is impossible but at the same time possible that it will exist</b>	The tomb was empty, Jesus had resuscitated

**TABLE 2:** TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION OF THE 8 MODES OF THE IMAGINATION FROM GODELIER (2015, P. 79)

What distinguishes these modes of the imagination is mainly how and whether these are related with reality, a reality which might belong to the past (like the memories of a beloved person) or perhaps to the future (like the picturing of a planned travel)<sup>6</sup>. Both these instances go in fact beyond what is in the present, but they both picture things that although not existent, have existed before or will exist in the future. They are both still associated with the real. But this is not always the case, as when I imagine a wishful travel that has not been planned, and therefore might never happen, or when I imagine the resuscitation of Jesus to come to terms with his death, then what I am creating are images, that have not resemblance and not association with the real. But for those who share a religious belief, for

<sup>6</sup> Annex 8 presents an elaboration of the Godelier’s modes of the imagination in relation to specific design tools for creativity I have used in my field-work.



instance, the resurrection is not just symbolic but it can be more real than real (we will see how these modes operate through social imaginaries later in this section). But let us go through the eight modes in more details.

Mode 1 and 2 of the imagination refer to the imagined that *is not* imagination, as my mother is real (or at least has been real at some point), and the house I picture, although might not be real for me, is real and exists somewhere. The first mode of the imagination performs the function of the memory, as it allows us to remember a past that does not exist anymore. Number 2 performs the function of thinking about something that I have not experienced yet, but that I might be able to experience in the future (we could perhaps think of this mode as linked to the realm of the *possible*). Mode number 3 is also linked to a possibility that is more of an expectation, as the imagined is likely to happen, and is not an act of imagination. Mode number 4 is the imagined that could one day transform itself in imagination, as the trip that I have dreamt of might never happen in the future (this mode is perhaps closer to the realm of the *probable*). Mode 5 refers to things that were for long time only imagined and then became reality, so that went from something to imagine, to something that became possible. This mode is interesting as shows us a way of describing the power of imagination, by tracing back its presence in history, and looking at things that for long could only be imagined, and how they became later possible, through the power of the act of imagining them. The 6<sup>th</sup> mode of the imagination refers to something that might or might not be possible, but that we could never learn for sure, as this fact belongs to a time to which we have no access and were only imagination could lead us<sup>7</sup>. Mode number 7 is where the imagined is purely imagination, as it bears not affiliation with a reality that could ever exist or has ever existed in the past. Finally, number 8 refers to the realm of religion, of magic and of myths, which is where things that are imagined can be *real*, but only on the base of an act of faith and belief. These realities are then considered somehow possible, but on a different plane than that of reality. This, as we have seen briefly before, and as anthropologists of myths, rituals and religions have times and times again argued (Geertz, 1966), does not mean that these images are

<sup>7</sup> This could be associated in design to tactics of 'speculative histories' or 'archaeologies of the future', which both look back creatively and speculatively at the past. Recently an interesting paper from Laine Nooney and Tega Brain (2019) introduces the concept of 'speculative pasts' as a design process for working across design and history disciplines.

not real, as they make people do things, can determine behaviours and can even start a war.

Imagination, as Godelier articulates it, has therefore multiple and key functions. It allows us to 1) represent realities that do not exist anymore or that might have existed (mapping the space between the dreaming, the probable and the possible); 2) to represent facts or situations that we have never directly experienced but that we can picture through the use of imagination (allowing for the process of possibly empathising with distant others); 3) it pushes us to look for what is behind the facts and the objects that are visible to us (by permitting us to develop our critical thinking ); and finally it allows us 4) to think or act differently since we start believing in the power of imagination and want to explore the possibilities it opens up for us (empowering our capacity to act). By allowing us to access all these 4 functions, imagination, the author claims, is the '*a priori*' condition for every form of thinking and, above all, acting that humanity possess: arts, religion, science, technique, forms of power and ideologies (Godelier, 2015 p. 86).

In order to continue with this excursus of works of theory that have posed imagination as an essential force of life, I find relevant to introduce at this point the work of Roberto Mungabeira Unger. The latter made an interesting contribution to the theories of imagination in the field of law and political theory, and has several and meaningful points of contact with the work of Castoriadis, as I will show at different points in this manuscript. The work of Unger to build a social theory of the radical democracy unfolds in several years and through several writings, both academic and more journalistic ones, where the author shapes, expands and re-traces his thought in a quite intricate netting of his thinking as it unfolds. With no pretence here to summarise Unger's intellectual journey (as I will come back to Unger's thought towards the end of this monograph), I would here like to provide an introduction to some of his key concepts as these underpin my thinking around imagination and provide some concrete suggestions for a *practice* of social imagination. Unger is a Brazilian philosopher critical thinker and politician, who developed a fascinating definition of imagination:

*"Imagination is the faculty by which we put the actual under the light of the possible. Our capacity to do so, however, is conditioned by our power to see and think more than our institutional and discursive systems can allow. By*

*giving voice, through the imagination, to the inexhaustibility of the mind, we are able to recognize the inexhaustibility of the real around us: seeing it as irreducible to what is now manifest”*

(Unger, 2001 p. lii)

What is interesting of this definition is that the actual (or the real) is here postulated as one of a number of possible variations, or in other words, that what is possible cannot be reduced to what is there. By extending this intuition, that what is there is just one possible expression of many other creative possibilities, Unger reframes the social and political order as “*made and imagined, that is a human artefact rather than the expression of an underlying natural order.*” (Unger, 2014 p.1). Through this passage, Unger’s thinking moves very close to Castoriadis elaboration and in some ways might be able to expand it, as it has been argued, Unger’s work can be understood “*as an effort to carry the idea of ‘society as artefact’ to the extreme*” (Cui in Unger, 1997).

Distinctive features of the imagination have also been identified by Stokes (2014, p. 173) and namely: that imagination is ‘*evidence-indifferent*’, as it is not relevant for imagination whether something is true or not, as long as one decides to believe in it; imagination exists in its relation to *affective systems* (idem, p. 174), since what we imagine generates strong feelings and emotions, despite the fact of not being real; finally, imagination might cause *action* (idem, p. 174). It is in fact possible that imagination might cause action indirectly, for instance by generating those emotions and mental states that might generate action (like belief, desire and intention).

On this note, I would like to go back to Castoriadis as I move in the next section to outline what a *practice* of social imagination might look like, in order to think about what imagination does (now that we know a little more about what this is) and interrogate its performative power.

### **1.1.2) What is that imagination *does*: the power of social imaginaries**

As we have seen, in Castoriadis imagination is where human freedom takes shape through the political act of instituting the social life (Mouzakitis, 2013 p. 31). The motto ‘*I create, therefore I am*’ (Karalis, 2014 p. xv) describes the performative role

of imagination in making the individual and, even more importantly, the collective subject. This, as we have said before, is the main intuition that we can take forward from the Greek-French philosopher, but in order to unpack what it means for imagination to perform a role in the making of the political subject, I turn to the work of Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish.

In a book called “The Radical Imagination” (2014) the author defined this as:

*“(...) the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be. It is the courage and the intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed. But the radical imagination is not just about dreaming of different futures. It’s about bringing those possible futures ‘back’ to work (italic in the original) on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today. Likewise, the radical imagination is about drawing on the past, telling different stories about how the world came to be the way it is (...). The radical imagination is also about imagining the present differently too. It represents our capacity to imagine and make common causes with the experience of other people (...).”*

(Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014 p. 3).

Haiven and Khasnabish see imagination not as something that individuals *possess*, but as something that groups *do*, and do together, by this making explicit what in the definition from Castoriadis is left implicit, and namely that imagination is something that ‘performs’, possess and infuses action.

Therefore, we could posit the value of imagination to be in its use. Imagination in fact can allow us to relate to things that we have not, or could not have experienced first-hand (like those examples, in the modes of Godelier, where we imagine something that is real but for different reasons not accessible to us). Imagination can also be the filter through which we can interpret and make sense of our own experience (through the modes of memories and expectations from Godelier). I would like to argue for imagination to perform a key role in affecting our capacity to empathise (or do not) with others, both through gaining a better sense of ourselves and by developing the capacity to establish an intimate relationship even with others with whom we might have nothing in common (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014 p. 4). This process, which at an individual level could be understood as the process of empathy building, becomes even more interesting if we consider its impact at a collective and societal level. Through this double process (of making sense of ourselves and of being able to relate to distant others)

imagination seems to be at the root of our capacity to develop a sense of solidarity, for instance for those battles that are not ours and in reaction to experiences that we have never directly experienced. This is – as we take it from Castoriadis – the first performative role of imagination.

Even more deeply, we learn from the Greek-French philosopher that Imagination does perform another key task: it makes, maintain and disrupt our shared *social imaginaries*. The study and explorations of social imaginaries<sup>8</sup> is a growing academic field (Adams *et al*, 2015) that inquiries into how different meanings can shape the political instituting of different modes of society, since we could talk for instance of the social imaginaries of capitalism, the democratic imaginaries and so on. As societies perform the task of trying to understand and picturing themselves to themselves they produce what, following from Castoriadis, we could define social imaginaries, which are self-representations that become as real as other social phenomena (Gilleard, 2018; Lennon, 2015; Gaonkar, 2002). These imaginaries, again following from Castoriadis, are made by the collective body of society and in turn make the collective body in certain ways rather than others, as they influence how individuals in a specific society behave, what they believe to be possible and what they dream. Social imagination, therefore, when articulated in a collective way – through social imaginaries - performs a *structuring role*, as it determines our ways of being in the world, informs our judgements and our actions. In different historical periods and depending on the ways these social imaginaries are made they can in fact either build the collective and social solidarity, or promote competition and conflict among groups to become the dominant one; they can promote inclusiveness and difference, or reject them both. This way of putting the social imagination into use, as it is presented by Castoriadis, is extremely powerful to both fostering and unsettling our social identities and political endeavours (Gilleard, 2018 p. 336). In order to understand how these social imaginaries work and their normative and performative power, I suggest we step back from our current historical times and look into past histories, as this is where – from the distance – social imaginaries can be clearly traced. Each

<sup>8</sup> I argue in this text and following from Castoriadis, to use the term social imaginary as a synonym of political imaginary (Ezrahi 2012) where both could be defined as fictions, metaphors, images that acquire power to regulate and shape political behaviour and institutions.

society in fact tends to institute its own reality by producing the social imaginaries that allow its members to understand and picture themselves to themselves. Ancient gods, witches or oracles – as Castoriadis reminds us – were all used at different points in history to produce a shared understanding of the social reality, as these images (or imaginaries) defined what was conceived as possible in that reality and what was not possible. Each of these *imaginaries* were subsequently replaced by renovated imaginaries, once they lost their power. This power they have – as I will articulate again *later (cfr Section 5.3.2)* – is the power of providing – once these imaginary devices are established – the horizon of what is possible and what is not. As Marx also said (quoted by Castoriadis) the reason why the Apollo of Delphi performed the *real* function of maintaining the social order is *simply* because the old Greeks chose to believe in it (Castoriadis in Escobar *et al*, 2010 p. 112). This *simply* is of course not simple at all. We have in fact to appreciate the following: i) that social imaginaries are not only the making of those in power but are built through much more complex and multi-actors processes; ii) that social imaginaries do – once established create and maintain the order and perpetuate the status quo; iii) that social imaginaries – once their processes are better understood and appropriated by those *not* in power – could be both the problem and the cure. We could in fact see how social imaginaries are devices that can disempower people, as well as being the terrain where social struggles for recognition<sup>9</sup> happen. Understanding how these imaginaries are framed and what role design is playing - already – and what role it would like to play in these framings is a key action to perform, as this study will emphasise.

By building on this concept of the social imaginaries – and making explicit something that Castoriadis has not addressed - as also pointed out by some of his readers (Lennon, 2015) - I would like to draw again on Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) to explore what it means for imagination to be not a universal capacity but an embodied one. If, in fact, social imaginaries tell us what specific subjects can do and cannot do, then we could deduce from this that they tell us what individuals

<sup>9</sup> For instance the radical imaginations from feminists, proletarians, queer and people from different ethnics background were built on the rejection of existing and dominant social imaginaries from which they were excluded and alienated and the building of alternative ones.

can or cannot imagine, as subjects might dispose of the same quantity of imagination in principle, but the capacity to use it in the same way and with the same quality might not be evenly distributed. In other words, social imaginaries present us with the idea that imagination might work differently for different individuals as this depends, in fact, from our previous experiences, our social class, our gender, upbringing, nationality, ethnicity and what position these take in a particular historical shaping of the image of society. This understanding of social imaginaries as embodied and diversely experienced is a '*problematic*' lack in Castoriadis according to many of his readers "*for the extent to which it assumes a homogeneity in the imaginaries of given societies and glosses over the divisions within them.*" (Lennon, 2015 p.84). Irigaray (1993) talks for instance about how this universality merely equates to masculine imaginaries, as she points out - together with other feminist theorists (Gatens, 1996) - the existence of a difference between male and female imaginaries (and the same could be said looking at race, class and other identity traits). Introducing these differences is necessary to start grasping with the complexity of the issues at stake - when it comes to mobilise individual's imagination - and elucidating why some groups might seem to be more able than others to use it and use it for their own purpose.

As I will come back to the theme of social imaginaries later towards the end of this monograph (*cfr Chapter 5.3*), I would like here to conclude by summarising some key points I have made in this section: first, I have framed the social imagination as a performative capacity that can be put into different uses, as it can inspire action, it can build empathy between individuals with different life experience, it can explain how *society passes into people's minds* through the role of social imaginaries (Gilleard, 2008 p. 328). I have developed - also by advancing a critique to Castoriadis thinking - an understanding of imagination as an embodied capacity which depends on the social reality of different individuals, and introduced the concept of *social imaginaries*, as the main product of the imagination, which explain how political worlds are made, sustained and decline - and how social struggles for recognition can happen - or not happen - on the level of the imagination. As Kathleen Lennon reminds us for Castoriadis "*The task of*

*revolutionary change and that of creating an alternative social order is not, then, that of dispensing with imaginaries, but of providing alternative ones.”* (2015, p.83).

I will move in the next sections to further explore the complex issue of the subject of the imagination, as this topic occupies a central place in my research, and as I move in this work to advance a critique of the ontological turn in design, by reclaiming a central role for the political subject.

### *1.2) The project of the autonomous subject*

Central to the work of Castoriadis is the project of achieving the autonomy of the subject.

The author defines *autonomy*, first on the individual level, to move later to a level that is of particular interest for me (and in Castoriadis project), which is the level of the collective. But let us start by trying to understand what this autonomous subject is for Castoriadis from the perspective of the individual.

Drawing on psychoanalytic thinking of his time, Castoriadis defines autonomy (the formation of the conscious *Ego*) as opposed to the state of the *Id* (which is the alienated subject), since he understands the *Id* as the subject dominated by the discourse and the imagination of the other, and the *Ego* as the subject that is able to develop an autonomous imaginary and discourse about herself. In the words of the author:

*“If to autonomy, that is to self-legislation or self-regulation, one opposes heteronomy, that is legislation or regulation by another, then autonomy is my law opposed to the regulation by the unconscious, which is another law, the law of another, other than myself.”*

(Castoriadis, 1987 p.102)

Interestingly, for Castoriadis the dynamic encounter of the heteronomous and the autonomous imaginary needs to happen through the encounter with the other different than me. The subject – Castoriadis adds - needs to develop a discourse about herself in order to be able to develop a discourse of and with the other. The process of gaining autonomy does not happen (and could not happen for Castoriadis) through the negation of the discourse of the other, as this would mean for the subject to exist outside or through an act of negation of society as such,



which is not possible and definitely not desirable<sup>10</sup>. What has to happen in order for the subject to become autonomous, is rather an elaboration of a discourse within an intersubjective relationship with the other. It becomes therefore evident, how the definition of autonomy, as Castoriadis poses it, leads directly to the question of the collective and the political dimension of it, as "*one cannot want autonomy without wanting it for everyone and (...) its realization cannot be conceived of in its full scope except as a collective enterprise.*" (Castoriadis, 1987 p. 107).

Autonomy, so defined, and this is an important point of clarification for me, does not longer mean the inalienable freedom of the individual subject to be pursued at all costs, since Castoriadis' definition moves far away from more traditional definition of autonomy - also criticised in feminist studies (McNay, 2000 p. 118) - to trace an alternative definition of autonomy which is intimately intersubjective and solidaristic. This is how I will always intend the term in this dissertation.

Going back to the social imaginaries, we can now understand the key role they play in the formation of the autonomous subject, as through the interplay between the individual, the social and the radical imagination the subject could either be formed or alienated (Castoriadis, 1987 p. 132). When the individual imagination radically differs from the predominant social imaginary of the wider society, then the process of subject formation is dysfunctional, as the subject is either left incapable of imagining herself autonomously or can only imagine herself in opposition to the predominant imaginary. Conversely, the subject is formed autonomously, when she can recognise the image of herself in the image of the wider society, and by recognising the other, she can recognise herself. We could therefore say - in other words - that the autonomous subject is central to the act of imagination, as she is the one who can perform the radical imagination and is (*per*)formed by the act of the radical imagination. Imagination then is defined *by* the subject and can in turn define her. In political terms, which are the terms in which Castoriadis usually speaks, this means that the process of formation of the autonomous subject happens through the democratic collective process of taking

<sup>10</sup> The choice of those groups that decide to step out from society to build and live according to their alternative models - for instance - would for Castoriadis only acquire meaning if their ultimate aim would remain the building of an alternative social imaginary that could one day become the imaginary of society at large.

*active* part in the social institutions, as a democratic society is the one that is created by society and creates society in turn: “*Athens cannot exist without Athenians (...), but Athenians are created only in and by Athens.*” (Castoriadis, 1994c p. 149). Additionally, in Castoriadis this process of the creation of the autonomous subject is not given once and for all, as it is intended to be lived and enacted continuously (Straume and Baruchello, 2013 p. 12). What it means for Castoriadis to be an autonomous and political subject is then not simply to be able to contribute collectively to the social modes of life, but to be able to keep contributing, by adopting a critical outlook on them and performing the act of continuously posing them into question.

This should shed now new light on what it means for the Greek-French philosopher to keep democracy alive creatively by developing the institutional means for society to be porous to change and potentially always prone to be revised. In line with this thought, therefore, the crisis of democracy that we are facing can be described as the crisis of those means to correct and improve democratic institutions by participatory means. This also poses Castoriadis definition of the democratic subject in stark contraposition to more ‘consumerist conceptions’ of democracy (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2014 p. 262). When the citizens’ role is narrowly defined as the going to the election polls to elect their representatives, we witness a *mis*-representations of real democracy. The democratic autonomous citizens, in fact, are the actively critical citizens, who understand themselves ‘*as both creators and questioners of the laws they create.*’ (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2014 p. 271).

Following from Lois McNay, I see a key insight of Castoriadis’s work in the fact that for him “*identity is formed not around a lack, pace Lacan, but around an originary capacity for figuration – the radical imaginary.*” (2000, p. 118). Whilst majority of theories for subject formation, in fact, pose identity as formed around a *lack*, as a way to affirm oneself by reaction against what we do not have or cannot be, compared to others; Castoriadis’ novelty relies on proposing a new way of theorising identity, as formed around an *originary capacity*, something we have, not simply in opposition to others, but in itself.

In her book *'Gender and Agency: reconfiguration of the subject in feminist social theory'* (2000), Lois McNay denounces the theoretical primacy that from Foucault onwards has been ascribed to the negative paradigm of identity formation, as the process of subjectification has been constructed as dependent from the dynamics of subjection (2000, p. 2). The main problem of these post-structuralist, negative theories of subject formation is that they can only theorise agency as a residual category, as the subject in these views can only come into being through resistance or fighting of the dominant social norms (for instance, women as non-men, black people as defined by their difference with white people, etc.). In her book, Lois McNay embarks in the ambitious plan to articulate what a generative theory of subject formation, that sees the affirmation of the subject as a creative act instead, might look like. She does so, through a more *dialogical 'understanding of the temporal aspects'* of subject formation (2000, p. 4). The negative paradigm in fact seems to overestimate the role that sedimented past experiences have on the subject, where what the subject can possibly do and be in the future is directly determined by what she has been able to do and be in the past, as in herself and within society. But where these theories of subject formation fall short, is in the fact that they cannot provide an explanation of those instances when individuals, faced with oppressive situations, respond in new and unanticipated way.

*"The uncovering of a creative or imaginative substrate to action (...) is necessary, however, to explain how action transcends its material context. A creative dimension to action is the condition of possibility of certain types of autonomous agency understood as the ability to act in an unexpected fashion or to institute new and unanticipated modes of behaviour."*

(McNay, 2000 p. 22)

These words could have been written by Castoriadis himself, as his theory of figuration (which is the creation ex-nihilo) is crucial in McNay. It provides, in fact, a significant explanation of the unexpected, which is something that breaks with what was there before and which inaugurates something that is deeply new – the *action that transcends its material context*. This is the idea – which I have articulated it before – that social imaginaries are both the powerful force that maintains the order - through the repetition of the sediment past experience – but also the tool through which order can be changed – through the *radical*

imagination - as individuals in certain circumstances break the cycle and respond in unanticipated ways. It is against a deterministic view of the social life – for which Castoriadis also harshly critiqued Marxist theories - that the Greek-French philosopher elaborates his theory of the role of creativity for the democratic life, where democracy can only be kept alive by the continuous creative activity of the individuals that are part of it, which takes the shape of both, as we have seen, an endless critique of the conditions of the social life, and a praxis of autonomy. This more ‘political’ autonomy - as Castoriadis also defines it (Rundell, 2014 p. 250) - is achieved through a specific mode of doing, called praxis<sup>11</sup>. *Praxis* is the last concept that I take from Castoriadis *oeuvre* for the purpose of illuminating my work.

### 1.2.2) Praxis and politics

Let us start with defining what praxis is through the author’s own words:

*“One could say that for praxis the autonomy of the other or of the others is at once the end and the means; praxis is what intends the development of autonomy as its end and, for this end, uses autonomy as its means.”*

(Castoriadis, 1987 p. 75)

So, praxis is central to the work of Castoriadis as it represents the procedure that at the same time creates autonomy and requires autonomy to be performed. In order to develop a deeper understanding of this concept, we need to start by exploring its key components, as Castoriadis intends them, which are i) its relationship with knowledge, and ii) the concept of the project.

The question of knowledge, Castoriadis tells us, is central to the understanding of praxis. There are in fact modes of thinking (including a certain stage of Marxism – as Castoriadis critically tells us) that assume that without theory – intended as total knowledge - there could be no conscious action and therefore no praxis.

These modes of thinking create the paradoxical concept that a man of action has to be primarily a man of theory, therefore deflating action from its potential. To elucidate the relationship between knowledge and action Castoriadis brings forward two extreme examples, that of ‘reflex action’ and that of ‘technique’. An

<sup>11</sup> The concept of praxis is a concept that Castoriadis takes directly from Marx and that he expands by building his critique to Marxism for having undermined praxis by bringing forward the role of theory and knowledge instead.

example of the first is action that has not relation to any type of knowledge, as it only develops in the doing, which for Castoriadis would generate the absurd concept of an action that does not belong to the domain of history. Action that has no context, is not rooted in its historical belonging, is by definition not possible in the thinking of Castoriadis, as he predicates the impossibility of the in-nihilo, of that which comes out of nothing, as we have seen before.

The second, its total opposite, is the idea of action that only takes shape when total knowledge of a domain is acquired by the subject. The closest to this idea is the example of 'technique', although no technique could exist that could ever operate on total and exhaustive knowledge. Even in the more elevated activities, as Castoriadis articulates, as for instance in the practice of a doctor, her technique will require previous knowledge as central to it but cannot be understood as complete theory or solely as knowledge. The doctor, in fact, cannot elaborate and operate her technique according to a purely theoretical stance of the medical condition, as she will have to use her practice to produce knowledge that she could not have otherwise.

Praxis is therefore not a simple reflex, but neither is pure technique. It is rather a provisional endeavour that, although based on the available knowledge, constantly gives rise to new knowledge. This provisional knowledge<sup>12</sup> is not intended by Castoriadis as a negative condition, as a temporary deficiency that through praxis we could, or should, address, but is in fact the only effective knowledge we could have (being total knowledge an illusion that can never be achieved). Provisional knowledge has the real as its object, and for this very reason it could not be anything else if not provisional, being the real in itself temporary (as it should be by now clear from my introduction of Castoriadis' thought). Remarkably, for the author the aim of praxis is not simply the production of new knowledge of the given, as writing a book, making a child or making a revolution – as Castoriadis points out (1997 p.162) – all implies the act of projecting oneself into a future situation which can never be fully known in advance, but will stay open on all sides to the unknown: *"This making/doing is lucid when it does not alienate itself to an*

<sup>12</sup> I believe Castoriadis' idea of *provisional knowledge* elegantly describes how designers consider knowledge as they look at the reality out there as being inherently provisional, since the real is the object of their intervention, and therefore frames as something transient and transformable (in Castoriadis words 'provisional')

*already established image of its future situation, but modifies this image as it goes along, when it does not lose itself in conjectures and speculations concerning aspects of the future irrelevant to what is to be done now or beyond our control.”* (idem, p. 162)

The ultimate goal of praxis therefore *“is not the clarification but the transformation of the given.”* (Castoriadis, 1987 p. 76), and for that transformation to happen no exhaustive knowledge is required of the new society that one intends to establish, nor does one have to ‘demonstrate’ that this society could solve all the problems that might ever arise. This vision for the new society could in fact emerge from our praxis as we go along. This vivid and inspirational definition of praxis interestingly resonates with certain theories of practice in design (Julier, 2007). But what Castoriadis adds is the positioning of praxis as an intimately political endeavour. As he points out: *“Politics (...) is neither the concretization of an Absolute Knowledge nor a technique; neither is the blind will of no one knows what. It belongs to another domain, that of making/doing, and to the specific mode of making/doing that is praxis (italic in the original)”* (1997a, p. 150).

Praxis in this way emerges for the author as a revolutionary ‘project’ where the use of this term is for Castoriadis a significant one. It aims in fact at highlighting how the revolutionary activity, rather than a moment in time, is a beginning without an end. It is not a plan, which could be taken forward only when – and if - all the conditions and means are precisely determined; neither is this a programme, as political programmes come and go. It is a project in the sense that it projects itself. As the words of the author again clarify:

*“What we call revolutionary politics is a praxis which takes as its object the organization and orientation of society with a view toward fostering the autonomy of all its members and which recognizes that this presupposes a radical transformation of society, which will be possible, in turn, only through people’s autonomous activity.”*

(Castoriadis, 1997a p.152)

This could be considered a perfect example of the circular thinking of Castoriadis of which I was talking about in the introduction: something is made, that makes something else, in order for the first thing to be made. I believe this way of thinking, although at points also frustrating and perhaps difficult to penetrate – I

have to admit – still represents the essence and the richness of his work. It is this way of thinking, I believe, - like in the Ouroboros metaphor - which makes its theory inherently creative and continuously in movement, as it positions transformation at the centre, rather than the immanence, becoming, rather than being. A praxis (and not a practice this time) of design, inspired by Castoriadis, is therefore at the same time a praxis that “*the subject does or makes* (both in italic in the original), *but which also makes* (italic in the original) *the subject*” (Castoriadis, 1987 p. 77).

### 1.3) Concluding Remarks

In the previous pages, I have hopefully made some clarity on the thinking of Cornelius Castoriadis and introduced his key concepts (the radical social imagination, the social imaginaries, the project of autonomy and the idea of revolutionary praxis).

What should be clear to the reader after this introduction is how I want to frame the value of Castoriadis philosophy to be crucial for design. Similarly to John Dewey, in fact, I believe Castoriadis presents interesting concepts that are both *relevant* and *productive* for design. Relevant because they deeply resonate with what design is about and its *modus operandi* in the world. To use Castoriadis thinking in design, I am arguing, would also be productive because the way in which Castoriadis talks about democracy, in this being very similar to Dewey, makes it like a practice that we can do and un-do in our everyday lives. Posing democracy both as *creative* and as a *practice* opens an interesting role for design and its repertoire of creative methods. By proposing to introduce Castoriadis' work in design, I intend therefore to bring to the design research community the following contributions:

- A profound confidence in the creative possibilities of all individuals and in creativity as a powerful act that can create – beyond objects and ideas - social institutions;
- The affirmation of a role for design as a creative practice with democratic potential;

- An exploration into the political role of creativity and a theory of power as made of and from imagination (as described before and as I will better illustrate on page 207).

I also propose to introduce the following four key concepts, which I take from the Greek-French philosopher, as a way to start building the argument which underpins my thesis and namely:

1. The idea that **societies are made and imagined** and could therefore be made in other ways;
2. The understanding that how societies are made depends on **the social imaginaries underpinning the social system**, which in turn allow for that system to be created and maintained, but also allow for its porosity to change – once these social imaginaries are understood as an artefact that could be made otherwise;
3. Creative democracy is therefore the **praxis of making and re-making of the social institutions** which can only be kept alive by the continuous creative activity of the individuals that are part of it, which takes the shape of both, as we have seen, an endless critique of the conditions of the social life and a praxis of autonomy;
4. Finally, I propose to take from Castoriadis his idea of the **creative autonomous subject** who is - as we have seen – a profoundly political, democratic, collective and solidaristic subject.

Before I move on to delve into my research work – my methodology and my field-work – I believe a crucial clarification is needed. We should not forget that Castoriadis started developing his concept of the social imagination around the 1960', although his main work on this theme was only published much later in 1975. 1960s' were a very specific political time of fierce critiques of the status-quo which addressed social and cultural habits as well<sup>13</sup>. This highlights the fact that he talked about creativity and social imagination long time before these concepts were appropriated and distorted with the booming of the creative economy.

<sup>13</sup> Castoriadis work on the social imagination was considered to be one of the main source of inspiration for the students' movements of 1968. The slogan "*Power to the imagination*" was for instance inspired by the Greek-French philosopher. Interestingly this slogan was in the following years appropriated and remarkably turned into a more liberal frame.



Although later in this monograph the creativity of Castoriadis might seem to encounter the creativity of the modern 'creative class', we should not forget that these two creativities are from a very different political and social times, in order to avoid the risk of deeply misinterpreting the intimate differences of these two predications of creativity. Despite apparent overlaps, in fact, these two *creativities* could not be more different. I believe in fact – although no one will ever be able to tell – that if the creative subject of Castoriadis would have met the creative subject of the creative class, the two would have not recognised each other as being of a similar type. Castoriadis himself would have possibly elaborated his theory very differently and looked at creativity through very different eyes if he had developed this twenty or so years later, in the 1980s or 90s instead.

Let me conclude this chapter by highlighting what I believe design practitioners can already take away from this first introduction to Castoriadis and the concept of imagination (as developed in the literature outside design) in very practical terms:

- First, I believe the 8 modes of the imagination as presented by Godelier could be used by designers to reflect and to further develop their creative design tools, as the table presents practical ways to frame the relationship between what is imagined and what is real, which is so central to the design process (as described in Section 1.1.1) and also illustrated in Annex 8)
- Secondly, I believe the understanding of the imagination as performative, presented here in section 1.1.2), could also be used by design practitioners to reflect and clarify first, on the role that imagination plays for empathy building, and solidarity (which is fundamental to inspire action) and second, on the importance of taking into account the role and the structuring power of the social imaginaries (I will come back to this key concepts again in Chapter 6).

## Chapter 2 - An anthropology ‘of’ and ‘by means’ of design

This manuscript is first and foremost an anthropology *of* design, as I started looking into what design is and what it does from my perspective of being a ‘non-native’, coming from a different part of the ‘world’, not speaking the language, and not understanding the rituals. Similarly to what more traditional cultural anthropologists do in their field-work - immersed in the everyday life of stranger communities in order to understand how they live and their culture - since 2011 I joined the community of designers in London, as a curious observer of what was for me at that point in time like an *alien* community. I spent many years observing designers as they were working in their studios, pitching ideas to client, facilitating workshops, presenting their projects to conferences or meet-ups, or simply hanging out with them in more social occasions, having lunch, going for a beer or for farewell parties. During that time, I came to slowly make sense of their practices, understand their language (to the point of becoming a fluent speaker myself) and learn their rituals. But many things were also left inaccessible to me, as I “went native” – to use an anthropological jargon – without ever *becoming* native. This doctoral work is my attempt to build on my initial observations and systemically study the practice of design in a more scholarly way in order to investigate how (and if) this could be used to politicise the social. Through this work – following from Castoriadis - I want to shed the anthropological light specifically on the creative part of the design process and discover more about that energy that design produces in the act of imagining and giving shape to new artefacts or ideas.

As I embarked in my research, I soon learnt that looking at the creative practice of design is not an easy task as “*Unfortunately the really interesting things that happen in the design process may be hidden in the designers’ heads rather than being audible*”

*or visible. If we simply listen to what designers are saying or watch what they are doing we are likely to be missing some significant data.*" (Lawson, 2005 p. 288). So, what data could I use to observe first hand and learn more about creativity in design? Asking designers about their process, or reading what they have written about it are the main sources that I had at my disposal and that I have used in my work. I was nevertheless very much aware that how designers talk about themselves could be misleading, as Lawson reminds us (2005, p. 288), and this for different reasons: first, as not all designers are great with words as they might be with other tools; second, as when they write about it publicly, they tend to highlight the good side of their work (like any other profession perhaps) and rarely talk about their doubts and weaknesses; third, because they are used to sell themselves and their practice to outsiders, and have built their narrative around their processes in this way and for this purpose.

What became apparent from the beginning were the limitations of adopting a purely anthropological approach to try and uncover the meaning of creativity and how this works in design. Immersing myself in this world of design and designers, in fact, in order to observe how they performed and described the creative act from the *distance*, was not going to give me any closer glimpse and better understanding of the inner dynamics of the processes at stake. Soon I realised that I was in a privileged position, having already acquired some knowledge of the design process myself, and that I could in fact engage with the practice of design first hand and learn about it, through actively doing it. Therefore, following the tradition of design anthropology (Clarke, 2011; Gunn *et al*, 2013), I looked into continuing my anthropological work with other means, as a way to deepen my understanding of the same concepts '*by means of*' design (Ingold, 2013). In this spirit, I embarked in my field-work and design practice, where I learnt and used design myself working on two long-term projects in the field of mental health, where I joined a team of motivated local social workers and so called 'users' as the 'design researcher', with the task of introducing design in their activities and support them to use it in the most suitable ways. In this context, my interest was to explore how non-designers, like myself, who were fully new to the process, the

language, the tools of design would make sense of it, and precisely of the creative part.

In line with Castoriadis' thought, I also designed my practice to be conducive of autonomy, both for the individual and for the groups involved as a collective. I built on the principles of autonomous design (Escobar, 2018) to pose autonomy, at the same time, as a condition for design and as its objective. It is in this way, by doing design *for* and *from* autonomy, that I came to see the meaning of my practice not through what it produces (as the design outcomes and ideas that we brought to life in the community projects that represent my field-work), but through what it *enables*, as in the capacity and the confidence it gives to those who practice it to become makers of their own fortunes.

### *2.1) Research Questions and Methodological Approach*

A research usually begins with what in anthropology have been defined *foreshadowed problems* (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989 p. 28):

*"If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrundingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings with him into the field, the more he is in the habit of moulding his theories according to facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped for the work."*

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989 p. 29)

Getting in the field-work with a clear list of well-polished and defined research questions, therefore, could incur in the risk of the researcher not being able to see what is really in front of her, as she will be busy looking for what she is after, and only searching for ways to find what she is looking for. '*Foreshadowed problems*', as I understand them, are instead first identified through observation and theoretical reading, but are then developed organically throughout the field-work. They are to be used as a guidance, namely an initial direction for where to look and what to look for in the field-work, rather than representing the questions that the field-work is supposed to answer. For these reasons, these can be defined as different types of questions that the researcher brings with her to start exploring the context, and to allow the real questions to emerge.

I went into my field-work with a series of these *foreshadowed* problems, which I initially formulated through years of practicing design in the social field, and reading about it and beyond. The main foreshadowed problems (or research aims) I brought with me in the field-work were the following:

- What could an inclusive and political *praxis* of creative democracy look like, which aims at re-making rather than perpetuating the given conditions?
- What can design contribute from its own repertoire of creative practices that could be re-appropriated by non-designers to perform both the critique of the current status and the crafting of imaginative and alternative visions of the social life?
- What is the role of a creative practice of design (if any) in the project of the formation of the '*autonomous political subject*'?

These broader aims took the shape of the following research questions, which were narrower in their scope and therefore manageable in the timeframe of the doctorate:

1. How can people together use design autonomously as a tool to explore their local contexts and investigate their social conditions?
2. What are the design creative tactics, resources and methods that can best contribute to support people to be imaginative and radically re-think their local context?
3. How can these ways of using design autonomously help groups developing a sense of the 'we' and generate collective action?

The next Chapters and my Conclusions, which lay ahead of you, will make justice to whether or not I have managed to answer these questions, and how. For now, I would like to introduce briefly the different traditions of design anthropology and reflect on what it meant to use a design anthropological approach as my research methodology.

Design Anthropology (henceforth also DA) is an emerging field that provides its own methods and tools to the process of knowledge production but, above all, it has been argued DA provides a distinct *style of knowing* (Otto and Smith, 2013 p.

10), one that incorporates both the processes of analysing and doing in the act of constructing knowledge. But what does it mean exactly for DA to represent a distinct *style of knowing*? The choice of the terminology is not accidental. Let us start with the choice of the word 'style'. The authors, drawing on the work of Ian Hacking (1992, cited in Otto and Smith, 2013 p. 11), see DA to possess all the characteristics that a style has: it is temporally bounded as it emerges as one specific point in time and it might in the future decline; at the same time it is not transient, as it presents some stability and enduring characteristics: finally, compares to other methodological approaches, it introduces novelty. 'Knowing' is also an interesting word choice. It gives us the senses of something in the making, a process, more than a final outcome. As the authors clarify, this indicates that knowledge production is more than just reasoning and thinking but is a *practice* of intervention that generates knowledge as a process (or in Castoriadis' words one could say a *praxis*). What DA produces, has been argued, is "*transformative knowledge, created in and through action and engagement rather than by observation and reflection alone (...)*". (Smith and Otto in Smith *et al.*, 2016 p. 20). *Emergence* and *intervention* are in fact two central tenets of Design Anthropology. Emergence, as Smith and Otto themselves refer, is the state in which social reality exists, as drawing on the philosopher George Herbert Mead, they pose the present as the temporal space in which all happens, and in which all is in movement. To make 'emergence' the object of study is not an easy task for anthropology, as it requires methodological innovation for a discipline that has more comfortably been dealing with the *untimely* (Rabinow *et al.*, 2008 p. 58), and with the 'what it is' rather than the what '*it might be*'. Studying the emergent means to stay with the uncertainty and the ambiguousness, and understand these not just as temporary states, or something we should be dealing with until it is solved and it goes away, but as a technology for research (Akama, Pink and Sumartojo, 2018 p. 46). In this way, we should come to see uncertainty and emergence not as object of study but as an intentional *tool* for generative research, that could be used as a mode of unsettling what is given for granted, accepting the serendipitous nature of findings, and dealing with not-yet known. Drawing on Castoriadis, we could push this concept of emergence one step further, and build an understanding of the knowledge we can produce through this methodology as *provisional* knowledge, as

definitive knowledge is not possible *per se*.

*Intervention* is the second key tenet of the methodological approach of Design Anthropology. Whilst designers, on one hand, are educated to a mode of practice that is comfortable with the idea of intervening in shaping the social context, anthropologists, on the other, simply are not. Ethnography in fact has been for many years more a practice of observation, description and analysis rather than intervention, where making changes to the observed has been perceived as problematic on a methodological and ethical point of view. The attitude towards intervening is therefore one of the main areas of tension that make the field of DA at the same incredibly generative and problematic, since drawing on the emerging field of DA is not without its challenges, as this is a shifting and contested (trans)discipline (Dawn Smith, 2011), whose nature, epistemology, research orientation and methods are still in formation.

It was Lucy Suchman (2011) who started the debate about whether an anthropology *as* design or *for* design was actually needed. She advocated for a critical anthropology *of* design, which would have the scope to “*articulate the cultural imaginaries and micropolitics that delineate design’s promises and practice.*” (2011, p. 3). Although I entirely share Suchman’s concerns about the need for a critical study of design studios and practices, as these have for too long remained obscure and inaccessible as “sites for cultural production” (Drazin, 2013), I do see the limitations of this approach, which ends up seeing design purely as an object of analysis (Gatt and Ingold, 2013). There are more fruitful ways of thinking about the two disciplines as combined, like in the anthropology *by means of* design (idem, 2013 p. 141), which aims not a criticising design, neither to simply use it as data for analysis, but to acknowledge that there are things for anthropology to learn from design and vice-versa. This approach resonates very much with the reflections shared by George E. Marcus and Paul Rabinow (2008) as they also articulated a role for design to reinvigorate the anthropological practice. In the following pages, I am going to briefly address the issues that Marcus and Rabinow discussed and namely: the distinct approach of the two disciplines to time; the relationship between intervening and theorising; the specific approaches to the distribution of the research outcomes.

The first question is the question of time and temporalities. As the anthropological work moves away from the temporality of slowness to the 'here and now' of more contemporary forms of social anthropology the first temporal turbulence (Rees 2008:7) appears. Although less elaborated than other forms of coercion, the question of time should be acknowledged as a question of *system of power in itself* (Mills in James and Mills, 2005), which produces *temporal* inclusion or exclusion of 'the others' (Nespor, Hicks and Fall, 2009). Conceptions of time (as in the relation between the present, past and future) are intimately linked to our perception of ourselves as agents capable (or not capable) of altering the world in which we live; they shape our ways of relating with each-others and are closely connected to debates around change and becoming, free will and freedom (which are central to this work). The untimeliness of anthropology, for instance, has been accused of being predicated on the assumption of excluding participants through '*differentiated times*' (Nespor, Hicks and Fall, 2009). This awareness and critique was initially moved within anthropological studies by Joannes Fabian (2006), who talked about the power exercised by his professional group through what he named '*allochrony*', the act of *writing* about anthropological knowledge by consistently placing *those* who are talked about in a time other than that of the one who talks.

Design on the other hand has not yet, to my best knowledge, elaborated a critique of its attitude towards the question of time. The relationship between design and time is in fact quite a complex one, as design seems at points to ignore, to fear, to avoid but also to indulge, to control and to play with time (Till, 2009). Typically, majority of designers and design scholars would understand design as a sibling of innovation and a *natural ally of futurity* (Appadurai, 2014). From the literature, in fact, design emerges to have strong connection to the realm of future-making (Ehn, Nilsson and Topgaard, 2014; Dilnot, 2014; Yelavich and Adams, 2014). But as Ramia Mazé also highlights: "*Today, temporal rhetorics of 'change', 'transformation', 'innovation', and 'the new' pervade design. However other temporal phenomena such as 'chance', 'indeterminacy' and the 'untimely' seem less welcome.*" (2016, p. 39). In choosing implicitly certain understanding of temporalities rather than others,



Mazé continues, designers build their work on assumptions about what is real, what is not, what is desirable or negotiable of the future.

Time is therefore perceived differently in design and anthropology, also in the way the two disciplines make use of it. Whilst anthropology requires to extend time, to allow for modes of long-term engagement in the field-work, which is a key tenet of a methodological approach that can only exist *in* time; designers seem to want to compress time as they tend to ignore the past, and use '*the present (...) – mainly - as a provisional leaping-off point for reimagining possible futures*' (Hunt, 2018 p. 89).

Second, and very much linked to the first point, is the dichotomic relationship between the act of theorising and that of intervening. Design has on one hand established a long tradition of producing situated knowledge through practice (Jonas, 2004; Archer, 1981), which experiments "*with treating the act of understanding and intervening as mutually constituted processes, rather than sequentially distinct phases*" (Halse, 2008 p. 199). This is not the case for anthropology. As we have briefly seen before, due to its history and the controversial role of the discipline during the period of the colonial empires, the question of intervention is for anthropology '*much more historically, politically, and ethically fraught.*' (Hunt, 2018 p. 90). But this is also, and more importantly, a question of epistemological differences. The two disciplines present in fact distinct ways of understanding the relationship between theorising or/and practicing, as in fact anthropology moves from the research tradition of knowledge that is produced and tested within academia, whilst the opposite is true for design, with its strong tradition of practice and its methods of research *through and by* design (Jonas, 2007). In addition, this epistemological tension reveals other unresolved issues – which I will not be able to address in this monograph, but that are still worth mentioning - and namely the questions of distance or vicinity to the *object* of knowledge, the question of agency of the researcher, and the questions of the ethical boundaries of the researcher's actions.

Final point of tension regards the form of the research output. This is not a secondary matter, neither for anthropology, nor for design, as both disciplines

bring strong traditions of what possible shapes knowledge can take in the respective fields: on one hand, the ethnographic writing of anthropology, on the other, the material object of design. Therefore, a design anthropological approach pushes us to rethink new ways of engaging with field-work, and possible new ways of writing/presenting the produced knowledge. As Gatt and Ingold pose it, for instance, *“the relationship we build during fieldwork may be more important, as products of our work as anthropologists, than the texts we subsequently write.”* (2013, p. 149) as these relationships present the richness of the ongoing and of the openness that the ethnographic text might miss. I am going to expand on this later in this Chapter, as I will present and reflect on the shape of my research output.

### **2.1.1) Being ‘neither – nor’: staying in the in-between of Design and Anthropology**

Despite all the tensions I have so far illustrated, opportunities of using anthropology in combination with design are for the purpose of my research particularly relevant, and I hope fruitful, as the two disciplines also present shared qualities as *‘imperfect analogs of one another’* (Murphy and Marcus, 2013 p. 251) and namely: that they both exist as process and product; that they share a clear focus on research; the being people-centred; and finally the central role that reflexivity plays in both research traditions (Murphy and Marcus, 2013 pp. 251-59). In the end, as Nicola Dawn-Smith stated: *“The connection between design and anthropology has always been implicit; the challenge lies in making it explicit and accessible through ongoing education, research and practice.”* (2011). And in the attempt to make explicit how this connection played out in my field-work, I move here to describe what an anthropology *of* and *by means of* design meant in the more mundane terms of my research activities and the methods I used.

First of all, I started from the difficult, but perhaps fortunate position, of being neither a designer, nor an anthropologist by background (although I had studied the second during my Undergraduate and my Master’s). I initially saw this ‘neither – nor’ as a quite problematic state of being, working across the two disciplines none of which was completely familiar to me. But it was during the first meeting with what would have later become my two doctorate supervisors – one from design and the other from anthropology - that I started perceiving this condition as

a fortunate one. I could not, in fact, be positioned by neither of them as fully on one side or the other, as I was not coming from anthropology to overtake on design, nor vice-versa; not fully understanding or sharing their respective disciplinary points of view, but somehow understanding them both better than what they could probably understand of each-other from their respective vantage points. I was in between, 'neither – nor', and decided to make the most of this condition and experiment with the discipline to find my own ways of practicing it. Being design anthropology a novel discipline in its own, of course, made the rest.

I was very aware that practicing DA, like others have done before me, I was at the same time exploring and tracing the boundaries of what it meant for a design school – where I was ultimately based - and a design audience to accept a design anthropological research, and what was design really ready to take or to leave as a result of this encounter. As I started practicing across the two disciplines, in fact, I started noticing how certain tensions materialised for instance through negative feedback from reviewers at design academic Conferences about my style of writing, as this did not always fit with the academic design expectations. I am aware that this negotiation of boundaries is something that is also happening to scholars from within anthropology (Gunn, Otto and Smith, 2013).

In line with the tradition of DA, my ontological standpoint started with the acknowledgement that "*social life is not something that simply exists out there, but is made (italic in the original): the very existence of social life depends on specific practices of display, representation, accounting and enactment.*" (Marres *et al*, 2018 p. 19). To acknowledge the performativity of social research means to frame intervention as a *form of inquiry* (Halse and Boffi, 2016) and inquiry as an intervention, or in other words that to inquire into a phenomenon can be considered equivalent to participate in it (Lury and Wakeford, 2014). As we have seen, this is a crucial point that also underlines the thought of Castoriadis.

For my epistemological stance I turn to anthropology again and its attention to the mundane and the everyday. I wanted in fact to distance myself from the design research epistemological assumption (sometimes also implicit) that tends to focus on eventful moments - like for instance the design workshop - as key moments for shared knowledge production. In my work, the time and the context of the design

workshop became instead quite problematic, as I observed how the structure, the jargon, or generally what I would call the *rituals* of a design workshop, could be exclusive of certain type of participants. Through my field-work, in fact, I noticed again and again how apparently simple part of a workshop - like performing according to an agenda, doing an ice-breaker, or taking part in group-work - were creating a distance between some participants and others. Usually these 'rituals' were deeply unfamiliar to people who had no previous experience with design interventions, or who never worked in an office environment, or never joined a meeting before. Not to mention people with social anxiety, other mental health issues, or simply with limited or no education (all of which cases were present in my field-work). I therefore adopted an epistemological stance which is critical of the short time span of classic (perhaps more commercial) design projects. Even more, as I have elsewhere articulated, I believe that *'The 'project' as the traditional space and temporal frame for all design interventions need to be rethought. When they operate within the political and social arenas, designers need to carve for themselves a more engaged role and elaborate a serious commitment that takes the life-time as its temporal reference and cannot be limited to the space of the single intervention.'* (Pierri, 2017 – see Annex 11). This meant for me to practice the long-term role of the *observant participation* of which Caroline Gatt and Tim Ingold talk about (2013, p. 154). I joined in fact the two projects – of which I am going to talk at length in the next Chapter - from their beginning and stayed with them until the end. In this way, I started being perceived as more than an external researcher and somehow an additional member of the team, struggling together with the other participants to make sense of the events that were happening, planning the next steps as things were moving along, adapting to what was emerging, dealing with the blocks and the failures to find alternative ways forward. At the same time, I was also aware of my position of *'unintentional power'* (Janes, 2015 p. 4) which characterised me inevitably as being 'different' from the other members of the team, as my role was unavoidably external, and my engagement and responsibilities limited, and I had no intention to pretend it was otherwise. My research data took the form of the ethnographic *field-notes*, which I recorded during the design activities but also in other mundane circumstances, like staff meetings, training moments, informal conversations, external presentations, Skype

calls, coffee or tea breaks and any other occasion that I had. In terms of organising and analysing the data from my field-work, I followed the ethnographic tradition, shared both by anthropology and design, of using: *field notes*, which are as concrete and descriptive as possible of the events that happened; *analytic notes*, which are distinguished by the participants' accounts and go beyond the recording of talks and events but move towards the making sense; and *analytic memos*, which are periodical moments of reflection on emergent ideas and research themes that I wrote and re-wrote again and again, as events took a different meaning once my understanding of the context accumulated. During my design practice (my anthropology *by means of* design), together with my field-notes, I also used ethnographic interviews which involved members of staff and some of the participants after the end of the project, or more specifically once the design part of it was finished. These interviews lasted between 40minutes and 1hour and were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Following the ethnographic tradition these interviews had the intention to check some of the initial concepts in my theory formation process, and also to reflect back on things we did together, to compare different meanings and understandings of what happened. As I will clarify and discuss in the next Chapter, for one of the two projects this process was not possible, as I had no direct access to the 'field' but had to find ways of accessing the field indirectly, through staff who was involved. In practice, I never managed to visit the place I will describe or talk to the people I will introduce - for reasons that will appear clear later - but I used the skills and the ethnographic sensibility of a member of staff, whom I also trained to do design research, as she lent me her ears and eyes throughout the one year of the project. Her ethnographic diary represents the main source of data for this specific field-work.

I have described so far what I have done as 'anthropology *of* and *by means of* design' and I have presented some of the implications of this approach, but I would like to try here to clarify how these two approaches were different in terms of methods and tools and why I needed them both.

My anthropology *of* design, as I have described it, started with the process of hanging out with designers, which somehow begun before my doctoral work. As I was becoming interested in the methods and the work of designers in the social

field, I wanted to take part in conferences, attend meet-ups and get to know more designers in the London context. Although this was not initially intended as a formal research activity, I noticed things and reflected on them anecdotally (as one cannot prevent herself from being curious and investigative, because she is not enrolled in a doctoral programme). When this curiosity became the object of my doctoral work, I made my process more formal and started collecting documents, designers accounts, ethnographies of design more systematically as they became my sources of data. I also contacted six designers, starting from a circle of designers I knew (either personally or for their work in the social field) and expanded this circle based on recommendations (using a classic snowballing technique). The designers I interviewed covered quite a good variety of profiles: I had one designer who was active in Academia, three who had set up their own companies, one who was working as a freelancer, and one who worked in a bigger company using design with non-designers. My questions to them were around their role and motivation to do what they were doing; I explored with them the role of design in the social field and questioned how this was perceived by the non-designers exposed to it. Most of the questions, directly or indirectly, were of course exploring the design process and more specifically the role of creativity in it. Most of the time I did not need to bring up any direct questions about creativity, since this topic, as I expected, came out quite naturally and early in various conversations I had with designers.

In addition to this, I also had the opportunity of spending few weeks working with a team of designers, as they informally met with the intention of founding a new design agency. The reasons why I asked to join this group is that the work they were doing was particularly interesting for my research. This group was in fact formed by designers who were all engaged in design within the social sector, and they all left their previous agency-based work as a critique to the mode of operating and the business model of these structures. Very idealistically, they believed that another way of doing design for social change was possible, that could be '*more radical and risk positive*' (as they themselves defined it once). This experiment unfortunately did not go far, as after less than four weeks of me joining and observing their meetings, the group separated and the whole plan took a

different direction, as only two of the designers initially involved continued on this idea independently, and the others all took different personal directions.

This more traditional anthropological research *of* design, and more specifically creativity in design, took place at the very beginning of my doctoral programme and as I went through analysing the data, the initial findings that emerged also informed much of my later field-work with a mental-health organisation, which represented my anthropology of creativity *by means of* design. This second part used design not as an object of study anymore, but as a tool for researching, an epistemological tool. This was a shift of not minor importance, as I used myself some of the techniques, tools and modes of thinking I had explored in the first part of the research, to investigate creativity 'in action'. My main interest, in making this shift, was to explore these practices not only intellectually but in their application, in order to gain an embedded understanding of them. Moreover, I also wanted to explore what creativity meant in its vernacular sense, in contexts where this is not usually spoken about, its practice is not made explicit and its value is not celebrated. Chapter 5 is where I will elaborate on the findings of what creativity meant in the contexts in which I operated, as this 'simple' idea of creating something *new* - as I will discuss later - proved to be much more complex and nuanced than I initially realised.

In the following section, I am going to articulate what my methodology meant in my design practice, as more than the methods or the tools that I used, in fact, the value of my approach was in what it *enabled* (or at least aimed to) as I came to understand my research as a '*practice of convocation*' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). In the next section I move to expand on this concept and introduce my approach to research, not just as what I did for my doctoral studies, but possibly as a tool for supporting an emancipatory project.

## 2.2) *Doing Research as a 'Convocation'*

Drawing from scholars from feminist and post-colonial studies, I understand epistemic governance for knowledge production and usage, as *the* crucial site of social struggles in a context of increasing inequalities (Janes, 2015; Mignolo, 2009; Hills Collins, 1986). From these readings I have come to identify research as a

*convocation* (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014 p. 67) that could potentially open up a new space for dialogue, debate, questioning and empowerment, and as a capacity with democratic potential, and therefore a *human right* that everyone should claim (Appadurai, 2013). In his work in India, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai developed this idea of research as a human right, in this way pointing out to the fact that the capacity to do research can increase individuals' social and cultural capacity to plan, hope, desire, and achieve socially valuable goals (2013, p. 269). The work of Arjun Appadurai has inspired me in different ways as I was planning my research practice. Following from his work, for instance, I started exploring the role of research not just as a process of knowledge accumulation for myself to use, but as a tool for *empowerment* that could be used by those who have less power, in order to gain more. If research is therefore a powerful tool, that has power and gives power, it should be a right for everyone to have. In the understanding of research that Appadurai brings forward this practice is tied with the development of what he defines the '*capacity to aspire*' which is "(...) *a collective capacity without which words such as empowerment, voice, and participation cannot be meaningful.*" (2013, p. 289). This capacity is a social and cultural capacity, that like the capacity to do research, is currently unequally distributed, and this is both a symptom and a measure of exclusion. Therefore, through his political and intellectual project Appadurai reclaims the old idea that information is central to truly be able to take part in the democratic life, whilst also denouncing how in times when knowledge is so crucial to orient oneself in the political sphere, the opportunities for gaining it are increasingly shrinking (2013, p. 282). The conundrum, as Appadurai himself makes it clear is that: "*Without aspiration, there is no pressure to know more. And without systemic tools for gaining relevant new knowledge, aspiration degenerates into fantasy or despair.*" (2013, p. 283). I believe this conundrum is even more visible today, and what shaped my practice was ultimately the thought that, if it is true that knowledge is so central and so unevenly distributed, then one needs to find ways to affirm it as a right for everyone. My attempt to design *for* and *from* autonomy, then, included the decision to have the people who were going to be most impacted by the research to be able to become researchers themselves, to explore their own contexts and situations as an act of re-appropriating the process of knowledge production.



As opportunities for design to be democratised have arisen (Manzini, 2015; Marshall, 2014; Ehn, Nilsson and Topgaard, 2014; Fuad-Luke, 2009), my project became a quest for the redistribution of the right to do research and produce knowledge. The research endeavour or, in the words of Di Salvo, the *act of discovery* (2009, p. 59) became therefore in my practice central to the act of building the autonomous subject, who aspires to more and better knowledge and to use this knowledge for changing her present conditions for better. This approach proved to be also in line with practices of design for making publics, which very well understand the importance of investigating and framing issues so that they can become *public* issues, and that the people involved become '*a public*'. Like scholars of design for making publics, therefore, I considered research to be a key tool for allowing inclusive modes of participation to the democratic life, and therefore a tool that should be appropriated by *non-design-researchers* as well.

Drawing on the literature about emancipatory research, I define this as a process that "*stems from the gradual rejection of the positivist view of social research as the pursuit of absolute knowledge through the scientific method (...). The emancipatory paradigm, as the name implies, is about the facilitating of a politics of the possible by confronting social oppression at whatever level it occurs.*" (Oliver 1992, p. 110). Continuing with Oliver, we see how this type of research is not about how to empower people but, and this implies a profound difference, is about '*once people have decided to empower themselves, (...) what research can then do to facilitate this process.*'.

This definition from Oliver of what emancipatory research is, also frames indirectly what emancipation is, as something that is not given or done *to* people, but something that people do for themselves. Then the question to ask ourselves is not how to do research that is emancipatory, but how to change the role of the researcher and the material conditions of the research endeavour, so that the research work we do can be useful in the process of emancipation. In the way Oliver intends it, then emancipatory research is research that challenges the rules and material conditions of research production. This means changing not just the locus of control of the research process (who decides, who gains and whose priorities are we following), but also the control of the *resources*. These resources,

as Oliver identifies them, are money (as funding bodies and funding processes are crucial) but also reputation (as the authority of who does the research counts). I would add to these two, the tools themselves for doing research and the understanding of the process of using research for knowledge production. These material conditions of the research process, as Zarb (1992, p. 127) reminds us, are most of the time out of the control, both of the researcher and of course of the participants. Also, Zarb warns us that changing these conditions might take a long time, as this would imply the changing of the deeper social and political conditions in which the research takes place, and therefore he suggests we focus in the meantime on the *social relations* of the research production instead (idem, p. 134). This requires us in practice to shift our attention to questions of accountability, participants' involvement, research paradigm, and the perennial questions around the shape, the audience and the product of the research itself. I believe this is where design research is incredibly useful. I am going to present my approach to emancipatory research through design anthropology by looking into these four questions (the question of accountability, of participants' involvement, the research paradigm, the output of research).

Let me start with the question of accountability, which is ultimately the question of who controls the research and who is responsible for it. As I will illustrate in more details in the next Chapter, my research was *commissioned* by a mental health organisation as part of two different projects who were both externally funded, one by the local Council and one by another mental health organisation. Both projects were quite open, both in terms of their contractual agreements from the funders and in terms of the attitude that the leading organisation had decided to take as they wanted to experiment with new methods for engaging with new *publics*. The research part was not the central part in both projects, as the funding was given in both cases to develop either a service, a model, or an intervention in the field of mental health, which meant I had more liberty in how to organise the research and not too much pressure on its final output. But of course, the question of accountability proved to be more complex than I had anticipated, as the control over the resources was not distributed but centralised in the role of the project manager, who proved to be a difficult *gate-keeper*, as I will illustrate in Chapter 3.

The question of the participants' involvement is deeply linked with both, the first and the third points – that of accountability and that of the research paradigm, as it will appear clear in a moment. As I briefly said before, my approach was to enable the people who were going to be most impacted by the research, to become researchers themselves.

As I have written in one of my papers attached to this monograph (Pierri, 2018):

*“The participation of people who have a lived experience of mental health in the public space has a long and proud history. It is mainly linked to the tradition of service users movements and, specifically for mental health, the so-called “survivors movement.” Service users participation has historically taken three distinct forms: (1) user movements, borne out of collective action, and independent from any invitation or encouragement by public officials or other organizations; (2) users involvement in services, which can be described as consumerist (i.e., when the intention is to improve service efficacy and users satisfaction) or democratic (i.e., when the final aim is to enable people to have more control over the issues that affect their lives); and (3) users involvement in research, as a way of collectivizing knowledge production. In my design practice, I have combined these three layers to amplify their cumulative effect, starting from user involvement in research, and to build a ladder that could move participation up toward a user movement shaped by collective action.”*

(p. 30)

The reason for this long quote, is that this passage very well clarifies two key elements of my approach. The first, is that I did not bring this whole concept of re-appropriation of knowledge production from nowhere, but instead I found it to be already there. It was me to be inspired by the work and the ethos of the ‘survivors’ movement’ and not the other way around. What I did was perhaps to find a way to recover this ethos, which was at the point of my field-work lost in time within more mainstream mental health organisations and services. Second, it highlights how I saw the research activity as integral to the wider project of emancipatory research and the project of the autonomous subject, and not as a methodological device that has value only in the academic space.

With these intentions, I chose a research paradigm – the third point I wanted to clarify – that aimed at engaging participants in changing the material conditions of research (also in terms of funding, as I will illustrate in Chapter 3). Theoretically I revised the notion of what in anthropology have been called ‘para-ethnographers’

(Holmes and Marcus, 2006). “Para-ethnography” is a term that initially emerged during conversations between George E. Marcus and Douglas Holmes in the late 1990s and it refers to the process by which the anthropological inquiry becomes a collaborative act, when other counterparts, who are not trained anthropologists, collaborate in the ethnographic endeavour.

Similarly, I have experimented in my work with how participants, who are not trained design researchers, can collaborate in the design ethnographic endeavour, by making the design inquiry a collaborative act. In this definition and research approach, what I will define from now on as ‘design co-researchers’ were not simply informants or sources of raw data; instead, they became the producers of new knowledge and subjects who were able to theorise.

The choice of this research paradigm consequently shaped the product of the research itself, which leads me to the fourth and final point of reflection on the social conditions of the research. This collaborative research approach in fact proved successful in terms of eliciting interesting and meaningful stories of people’s struggles, desires and concerns and, through the act of listening and telling other people’s experience, it made the co-researchers reflect and rethink about their personal experiences too. Again, drawing on anthropology, we could see this process as one that moves from the more traditional ethnographic work, to the level of the auto-ethnography (Adams *et al*, 2015).

From my paper from 2018:

*“The richness of the stories came not just from good ethnographic research, but from the added value provided by an auto-ethnographic approach. Half of the researchers had a lived experience of poor mental health; they potentially experienced similar feelings and episodes as they disclosed their mental health (...). Because of these shared experiences, the researchers could feel close to the stories shared by the people they interviewed: the stories were authentic to them and deeply meaningful and moving.”*

(p. 33)

Together with others (both designers and non-designers) I developed in my previous practice an “Insights Report” template to present the results of the research activities. This is a simple format that allows co-researchers to contribute and to tell their stories using personas, quotes, and other resources that help them

to present their findings at glance and use them for planning future actions. This format presents a professional graphic and the use of visuals, while still using a simple editing software (in our case we chose Power-Point), which any organisations and many individuals will have installed on their computers, instead of more professional but un-accessible editing software like InDesign or similar. This solution claims by no means to be the ultimate response to the perennial questions around the shape, the audience and the product of the research itself but goes somewhere in that direction. In my field-work, the Insight report in fact was used and circulated among the participants, to the funders, and to other partners and stakeholders. It was definitely the design research output that was mostly used and brought by staff to most of the meetings. It was used as a way to quickly present the main findings, introduce the people we had interviewed, suggest some possible ideas to address the problems at stake. It was an easy access tool for those external to the context, to familiarise themselves with the main challenges and the main resources and be able in this way to contribute to the project development (see Annex 6 and 7 for examples of the finding list from the two projects' Insights Reports).

As practitioners of so called 'emancipatory research' have many times warned us, this type of research is by no means in itself good or unproblematic. For instance, Oliver (1997, p. 15) talks about the risk of emancipatory research becoming a '*rip-off*', as those who benefit most from the process are eventually the academic researchers themselves. What you have in your hands right now, which is my doctoral monograph, is in fact the quintessential demonstration of this shortcoming. I did in fact (perhaps more than the others) benefit from the research activities we did together, as these took for me the double shape of the project results, of which I was of course pleased, but mainly the shape of my doctoral thesis which is only related to me and my academic life, and possibly career. One could see the second as the by-product of the emancipatory research work I did on the ground; but the opposite would be also true.

Despite my best intentions, in fact, the critique in my work remains that what my research produced on the ground (without wanting to undermine the outcomes that the projects achieved) can be considered as a minimal part of the research

effort (a by-product), whilst the central part (more significant both in terms of depth and length) is what ended up in this monograph. But I am very careful of not falling in the trap of the perennial and sterile self-critique, which also only has a place in the academic realm and which risks, if over bloated, to only lead to inaction since emancipatory research, has been argued, is something that could possibly never been achieved (Oliver, 1997) but only aimed to.

I also believe that this self-critique possibly just reproduces old assumptions about the value of research, made by an academic (or better an aspiring one) from within the field of academic research. Implicit in this critique there is in fact an attribution of differential *value* to the knowledge produced in the two realms (within the projects realm and the academic one) which risks undermining the practical knowledge produced for the purpose of the projects and perhaps overestimate the academic work in comparison. To bring a simple example, when I talked to my participants about *my* research, also inviting them to work jointly with me to present this work at conferences and non-academic events, I encountered at best little curiosity, but mostly complete disinterest. The difference between '*my* research' and '*their* research' possibly only appeared to me, as I could see them both. For my participants, there was only one research, and this is the one we did together during the two projects, and this was the only one that counted.

The point of sharing these reflections here, and I will come back to them in more depth in my Conclusions, is not to disentangle myself from the possible critiques, or to plead guilty (or innocent) of the possible wrongdoings, but is just to offer a glimpse of the complexities that a design-anthropology research, developed with an emancipatory ethos, will inevitably present (at least within the present socio-political conditions).

### **2.2.1) The 'ethics' question**

Working in the field of mental health inevitably brought the 'ethics' question at the fore-front of my research during the time of my doctorate. I refer here to the 'ethics' question, as being something different from the *ethical* questions (this time in plural) that I had to inevitably to address in my field-work at various points. With 'ethics' I refer here specifically to the codes of conduct and regulations of the University of the Arts London (UAL), where I undertook my doctoral work.

The Codes of conduct and Ethics regulations reflect how the University is committed to support good practice in research activity, which is translated as research being conducted in accordance with the University ethical principles.

From the UAL Codes of Conduct I learnt that these guiding principles are:

- Respect for the persons involved: which means to recognise the capacity and rights of all individuals to make their own choices and decisions,
- Justice: which aims at distributing equally the risks and benefits of participation in research,
- and Beneficence: the ‘doing good’ principles to look after the interests and well-being of participants.

In compliance with UAL Codes of conduct and Ethics regulations I presented my research plans to an Ethics Committee and after their risk assessment my research was considered to raise ‘*more than minimal risks*’. This decision came few months after I started my research journey, as it became clear that my field-work was going to be carried out in a mental health organisation, possibly dealing with people who had experienced mental health issues. In compliance with UAL Codes of conduct, I submitted my reviewed ethics proposal, including the Information and Consent Forms, illustrating the results of my risk assessment and the measures that I had identified to mitigate those risks. I also illustrated in the Ethics Approval form how I was proposing to deal with issues of anonymity and developed my procedures to collect, process, and store personal data and sensitive information. My ethics application was finally approved by the University Research Ethics Sub-Committee as a research presenting more than minimal risk, but that could be ethically conducted through the procedures and risk-mitigations processes I had identified. In addition, and before I could start my field-work, I also had to apply for a Disclosure and Barring Service<sup>14</sup> (DBS) check, as part of the statutory requirements from UAL.

All this was necessary because the Ethics Committee had identified my research as engaging with ‘*vulnerable adults*’. Although, I strongly believe in the usefulness of

<sup>14</sup> A DBS certificate contains details of both spent and unspent convictions, cautions, reprimands and warnings that are held on the Police National Computer and which are not subject to filtering (from <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service/about>).

ethics guidance provided by Universities for designers or design researchers (or better *any* researcher) who are entering their field-work, I did strongly reject the idea that the Research Ethics Sub-Committee implied, and namely that people with mental health conditions should be considered to be ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’. As critiques to the limitation and real aim of Universities ethics regulations and codes of conducts have been widely discussed elsewhere (Schrag, 2011), I would like to focus here on the specificity of my case and elaborate what I see as being critical of the easy assumptions that were made about people with mental health experience involved in my research and the possibly unintentional consequences of those assumptions.

As I learnt through my experience working in social care in the UK, and specifically after many years working in mental health, the notion of “vulnerable adult” is not a straightforward one and in some contexts fiercely contested for perpetuating the stigma associated with having an impairment or a disability.

As Laura Pritchard-Jones (2018) reminds us the origins of this concept are to be found in the UK Department of Health’s ‘No Secrets’ guidance from 2000, where a vulnerable adult is defined as a person “(...) *who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness, and who is or may be unable to take care of him or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation* (from the Department of Health “*No Secrets: guidance on developing and implementing multi-agency policies and procedures to protect vulnerable adults from abuse*” par. 2.3). As the author notices this definition problematically position the vulnerability as residing in the person and depending on the presence of an inherent vulnerability (2018, p. 50). Critiques to this approach to vulnerability mainly fall in these two domains, as illustrated by Pritchard-Jones:

*“First, the potential of vulnerability as a legal tool to reinforce the stigma associated with physical and cognitive impairments, or other inherent characteristics that may be seen as weaknesses or “to blame” for the abuse, such as young or old age. Second, because of the reinforcement of this stigma, the interventions envisaged for such vulnerability are considered inappropriate in that they are easier to implement, overly paternalistic, and fail to either listen to the adult’s wishes, or fail to consider the vulnerable adult’s circumstances in their entirety.”*

(2018, p. 50)



Therefore, my argument against the use of the terminology of ‘vulnerable adults’ in the University Codes of conduct and research guidance stems from the idea that safeguarding (or protection) in these definitions becomes something that is “done to” these groups, in line with a deficit-based model, and this has specific moral implications. Rather, I wished my ethical concerns, and plans to overcome them, were going to come out of a process in which the people with mental health experience and the staff from the mental health organisation could be actively involved. The point I would like to make here is that the use of the terminology of ‘vulnerable adults’ in the academic ethical guidance, with no further critical understanding or further proper definition, could have consequences around stigmatisation which would require further conceptualising and careful reflection (Virokannas, Liuski and Kuronen, 2018). As Kate Brown stated: “(...) ‘vulnerability’ is so loaded with political, moral and practical implications that it is potentially damaging to the pursuit of social justice. (...) ‘vulnerability’ is a concept that should be handled with more care.” (Brown 2011, p. 313)

More specifically on mental health, I also critiqued the assumption from the Subcommittee that, as my field-work was developed within projects from a mental health organisation, this implied the fact that I was going to work with people who were experiencing a mental health distress at the time of the project. This despite the fact that, at different points, I clarified that both projects of my field-work were actually focused on resilience in two different communities and preventative services, which both in theory aimed at involving communities and the general populations, and did not focus on specific mental health services or conditions, or explored the experience of having a mental health distress in any forms or shape. This also represented for me a critical stand-point, especially if we consider, as many mental health organisations in the UK do, following from the World Health Organisation statistics, that “*One in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives.*” (WHO, 2001). The assumption that people dealing with a mental health organisation had to currently experience a mental health distress was therefore problematic, as it framed mental health as a permanent status and mental distress being therefore an inherent

condition of those participants involved. It was, for instance, not considered whether I myself or any other member of staff or any of the other stakeholders, beyond our role as 'the researcher', 'the Staff' and the 'civil servant', could in fact have ever experienced mental distress or been diagnosed with a mental health condition (which according to the 'one in four' narrative was statistically a very high possibility).

Beyond the ethics guidelines of my University, which still proved extremely useful despite the critiques that I have presented, my approach to ethically address the field-work was mainly based on the idea of building on the knowledge, resources and support that the experienced staff from the organisation I was working with had developed. In fact, as both projects were part of the mental health organisation delivery, all the training, procedures, safeguarding principles and line management rules that the organisation had in place for its service delivery were also applied during the projects. These ethical guidelines, based on best practices of social care services, were particularly helpful for me in framing my practice as aiming at treating people - who might have experienced a mental health problem - with the support they needed and the respect they deserve. To ensure safeguarding and protection for all those involved in our activities, along the whole project duration, I turned many times to 'my team' - made of the front-line staff from the mental health organisation - to discuss with them the best ways forward, as ethical questions emerged not just at the inauguration of my field-work but all along its unfolding. To give the reader an example of what defined my field-work ethical questions, these were discussions around the use of images, the protection of the individuals' privacy, specific questions of access and inclusion in the design work, questions of language used, attention to the space and the pace of the design work, and also the question of whether or not - and how much - pay the participants for their engagement, in the attempt as I have described to reconfigure the material relationship of research. Moreover, ethical questions arose for those individuals who became the project co-researchers. With them we were quite explicit during the research training to define the boundaries of the researcher role, as somebody who is there to listen but not there to help or give advice. We discussed with the co-researchers how to deal with participants who might have been in need of

mental health support, and advise them to refer these people to the professional statutory or non-statutory services that were locally available. This proved useful to protect both the researchers, from feeling the weight of having to help people in their capacity and act on what they were told, and the interviewees, from being advised or helped by somebody who had perhaps good intentions, but no tools or knowledge to truly be able to help. These instructions, as it emerged from some of the interviews extracts as well, proved in the end to be quite beneficial to ensure that our research was carried out *ethically* and in ways that ensured participants protection and, as much as possible, the wellbeing of everyone involved.

In the same spirit of looking after all participants' wellbeing, I did offer to all member of staff involved more than one hundred hours of what we called 'design coaching'. These coaching sessions took the shape of regular one-hour long Skype calls and were usually attended by myself and the project manager, or the person who was responsible for the design work. Where relevant, we also organised calls where additional members of staff were invited. The structure of the call was set in advance and included: a looking back moment, describing what had been done and what had been achieved since the previous call; a looking deeper session, where we tried to unpack the meaning of what had happened and reflect more on potential implications, longer-term impact, possible frustrations or challenges, and also to celebrate the successes; the final part of the call was the looking forward part, and here the staff shared what they were looking forward to or what they were anxious about and what approach to possibly take. In some calls, when requested, we also took extra time to look more in depth at specific design tools that we were using, or to look at specific design phases. These design coaching calls aimed at providing staff who was engaging with a new approach with the support needed, so that they could help others in the team and the co-researchers. These calls also allowed for reflective moments on the implementation of the design activities. In fact, for both projects, a reflective practice approach was adopted, which engaged all staff involved and proved to be very helpful as I will come back to in Chapter 3 and 5.

Before I move on, let me address here again the design scholar and the practitioner reader as I believe there are in this Chapter useful concepts and modes of design, which might be informing their practice, and namely:

- The introduction of this new *style of knowing* of Design Anthropology, which I believe can enrich design project and design work in different contexts;
- The sharing of the practical ways in which my field-work and design practice has been concerned with the question of emancipation, as something that should be more relevant in design (and specifically in certain practice of participatory design (Storni, 2014) – more practical examples on this are shared in the next Chapter as well
- The introduction of the role of the para-designers (or co-researchers) which provides with new ways of engaging participants and their sensibilities and resources in the building of knowledge that is contextual and actionable (a description of the training day is provided in the next chapter and the structure of the training workshop is also available in Annex 5)

### 2.3) *The Structure of the Writing*

The final shape of my write-up should not be taken for granted, as choosing the form I have deliberately chosen, in fact, means that many alternative forms have been discarded. Drawing from the ethnographic tradition, I understand writing as much more than a mechanical exercise, performed at the end of the research and analysis work, and used straightforwardly to present the results. Ethnographic writing should in fact be considered a deeply reflective practice, that is an integral part of the ethnographic field-work itself and a key tool for the process of analysis, as “*there can be no hard-and-fast distinction between ‘writing’ and ‘analysis’*” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989 p. 209). Moreover, ethnographic writing, has been argued, tends to have connections with literary style as we could see how this effort requires some *literary awareness* (idem, p. 209).

Several literature and rhetorical figures, for instance, might be used in academic writing, and attention should be paid to the stylistic presentation, the tone of voice, and the storytelling element of writing up the ethnographic notes.

After much consideration, I chose for this monograph, to present my ethnographic writing in the form of a chronological account, despite the critiques and shortcomings that this style might present (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989 p. 220). This style proved in fact a very useful device to introduce the question of time centrally in my work, and also through my writing. As my ethnographic work focused on processes of change and process of *becoming*, a chronological style of writing proved to be not just simply engaging, for the reader, but also effective in conveying the happening through the identification of *stages*, which punctuated the unfolding of the events. This should not mislead the reader in believing that the real process of events' unfolding, my reflections on them, and the key moments of understanding and clarification always happened in the neat and straightforward way in which I describe them here, as of course things were messier in the field-work and much of the work of tidying them up happened in the act of writing, and therefore retrospectively.

In responding to the challenge of having, on one hand, to organise and present a considerable amount of data and, on the other, wanting to give the reader an overview of the key events and stages, I also took the choice of neatly separating the narration from the analysis. Being aware of the potential pitfalls of this approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989 p. 222), I paid attention to present the narrative part (Chapter 3) as something that is not neutral, as it contains already an analytical component. Already in Chapter 3, in fact, the reader will find some initial analytical conclusions. I was also careful, when I moved to present my analytic part as separate from the narrative (*cfr. Chapter 4 and 5*), to relate my findings and the claims I made as much as possible and as directly as possible to the narrative itself, so that the process through which I derived them from the field-work and from my notes could be evident to the reader, rather than being perceived as an arbitrary exercise.

Let me conclude this part with a short note on the audience. This was from the outset of my research not a straightforward choice. As I was in that space, which I have described before of 'neither – nor', the question of who my main audience was going to be did not have an immediate answer. I wanted this work, in fact, to be of interest for both anthropologists and designers, as well as those handful scholars and practitioners of design anthropology. Although this work is not

primarily written for them, I did not exclude the possibility that scholars from community and social work research, as well as political theory and political philosophy, could find ways to integrate my findings as relevant in their research as well. The fact that there might potentially be multiple audiences for the same academic piece of work is nothing problematic in itself; but the dilemma arose when I tried to think of my style of writing, in relationship to the different audiences I had identified. Probably as closer to my academic background, the ethnographic style appeared to me immediately as more accessible, enjoyable and something I wanted to explore for a possible future academic career as well. As I have briefly illustrated above this choice raised not little issues whenever I presented my work at design Conferences or for internal examination in my University. I was, after all, graduating from a design school and presenting my work primarily at design events, as these proven to be both more relevant, and also more accessible to me. These 'issues' took the shape of peer reviewers' comments, focused either on my form of writing or on the style, which was considered as too theoretical and not clearly linked to design case studies. Comments about the use of the 'I' or 'we' were raised at several points, as well as comments about the 'invisibility' of my design work, these last ones probably determined by a lack of visuals, lack of photos and lack of reference to the most identifiable design phases or tools (being this a workshop, a persona, a storyboard, or similar). These comments and critiques were all particularly helpful, as they pushed me to think about my style, and produce a more articulated and conscious analysis of what was and what was not in my writing.

I can therefore now confidently say that what is not present in my work are the following: a reference to the design phases; the description or the visualisation of the design tools and workshops I facilitated and organised; the photos that usually *decorate* many papers on design case studies; participants also are not there, neither in photo, or in the format of a vignette or in a classic persona format. For all these *lacking*, of course, there were reasons.

Design phases, for instance, were partly there since we organised our work according to what would be identified as phases of the design process by a designer (explore, create, learn, grow, etc.). But they were not there, at the same time, as I tried to balance the awareness of the process itself, which I did through

the training for instance, with the intention to avoid alienating my participants due to too much jargon and too strict and linear processes. As I came to realise more and more clearly during my field-work, in fact, design was not the centre of this work and it was there – as I have said before - not for what it could produce or make, but for what it enabled, as in the process of the formation of the autonomous political subject. This partly explains why design tools and workshops are also not illustrated in detail in this monograph, but only briefly presented in the format of a table in the Appendix. This is not because I do not believe those tools and workshops were important, as I do; but because, as I already touched on, I positioned my practice epistemologically within the anthropological tradition of making sense as a process of accumulation and duration, rather than the eventful moment of the doing that breaks with the existing to generate something new. Moreover, to a design or design anthropology audience the design tools and methods I used would appear as rather mundane and banal. The interesting part of my design methodology, I believe, comes instead from the *para-designer* approach and the social work and social service approaches that I used (like the World Café model, or the Asset Based model), which were introduced to me by the staff and can be more interesting as they illustrate the fascinating process of *hybridisation* that my practice went through. These methods and reflections are presented in the following Chapters.

Photos are not here for at least two reasons: 1) the need to protect the anonymity of my participants, and 2) as a reaction and a polemic point I wanted to make to the problematic aesthetics of social design, which especially when compared to other forms of design risks of being perceived as either too *poor* or inappropriately aestheticized.

The question of the absence of the participants is a more complex one, as my work aimed to be an attempt at building an emancipatory framework for design anthropology, with the purpose of supporting the subject formation process. First of all, a clarification is needed of the terms that I will use in this work. I consider *participants* – as I could not find a better word for calling them - all the staff directly involved in projects and the residents of the communities I engaged with; *co-researchers* were the residents from the first project I did, which attended the

training, conducted interviews and participated in the analysis phase and the writing up of the research report; *staff* is also a term I use to distinguish among the wider group of the participants, between those who were paid and employed by the organisation, and those who were not, as their modes of engagement, responsibilities and interests were of course different.

Other people were at different points involved in the project like the senior management of the organisation, the external company which did the evaluation of the first project, the members of the steering committee, which was set-up for the first project, other stakeholders from community sector or public services which were at different points involved in both projects (sometimes as helpful collaborators, sometimes less so). I only briefly touch on this second group, when and if relevant, and I do so by clarifying who these persons are, so that it is clear that they do not pertain to the general group of 'participants', neither to the restricted group of the 'staff'. Participants in my project could have also be named – drawing on anthropology – as *informants*, but I chose to avoid using this terminology as this frames too strongly the people involved as source of data, and to use 'participant' instead, as this, although not unproblematic, is more widely used in emancipatory research and also in design.

This question of how to represents the participants became pressing when I had to describe my field-work and to use the quotes that I had collected in my notes or from formal interviews. In that moment, it became inevitable to address the question of how to give '*voice*'. It was by drawing again on emancipatory research that I took the (not easy) decision of not making my participants visible in my work. This would be perfectly in line with the research Ethics code of conduct, which states that a researcher cannot make her participants known and therefore visible. But this is not the reason why I made this choice, as I find this passage of the ethics guidelines also problematic since it does not allow participants to claim their voices and identities and leaves them anonymous, whilst the researcher name and identity is everywhere. The choice of anonymity, in my case, was coming from a different line of thinking and was strongly supported by the staff from the organisation, who was always extra careful in the use of images, the taking pictures, the recording of names, etc. in all their activities. I decided on this point to trust the staff, who knew the participants since long time and knew how to work



with them in respectful ways, although, one could argue, this was still a choice made by professionals which was denying the participants' voice. Interestingly, when I collected my consent forms, I noticed how more than one participant had ticked the box which authorised me to use their real names and identity. But not all of them did, so I decided to not reveal any identity, as the naming of one person or of the organisation where I worked, would have meant possibly revealing all identities of those involved. Once I took the decision of not using the real identities of the participants, I had two choices left: to present them through the use of vignette or personas, or to give them a disembodied voice. Both choices were quite problematic but I chose the second. Choosing the first one, in fact, would have meant to choose a fictional way of depicting my participants and this would have proven too challenging on many levels, according to emancipatory research. First, how could I have avoided the risk of reinforcing oppositional constructions (us – them / the staff- the community, the researcher / the participant) in the attempt to reclaim *authenticity* (Janes, 2015 p. 8). Second, how to avoid the *staging of the suffering* (Hartman, 1997, cited in Janes, 2015 p. 8) in the attempt to give voice to my participants. Finally, I had to confront myself with the risk of *over-determination* of the non-academic (Janes, 2015 p. 10), or in the words of Sarah Ahmed the '*over-representation of the stranger as a figure of the unknowable*' (2000, p. 22). Even if done with the best intentions, in fact, in the process of representing the participants we create them as being others from us and being strangers. In the words of Sarah Ahmed again:

*"How do you know the difference between a friend and a stranger? How do you know a stranger? Such questions challenge the assumption that the stranger is the one who is precisely not (italic in the original) the object of knowledge. For in such a question, knowledge is staged as constitutive, not only of what is familiar, what is already known or indeed knowable, but also of what is strange, and who is the stranger.*

*(...) the stranger is not any-body (italic in the original) that we have failed to recognise, but some-body (italic in the original) that we have already recognised as (italic in the original) a stranger, as 'a body out of place'. Hence, the stranger is some-body we know as not knowing, rather than some-body we simply do not know. The stranger is produced as a category within knowledge, rather than coming into being in an absence of knowledge."*

(Ahmed, 2000 p. 55)

The risk of reproducing and representing participants through a vignette would therefore be to build a crystallised version of them, which would inevitably present some traits of their personalities and not others, dwell on details of their lives that are relevant for this research project and not others. The reality is that I do not know these people and I should not pretend otherwise. As Julia E. Janes again suggested, I wanted to leave a distance between myself and the participants (2015, p. 12), as the getting closer might become oppressive. Moreover, the personification of the participants, by creating a fictional proximity – or a *fetishism* as Ahmed would define it (2000, p. 2) – would simply hide the fact that we (me and you, the reader) do not know this people. The choice to not *represent*, therefore became my tactic to maintain a distance in the attempt to neither celebrate nor deny our differences. I have to note here that, whilst I found a sensibility towards the issues of representation somehow to be present in anthropology (Fabian, 1990, 2006; Crapanzano, 1986), this seems to be a topic which is under-theorised in design literature, and this despite the incredible richness of tools and ways of using design for making visible, representing and telling stories.

To conclude, the voice of the participants in this monograph is for the reasons that I have articulated a disembodied one. The only difference I felt it was important to make, was the difference between resident participants and staff participants, as of course these two groups are not the same. When a comment or a quote is from a member of staff, this is then noted in the text and staff are identified with their initials – sometime real ones, sometime fictitious. Finally, as I am aware of the risks of not giving my participants a body, as '*subjectivity and identity cannot be separated from specific forms of embodiment*' (Bordo, 1993, cited in Ahmed, 2000 p. 41), I did report in my narrative of the field-work some key traits of my participants and namely: their gender, the socio-economic background, the education levels, or other anecdotal details about their lives. In the end, as anthropologists know very well, the role of the ethnographic encounter is to render the stranger familiar, whilst preserving its very nature of being strange and foreign at the same time (Clifford, 1986). I found this task a not easy endeavour, also in ethical terms (Ahmed, 2000).

Before I can move on, let me just briefly illustrate how my work is organised in the next Chapters: in Chapter 3 I will extensively present my field-work through the style of ethnographic writing and will share some initial theoretical implications for practices of design within the field of the social. Chapter 4 is devoted to introduce my exploration into the creative part of the design process through my anthropology *of* design, in the attempt to investigate how (and whether) this could translate to the field of political imagination, with the aim of creativity becoming the *imagining* of new social arrangements and ways of living. In Chapter 5, I draw on the data I collected through my anthropology of creativity *by means of design* and illustrate the critique to creativity, as this is currently predicated within design practice, that emerged from the practical design activities I did when these were confronted with the social reality of my field-work. Chapter 6 is where my contribution to knowledge is presented as the Chapter tries to unpack the limits of creativity in the contexts where the subject is not there, and to present my contribution to knowledge through the suggestion of alternative possible ways in which design could be used to support the social imagination. Chapter 7 will present an attempt to come to (preliminary) conclusions and will reflect on other possible ways in which my work has contributed to novel knowledge, and present the areas that will have to still be explored.

## Chapter 3 – Ethnographic notes and field-work

*“Almost all societies we know have instituted themselves in and through the closure of meaning. They are heteronomous; they cannot put into question their own institution and they produce conformal and heteronomous individuals for whom the putting into question of the existing law is not just forbidden but mentally inconceivable and physically unbearable. These individuals are conscious but not self-reflexive subjectivities.”*

(Castoriadis, 1994c p.152)

My design practice unfolds in the field of mental health in the UK, where I have been working since 2014. The field-work that represents the core part of my research focuses on two programmes that addressed mental health in very different contexts: one is a community project, aimed at building resilience in two local communities in Southern England; the other is a programme to explore alternative ways to address the topic of mental health within a Gypsies and Travellers site, in a community where the incidence of suicides was in 2014 six-times higher than in the general population (Pavee Point, 2013).

Before I dive into the ethnographic account from my field-work, let me just spend few words on a key concept to which I am going to refer multiple times: ‘community’. Working within so-called ‘*community* mental-health services” and on two projects which employed ‘*community workers*’, the risk of a-critically assuming the ‘community’ as a homogenous given was a real one. Drawing on existing anthropological and sociological critiques of the concept of community (Pink, 2008), and coming from the political tradition of Castoriadis, when I entered my field-work I was quite sceptical of the concept itself. Particularly so, as this concept seems to be assumed – at least across UK social services– as an always positive and perhaps *over*-valued notion (Gold, 2005). In this text, I will use the

term 'community' many times, as this was a too laden concept in the field where I did my design anthropology work to simply get rid of it. But I tried, every time I could, to investigate, challenge, complexify the concept with the team I was working. Interestingly, they were the ones to mostly refer to the concept of community. A concept that instead I heard rarely from the residents we worked with, as they talked more simply about *groups*, *residents* or *neighbours*. For these reasons, except for when directly recounting episodes from the project work or reporting words from the staff directly, in my own text I will be intentional in using the word *groups* rather than the emotionally charged *community*.

As I have illustrated above, my research practice consisted of developing tools, training and resources to support non-designers (staff from community organisations, volunteers and people with lived experience of mental health) to use the design approach, alongside more traditional practices of service users' engagement, advocacy and campaigning for social justice. In my role as design researcher, I performed different activities: from providing design training to staff and to residents; to supporting the project managers and the staff with regular coaching and reflective sessions; through to facilitating design workshops and other design activities (including for instance interviews, idea generation sessions, prototyping, workshop facilitation, etc.). More details about my design activities in these two programmes are available in Annex 1.

In line with the ethos of emancipatory research (in this very much aligned with Participatory Action Research as well), my work started with the issues that the participants were framing as important to them, it valued and honoured their knowledge and lived experience, and it had the double aim of producing both impact and knowledge (Wadsworth, 1998; Reason in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Whyte, 1981). This was reflected, for instance, in the fact that I was myself not always at ease with the decisions made by the project team, or the language and concepts used, but that I understood the importance of keeping my uneasiness out of my practice, and to leave it for my reflective research writing.

In terms of where I position my practice within the wider spectrum of design disciplines and approaches, I have to admit that this is not a clear-cut answer, but something I have struggled to come to terms with, for a long time. This is partly because the practices of design that deal with the messiness and complexity of the

social assemblages are still a terrain of contested definitions, and partly because I wanted to make the deliberate attempt to explore the meaning of design, beyond its parochial definitions and labels, but through the language and the experience of those (non-designers) that were using it with me (as I will illustrate in the next section).

I have chosen to present in the following pages my field-work as two clearly distinct projects, which I will call for simplicity project 1 and project 2. Although they could be considered somehow part of the same field-work, as I worked with the same organisation for both projects, both represented the exploration of the same topic and the attempt to answer the same research questions, the two experiences proved in the end very different, from the point of view of the encounter with design and for the findings that they generated, that they deserve to be treated separately.

I have been involved in the field of mental health in the UK since April 2014, initially working with a national mental health charity to improve their services through innovative practices of service users' engagement. By the time I started my Doctorate, I had already developed in the field a number of contacts and a good understanding of the issues, the policies and the mental health system. The cases for my field-work emerged almost naturally from these connections, open conversations and work in the field that I was already doing. Of course, in line with the ethical guidance of my University and my professional code of conduct, when I decided to turn a short consultancy into my doctoral field-work, I went through the process of formalising this shift in engagement. This took the material shape of going through my Information and Consent forms with participants, and through the less formal act of engaging in conversations with them, regarding how my role was going to change, what my interest and expectations were. I took the opportunity of going through the formalities for the ethical clearance of my research, as an excuse to raise and discuss my position with the CEO of the mental health community organisation I collaborated with, but also to get access to the members of staff (as I needed them to sign the information and consent forms too) and all the others who were involved. I used this opportunity to also unpack the always tricky conversation about boundaries and responsibilities. The fact that I

was working in a mental health organisation, I have to say, made this all conversation much easier. Whereas discussing ethics, at the beginning of a process of getting to know each other in a research project, might sometime raise feeling of awkwardness and mistrust (or simply misunderstandings), the “*ethics conversation*” was very much welcomed by this mental health organisation as ethical considerations, issues of boundaries, safety and risk management were in fact, as I have illustrated before, we could say “the bread and butter” of their work. The fact that I had worked with mental health charities before, that I had done the basic training and that I understood the context, made the process of gaining and maintaining trust a lot easier.

The community mental health organisation I ended up working with for my research was a local mental health organisation, which provided several community mental health services in a quite vast area in South East England. When I started this research project, this was not the only mental health organisation I was working with, but they were the only one to fulfil my criteria for the selection of my field-work. In fact, I wanted to work on projects where:

- design could be explicitly used as an approach to critique existing modes and roles within the current system of mental health service delivery;
- there was a clear participatory ethos as the engagement with the final users (or *beneficiaries*, in the mental health service language) was central;
- opportunities for long-term engagement were ensured, as I made this central to my practice of design.

Finally, what convinced me to work with this community mental health organisation as part of my doctoral research was the activist attitude they embodied and which was visible in most of the people I had the pleasure to work with (from the CEO to several members of staff), and their genuine interest in experimenting with creative practices of users’ engagement for designing and delivering better user-centred and personalised services.

In terms of who I considered to be my participants, as I have touched on this before, I built on Marres understanding of the public (2012) to draw a line between those actors who qualified as legitimate participants and those who did not. In fact, drawing on her framing of ‘problems of relevance’, I assumed an

internalist perspective which meant that I did not choose or identify my participants in advance, but allowed those who were living in the neighbourhood where we worked, to voluntarily choose how and whether to be engaged in our activities as our 'public'.

### 3.1) *Design comes in different flavours*

I still remember what a senior manager of a UK Voluntary Sector organisation once told me about design, as we were discussing her practice and experience of bringing design approaches and tools into the sector. The quote below is not verbatim but taken from my notes:

*"For the people here at XXX, learning about design is like learning about a new word in a foreign language, like they were hearing the word 'gelato' - which is ice-cream in Italian - for the first time. Once they have learnt this new word, everyone wants some 'gelato', they talk about 'gelato' all the time, they like the sound of it, and its key (evident) characteristics: it is fresh, it is colourful, it is tasty and creamy, it is definitely something they want more of. What they still don't know about 'gelato' is how it is made, what the ingredients are, what other words in Italian they can use to express the same concept, and they still don't know that 'gelato' comes in different flavours. There is in fact so much more they could be doing with 'gelato' (design) than what they can now even conceive of."*

I have used this anecdote and analogy from that conversation many times to explain what has also been true from my experience of introducing design in 'unusual' contexts, where the immediate reaction had always been that they wanted more of it. People got easily excited about the most evident features of design, as in the post-it notes, the sharpies, and the visual tools. But often struggled to grasp design in its complexity and full potential, as for instance in the case of the organisation I have been working with. When I started, both staff and management had in fact a shallow and simplified understanding of what design was and what it could do for them (or rather what they could do with it).

In this section, I am going to explore this idea that design comes in *different flavours*, as for me it is associated with the different ideologies and value systems that are present in different applications of design. Following from Nigel Whiteley (1993) we could say that although the social field is developing better design *consciousness*, little has still been done to develop more design *awareness*. I would



also argue that the issue of design unspoken ideology, which also determines where some of its tools and methods originally come from, becomes even more central when design is applied to design policies, social services and models of welfare. An a-historical and a-political understanding of design, in fact, tends to overlook the question of where design originates from, and assumes the practice of design as a value-free and homogeneous practice. According to Whiteley, though, this is not the case and unless we take a clear stance about the type of design we refer to, we are probably inadvertently falling in the consumerist tradition (or rather the market-led tradition) of design, with all its relevant implications.

However, if we put design in a historical perspective, it becomes evident how different types of design have emerged that were the result of divergent visions of the world and value systems that became established at different points in time. If we just look at the feature of users' participation in design, for instance, and the role and the attitude towards designers' expertise, we could already trace a quite interesting history of the recent past, that would show how the attitude of design and designers toward the inclusion of users (on which the whole idea of user-centeredness is based) is actually something that only in the 1970s emerged. I am going to look into the ideology of these collaborative practices of design in more details.

Building on Bradwell and Marr working definition, we could identify the following as the key components of this collaborative approaches to co-design:

***Participation:*** *Co-design is a collaboration. (...) There is a great deal of transparency involved in co-design: all participants are aware of the design methodology, its inputs and outputs, its goals and current status, etc. It is designing with people, not merely for people. (...)*

***Development:*** *Co-design is a developmental process. It involves the exchange of information and expertise relating to both the subject of the design process and the process itself. In this sense, co-design teaches co-design.*

***Ownership and power:*** *Co-design shifts power to the process, creating a framework that defines and maintains the necessary balance of rights and freedoms between participants. There is equality of legitimacy and value in inputs from all those involved, whether suggestions entail large- or small-scale changes. This combination of controlled abrogation of power by those with whom it usually rests, and the concomitant empowerment of those in a traditional 'client' role, serves to create a sense of collective ownership.*

***Outcomes and intent:*** *Co-design activities are outcome-based: they possess a practical focus, with clarity of vision and direction. Methodology and implementation seek to ensure a shared creative intent between all participants."*

(Bradwell and Marr, 2008)

What I like in this definition is that it introduces questions of ownership and power, which are usually overlooked in more optimistic accounts of co-design projects as ethical and good in their own right. Questions of how power relations operate and are transformed – if at all – in co-design work within public services are in fact long overdue and this is, according to Donetto *et al* (2015), for at least two reasons: *"first, inherent to co-design are notions of equality, equal contribution and mutual respect that are proving difficult to establish in (healthcare) contexts where traditional roles of provider and recipient of care are clearly demarcated; and, second, without critical understanding of the different types and facets of power operating within a specific setting, their configurations and their possible effects, the discourses of service user empowerment and democratization of service provision risk being deployed simplistically, thereby obfuscating more subtle forms of oppression and social exclusion."* (Donetto *et al*, 2015 p. 242). Other scholars and practitioners have also raised their concerns towards some *collaborative* elements of design approaches as these present peculiar challenges, and namely: a) the difficulty of addressing *power dynamics* within the context of co-design processes, where users rarely are in an *'equal' position to providers* (Bowen *et al*, 2013 p. 14); b) the problems with the *locus of control* (Bowen *et al*, 2013, Iedema *et al*, 2010) as the dynamics that have brought users and staff of a public service to be involved in a participatory intervention widely vary, with users keen to be involved and staff, in contrast, reporting to have been strongly *encouraged* to be involved; and c) the tendency during co-design discussions to converge towards *'quick fix'* solutions too early without exploring divergent thinking (Bowen *et al*, 2013), that may allow these interactions to go beyond providing practical solutions and initiate *change* that can be sustained in the longer term.

It is only by starting to complexify design and its ethics of collaboration that we can try to avoid the risk of *romanticising participation* (Collins and Cook, 2014) for

the sake of participation, by assuming that participatory forms of design are in and of themselves an efficient ethical act in the quest for ethical outcomes. I felt my practice to be closer to forms of Participatory Design, as it developed within the Swedish tradition and on the background of the struggles for democracy at work, when debates took place around the right of workers to co-determination in the production process (Schuler and Namioka, 1993). But I looked at other practices of design too, like for instance activist design, critical design and transition design (Irwin *et al*, 2015), and from each of them I took some learnings and reflections that have informed my work. Like for instance in re-considering the role of the designer and the importance of her personal values and personality traits, as I came to see designers' own mind-set and posture to be an essential component of the design process itself (Irwin *et al*, 2015); or like the rethinking of the 'project' as the traditional space and temporal frame for design intervention. I decided not to use – despite the focus of my work being on the radical imagination – more classic speculative design methods (Dunne and Raby, 2014) as these remain – I believe – an expert-led practice compared to more collaborative approaches (Sanders and Stappers, 2008), which are those I am trying to explore<sup>15</sup>.

Only later in my doctoral work I came to understand my practice as design *for* and *from* autonomy, by drawing on the work of the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2018) and his concept of 'autonomous design'. I found this practice of design to give a name to what I had been doing in different contexts and for many years, trying to highlight a sort of 'natural design', which happens in local communities independently from external 'expert' knowledge. In my practice and when I introduced the project to the organisation I ended up working with, I chose to call what I was doing as '*service design*' as I found this label to be more accessible to them, since it was mirroring the language that the organisation already used, which is the language of *services*. As I will illustrate later in this Chapter, this proved to be a non-fortunate choice, as some members of staff found the concept of 'services' in itself quite problematic.

<sup>15</sup> My research interest and practice focus in fact on exploring those creative methods in design that could be re-appropriated by non-designers, rather than using more experts-led creative approaches.

Although I have in this section intentionally not given a one clear definition of where I situate my practice, as in the attempt to reclaim my right to do the work of the *bricoleur* in taking and using from different approaches from design, I hope I have given the reader enough points of reference around my underpinning values and beliefs to position myself and my practice by now. In the next section, I am going to make this even clearer, by leaving my practice to speak directly through the description of what I did, why I did it and how.

### *3.2) The Asset Based Approach: 'Use what you have to secure what you have not'*

An important component of my field-work was the fact that the organisation decided to use in both projects - and for their first time - an approach called Asset Based Community Development (from now on also ABCD). This proved to be one of those fortuitous coincidences that one could never plan, as the principles and values underpinning this approach ended up influencing my design practice and shape the ethos of the projects. The ABCD approach provides a theoretical framework which main characteristic is that, contrary to many social work and community approaches, it focuses on building on what is already strong rather than what is wrong in groups and communities and has a strong ethos around issues of social justice.

Originally inspired by Ivan Illich's work, Asset Based Community Development frames the role of professionals as 'disabler' that, in the language of the approach, *de-activate* people in communities by building the argument that *they* (the people in the community) are in need, and that *them* (the professionals) have the tools to 'fix them'.

Ivan Illich was a philosopher born in Vienna in 1926, who spent most of his life travelling in South America. He was a fierce critic of Western ways of life and institutions, and wrote extensively in the fields of education, medicine, and development. As I have recounted in a paper presented at the European Design Academy Conference and later published in the Design Journal (Pierri, 2019), I have been inspired for many years by the thinking of Ivan Illich, as a courageous and polemic author and a practitioner of his own thinking. This was well before

encountering his work again through my design practice. It was then with incredible surprise and joy that I found out later he was, in fact, the theoretical inspirator of the concept of ABCD, as this developed in community services across the UK. Most of the theoretical underpinning of the approach drew originally from a book from Illich titled 'The Age of Disabling Professions' (1977), with which he indicated "*an age when people had 'problems', experts had 'solutions' and scientists measured imponderables such as 'abilities' and 'needs'.*" (p. 11). Again, in the author's words:

*"When I learned to speak, problems existed only in mathematics or chess: solutions were saline or legal, and need was mainly used as a verb. The expressions, "I have a problem", or, "I have a need", both sounded silly. (...) As people become experts in the art of learning to need, learning to identify wants from experience becomes a rare competence. (...) To be ignorant or unconvinced of one's own needs has become the unforgivable anti-social act."*

(Illich 1977, pp. 22-24)

In line with the thinking of Castoriadis, the work of Illich expands the critique of the role of the professionals as partly responsible for the creation of the division between those who direct and know how to do that, and the majority who only have to execute. Quoting again a passage from Castoriadis "*(...) capitalism consists in more or less arbitrarily choosing fifty (...) individuals, vesting them with managerial authority, and deciding that the others should be cogs.*" (Castoriadis, 1974 p. 52). I would suggest that in social and public services where design has been introduced and used, the risk appears that designers could become this kind of 'professionals', like for instance when they appropriate concepts like those of 'problems' and 'needs', and imposes them on the people they work with as a given; or when they portray the communities and groups they work with through a narrative based on needs. In these instances, design could be considered co-responsible of the potential damaging implications of self-perception, as people become experts in the arts of being in need and forget about the gifts and resources that they also have. These examples of design, as I would argue in this work, could be defined an example of *heteronomous* design, using the words from Castoriadis, which is a practice of design which imposes a social imaginary on groups and communities from the outside (where certain groups have problems to be fixed and design experts had the solutions). As I will illustrate in the next pages,

it was through the lens of the ABCD approach that I was able to reflect and explore on the implications of a heteronomous practice of design, and what – by reverse – an autonomous practice might be that starts from what is strong, rather than what is wrong in a community, defining this from the perspective of the community itself.

As the ABCD approach has a strong theoretical framework underpinning its use, the team from the community organisation I worked with had from the beginning identified a mentor, somebody with experience of the approach that they could talk and refer to, in order to improve their ABCD practice. I had the opportunity to interview this expert and ABCD mentor at the beginning of my field-work, as I was trying myself to grasp more of the concept and of its practical implications in the field of community development.

I learnt from that interview that the team worked using a model to frame their actions that their mentor described as follows:

*“(...) there are 4 levels of helping that are operating in the world today in helping professions and most people are making the distinction between the 4. These are:*

- **Helping 1.0 - Relief:** which is typified by the idea of stopping the bleeding. So, it's about you go in, you deal with the crisis. You know... people are hungry you feed them
- **Helping 2.0 – is rehabilitation:** and I use here the parody of a ship building metaphor... is about taking the ship out of the high and stormy seas and bring it in the dry dock so it's about taking people out of their context and bring them into dry-docks. So a prison would be a dry dock. The idea is that you can rehabilitate yourself if you get away from the stormy seas. The difficulty is that the sea is not just a stormy place, but also provides lots of important things, and if you take people away from the context to rehabilitate and then you put them back in the context, we see a lot of relapse.
- **Helping 3.0 is advocacy,** and this is where we come alongside people and we advocate to ensure their rights for services or maybe the right to be independent from services. But what advocacy doesn't do enough, in my view, is to figure out with people how they themselves can bring their own voice and articulate a voice of the citizenship. So how they can talk not just about being consumer of a service but also how they can talk about being a producer and a co-producer with others of better social value. We need both.
- **Helping 4.0 is community building,** which focuses on community driven citizenship and it does not exclude all of the others. But here we need to pay attention to the context, and in any given

*context, one of these approaches or a combination of them is going to prove more helpful.*

*My thesis is that we have been using helping 1.0 while we should be using helping 4.0 and so on. We have been conflating the other forms of helping and in doing so procuring harm to people's autonomy and interdependency and the capacity to build indigenous community. So, help 4.0 is the attempt to speak to how we build interdependency in the community life and is not intended to replace services, as we need services."*

Like in this passage, the tone that he used during the interview was often very emphatic. He seemed to me at times that he spoke more like a preacher than a mentor. One could definitely tell that he was deeply inspired by the ABCD approach and quite ideological about it. But I have to say, going beyond the tone, that I found what he was saying and this way of categorising help in social services, quite thought provoking and also very inspiring. It does, in fact, very well portray the variety of services that I have experienced working in the field of mental health and makes explicit the implicit attitudes that usually underpin them. I came back to this distinction many times during my work with the community mental health organisation, as we used this scheme as a way of increasing our awareness of the kind of activities that we were doing in the field. I believe this list could prove quite helpful to the designers as well, working in the social field, to help them navigate the system of services with increased awareness.

As I learnt, the practice of ABCD comes with its language and concepts. A key one is the concept of 'activation' (and of course its opposite, deactivation) as something that professionals do to communities. When I asked the mentor to clarify the concept, this is what he said:

*"I think activation is much a sociological phenomenon as it is an individual phenomenon. Environment and culture socialise people into being enabled or disabled. For example, in some culture where people are aggregated around some labels they can learn behaviour that are not actually peculiar to them as individuals or their development at all. And this is a form of disablement. (...) It's very much like a social interactional and kind of transactional dynamics can enable or disable development. The same capacities will always be there but it's a question of whether these have been enabled or disabled."*

And when I asked him to clarify the relationship between activation and deactivation, he added:

*"(...) I think there is an interplay between de-activation and activation. So for example I could de-activate somebody willingness to look at the territory around them in positive terms, by making them see that the glass is half empty. Or I could activate them to believe that far-away hills are greener. So if you have an aspiration - like you want to go out of here - there is an interplay and I can activate in one space and deactivate in another."*

Lots of the activities and the work of the staff, and most of our design research as well, as we will see in a moment, focused on exploring these moments and lever of activation and de-activation. In their everyday work in the community, for instance, staff went out to have what they called 'assets-mapping conversations' to engage with residents, and these 'conversations' soon became a central tool for our design practice. By hanging out in 'bumping spaces' – which in the words of staff were cafes, shopping centres and other places which offered opportunities to meet - these members of staff used convivial opportunities to approach residents and start informal conversations on all sorts of topics. Although following a natural flow, these conversations were mainly of two sorts: motivation-conversations and concern-conversations. So, conversations around motivations were usually trying to tease out people's passions, focusing on the skills and gifts that people could see in themselves, their neighbours or in the wider community, and which they were open to share or interested to receive. These were things more common like language skills, baking or gardening, a space for a post-school event with children, but also sharing with new residents more about the history of the community, or supporting people to apply for funding from the local council. Motivation based conversations then moved on to a second level, starting to probe people to share their dreams and visions, to encourage residents to imagine what a self-determined, rather than service-determined, community would look like. People who were asked to share their dreams for their community talked about a variety of things they would have liked to see happening: from outdoor cinema, to pop-up film nights, to toddler groups, to night games or music festivals.

Many times, conversations also addressed residents' concerns about scarcity of local resources, or practical issues like parking or lack of school support. These concern-based conversations, within the ABCD approach, were particularly significant as they aimed to open up and make visible a direct link from what did not work to what could be done differently in their local area. By letting the



community recognise its own strengths and resources, in fact, ABCD conversations aimed to construct first the belief in people's own capacity to act, which could in turn inspire the confidence to start taking over control of their communities, which could ultimately in some instances bring about conversations that move to the place of social justice (Mathie, 2006). From the words of one of the members of staff involved in this project:

*“ABCD conversations are about what do we have already to get what we need. When community functions top down, then ABCD is to have conversations to encourage residents to envision how what is already there could function differently with them at the centre. It's tricky. Getting the community to take ownership and work things differently is the ultimate goal. It's through the process of getting people to do more stuff without professional help that leads to this ownership. In practical terms is about challenging the way they respond to a challenge or dilemma in their community. In order to take ownership, the residents need to buy into a new narrative challenging the way they think about their place in the community, specifically... are you after specific?”*

*The big part of ABC is telling stories. If people in a room... the way I would challenge their thought of their place in the community would be: tell me a story when neighbours have come together to make change. You are not asking anything from them at this point. But to recount a story that either they have got involved with, or they have witnessed, etc. Through that process you get a group of people to start thinking differently. Once they've told the stories, then you ask which one resonate with you most. Why did that resonate with you the most and then the following exercise would probably be what does a good life / good community looks like to you. And they can paint a picture together, literally, and then after you link the two together and say what do you need to achieve that and if they start go on a tangent about how they need professionals, or funding, then you can go back and say, look that has been done by neighbours without help, that is the point of that first part of the exercise.”*

(Interview with B., member of staff)

*“Use what you have to secure what you have not”* (which also gives the title to this section) is the inspirational principles that Alison Mathie uses to describe what ABCD is ultimately about, and which perfectly resonate with B. extract above. The simple point of the approach is that the more the community can mobilise its own resources and build that sense of authority from within, the more it can do to attract investment from the outside, to leverage resources that are needed in order to claim the assets (and the rights) to which the community is entitled (2006). I

believe this point can articulate what Castoriadis' project of a *praxis* for the autonomous subject might look like on the ground. Although I did come later to elaborate some critiques to the ABCD approach and to the way it had been applied in the UK social and health services<sup>16</sup>, and despite the difficulties that the model proved to have in practice for the staff (as I will later elaborate in this Chapter), I found the approach and the tool of the ABCD conversations a simple way to demonstrate what creative democracy is and how it could be achieved in practice. As I will come back to these critiques later, it might be worth mentioning here how framing 'communities' as always positive and resourceful is not less problematic than it is to always condemn them as difficult and deficit based. As Sukarieh and Tannock (2011, p. 688) highlighted, the value of critical analysis should not be to simply replace negative stereotypes with positive ones, but to understand how and why particular kinds of positive and negative stereotypes are mobilized in the first place by different groups and for what purposes.

My work in the field has been a learning journey from the beginning, as getting my head around ABCD was the first thing I did for understanding more about the project. Moreover, I learnt about exercising patience, as time was diluted, in order to not interfere with the busy life in the community, by imposing on them the hectic pace of the design work. I was following the words of the ABCD mentor: "*As long as you stay in searching mode, rather than programmatic and planning mode the purpose of this becomes to learn, and the community your best teacher of how to build community. People will teach you very quickly.*"

### 3.3) *Field-work nr1: Working with Resilient Communities*

I started my field-work working with resilient communities in the UK in October 2016. I was initially approached to do this work by the organisation itself, a local mental health charity, which was funded by the local Council to run a three years'

<sup>16</sup> Many of the critiques to ABCD come from the origin of the approach in the 1980s in the context of conservative and neo-liberal policies for community development. In the UK, scholars have for instance highlighted how the model has been used to justify privatisation and funding cuts to community services (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014). Further critics can be raised around the neo-liberal framing of communities as *resources* and *assets*.

long project (from 2015 to 2018) to improve wellbeing and resilience in two local communities.

The two communities were chosen as they both had issues articulating that concept of 'community' in practice. In one case, the project focused on a new development area, where new buildings and luxury complex had been recently built around the core of a small historical settlement. The issue in what I will call Area A was that, as a result of the new development, a new community had been 'designed' on paper, that was actually not there in practice. When I visited the place the first time in a cold day of November 2016, the area still had lots of development works going on, which made the neighbourhood look really not a welcoming place but more like a building site: there was no gathering spaces or a developed high street offer for cafes and other meeting points; the people that moved there first were coming from different contexts and backgrounds and not represented a cohesive group at all. There were in fact, on one hand, wealthy people who moved in the area as they chose and could afford to buy the new houses; on the other hand, one could find people in social housing whom had not really chosen to move in the area, as they were 'assigned' a flat there and had no choice about it; next to these there were the original residents who had seen their local neighbourhood changing and were not involved in the new developments. As I learnt quickly by hanging around in the neighbourhood, one could tell 'who was whom', from a very simple and evident sign: solar panels on their rooftops. All the 'rich', who moved there in the new buildings, apparently, had solar panel everywhere. Nobody else did.

The other neighbourhood, which I will call Area B, had a very different story, but similar issues. It was a very old and more traditional community, which was going through a phase of economic crisis, with many shops and cafes closing down in the high-street, a sense of abandonment and of shutting down of opportunities, that one could almost perceive when walking by in the streets. The area had seen the numbers of immigrants, especially coming from Eastern Europe, increasing and this was not seen positively by the residents, since these *newcomers* were also struggling to integrate in the community.

Both areas were of course chosen – I was told - as they both needed their sense of community to be somehow rebuilt. In one case because what represented the “community” was in the process of being re-negotiated, in the other because the community, which was there, was being threatened by different sources. The rationale behind the project was to foster more connected communities, where people knew where to turn for help, and where common passions and sense of belonging could be nurtured, as this would have helped promoting the wellbeing of the area. In the words of one of the community builders who worked on the project:

*“Although it is an innovative approach, what is trying to achieve is essentially to regain what we had before, what communities used to be, when there was very much a sort of interdependent living, if you needed something you could go and ask your neighbour. Now this seems to be lost, especially in new development.*

*(Our project) saw the benefit of people being able to contribute and be connected on a neighbourhood level and the importance of this for resilience and wellbeing. (Our project) is a preventative intervention for mental health and the idea behind is that if we can encourage more people to connect with one another and contribute their skills and develop a sense of purpose, then we are able to improve wellbeing.”*

I will say more on the project itself, as I move in this chapter to describe the work we did with the team, but I would like to spend few words here to clarify how the organisation used the concept of resilience. Within the context of mental health ‘resilience’ is still a controversial idea and there is no one definition of it that is available and shared by all organisations in the field. Some practitioners highlight that resilience is about the individual’s ability to ‘bounce back’ from adversities (Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004); others also point to the fact that resilience requires the capacity of the individual (or of a community) to adapt, in the face of challenging circumstances, whilst maintaining a positive mental wellbeing (Mayo Clinic, 2017, Mind and the Mental Health Foundation, 2013). For the purpose of the project, resilience was not considered to be a personality trait but something that all people can develop and achieve.

The design work, which I am going to talk mostly about, was envisioned since the beginning of the project presentation phase from the organisation itself, as one of

three pillars of the project (together with ABCD and mental health awareness activities).

### **3.3.1) Who is paid and who is not**

The reason for using design in the project - as I learnt when I joined and simply asked this question - was for the organisation to be more intentional in the act of creating some sort of structures or services that could, on one hand, create more opportunities for residents to meet, to mingle and to engage with each other, and on the other, use these encounters so that residents could feel motivated to act together in their community. A group of 4 residents, 2 from area A and 2 from area B, were selected by the project staff to become part of the co-design team. In line with the organisation's engagement policies, the residents involved were all offered an Engagement Agreement (an anonymised copy of this agreement is available in Annex 2 and an 'Engagement planning and monitoring sheet' is also attached as Annex 3). This was a one-page document that both parts had to sign and where it was detailed the commitment required, what the expectations were, what support was offered and – in line with the effort to re-distribute the material resources of the design research activities – what payment was offered to all participants. I was involved from the beginning when these so called 'Engagement Agreements' were prepared and most of the conversation, interestingly, focused on the choice of paying the residents for their work. Although the engagement policy of the organisation already included some sorts of coupons or gratuity for all those who were engaged in their activities, payments in cash had never been considered before. It was raised as an option by myself – in line with the intention of redistributing the resources of research - and a couple of other members of the team immediately supported it. The team in fact soon realised that the type of engagement that was going to be necessary for the design part of the project (becoming a co-researcher and being actively involved in all the tasks and design activities) was definitely at the high-end of the ladder of engagement, and something like they had never done before (cfr the Engagement Ladder in Annex 4). The main argument I made to include this form of payment for all participants was that the only participants who were not paid were the 'users' – in our case the residents (as it tends to happen also in many participatory design practices). This is perhaps based on the never discussed assumption that 'users' have already a

motivation to attend the workshops, which is to be able to have their voice heard and to get involved. But how is this different from any other participants? I would say it is not. The argument could be made, in fact, that professionals, experts and designers alike, all have their own interest in taking part in the design development (as they all hold somehow a stake in the project and want to make sure their voices are also heard). But while all the other participants (experts, staff, designers) are usually there as part of their jobs, usually during working hours, hence they are paid for being there, this is rarely the case for the 'users'. The question of payment, as I made my argument to the organisation, was very much in line with all the principles they talked about in ABCD, it would have created a collaboration on a more equal foot, and would have meant to recognise that 'users' not only have something to take from the workshops, but that they have really something to give as well. Something with a value attached to it, which in our society easily takes the form of money. The payment was finally agreed, and although the compensation could not be related to the equivalent of staff salary, as that would have created issues to the organisation employment rules and also to some of the residents, who were at that point in time receiving employment benefits, the *reimbursement* - as this was still called - considered the amount of hours needed for the different phases of the work (including attending the training, doing the design research, analysing the data, participating in the workshop activities) and attached a figure to that amount of hours. It was a first step, but definitely one in the right direction.

### **3.3.2) The difficult encounter with Design**

Once all these 'practicalities' were sorted and before starting the co-design work, I had my first meeting with the enlarged team, who was working on the project. The aim of the meeting was a first introduction to the concept and the tools of design. It was a day in October 2016 when I joined the team for the first time and it was incredible to see how, on one hand, everyone felt super excited about using this new approach, but, on the other, how little they really knew about it. I noticed how especially the project manager was saying all the right things about using the design approach (like '*we need to keep an open mind*', '*we should not close opportunities too early*', etc.), but then rarely put them into practice. She was in fact operating in a very rigid style, more classic of a project management approach

I would say: e.g. rigid timeline, rigid definition of what things were, rigid definitions of roles. It struck me how the two sides were actually coexisting together, but particularly, I was surprised by the fact that she could not see the discrepancy in these two different attitudes.

I remember, as I was traveling back to London feeling discouraged from the first meeting, that I was writing down in my notepad a series of questions: Why they thought they needed Service Design in the first place? Were they genuinely interested (and ready) to change their ways of working and doing things in a 'designerly way'? What they were expecting design to do for them? And why they could not see the contradictions that I could see everywhere?

It was the Project manager who decided who was in and who was out of the design part of the project, and although she invited the two other members of staff for the initial day of introduction to the approach, I felt from the beginning that she did not want them to be *too* much engaged in the design work. One day, about two weeks after our first encounter, she came to me at the end of a meeting, took me apart and lowering her voice to make sure no one could hear us, told me: *'I have a problem with (and she said the names of the two members of staff), as they have complained to me that they have already too much on their plate. I cannot count on them doing anything on this project. They will be involved in group activities but will not do 1to1 interviews. In fact, I am also doing the recruitment myself. The message I've got from them is 'we need to step back and need you to run the show'.* This is not a verbatim quote but is very close to what she said word by word, as it is taken from my notes, which I used to write down during the meetings or, when this was not possible, immediately afterwards. I have to admit that this came to me totally as a surprise. I had met with the other two members of the team at least twice by then, in a whole day training and a more operational meeting, and both times I came out with the exact opposite impression: that they were very keen to learn something new, that what we were going to do with the design work felt very similar to what they were already doing in the communities, they started naming names of people that they could invite to engage as co-researchers, etc.. Either I had totally misunderstood the situation and the messages that the staff was sending me, or they had been lying to me bluntly (but for what purpose?), or

perhaps there was something else going on that I could not possibly understand at that point.

As I learnt later, it was actually the project manager who was not keen on opening the process up to other people and especially part of her team. Many times after she made me that confidence, I have been thinking about the way she twisted the whole situation: she made it look as she was the 'good manager', who was listening to the staff and was worried for *them* (that is what she said), as staff had already too much to do; they wanted *to step back and for her to run the show*. Sometimes later, I felt as she was almost resisting the fact that *I myself* was joining the process, and during these difficult initial weeks of the project I started reconsidering my understanding of the power dynamics in the group. I had walked through the door of this project, in fact, very aware of *my* power: I was coming into this organisation, working with a bigger organisation at that time, and as the expert of service design to 'train' staff on how to use this approach. I had the support of the senior management who introduced me to the team, I could tell people what to do, how to work, have the last word on all things design-related, as everyone was turning towards me when things had to be decided, or simply when they wanted to check if what they were saying was right or wrong (and of course, I had that power of deciding what was right or wrong in 'service design' terms). I was there to ask questions, and this was also a powerful position to be in.

But after those few meetings and coaching calls with the project manager, I started wondering whether I had misunderstood the situation completely, and whether I was in reality the disempowered one. In fact, I was not *inside* the organisation all the time; I only went there for meetings and workshops, and when invited; I only knew what they wanted to share and tell me, and I realised months later how little I actually knew and had understood of the internal dynamics that were going on in the team. The project manager was the one who *invited* me in, and she was always in control of what I was going to see and to know and what I was not. Furthermore, she was ultimately the one deciding on the things that were get done, and things that were not, and she could use any excuse to justify her decisions (once was about lack of time, once was staff motivation, once was budget cuts or other



excuses). I could not *impose* myself on anything. She always got her way around me.

### 3.3.3) Finding our Co-researchers

The weeks before the research training in November 2016, were difficult ones. Things with the Project Manager (from now on PM1) started becoming tense. We had a couple of tough calls where it became visible that we were both annoyed by each other's attitude. I was doing my design-coaching role, I was being challenging, I was trying to keep the process open and giving her advice on how to frame the research brief and the research questions. But PM1 was not happy with that at all. She was obsessed with pre-planning and having all nailed down to the minimum details.

Was she concerned about the fact that the co-researchers were people from the communities, so with little experience of doing this before? Was she simply trying to control her project in all the small details? Was she just being herself and following her project-management style? Was she put under pressure from the top of the organisation for delivering a key project and started becoming anxious about letting control go? I do not know exactly what it was, but definitely she did not trust my judgement at this point and saw my questions and my requests for making changes as a big loss of time, that she would have done very well without. Finally, after various tense calls and a couple of change of dates, we had our training day with residents' co-researchers booked for the end of November 2016. We were 9 people in the room, 4 residents, 4 staff and me. The research-training was a day long training where I used the content I had developed, together with other designers and non-designers in my previous design practice (the structure of the workshop we built for the design research training is available in Annex 5, including a list of top-tips for doing research in Annex 5 bis). This consisted in a day-long activity which aimed at introducing some basic principles of design research - as actionable research - and how does this differ from other modes of research (like surveys or questionnaire). The training was built so to avoid as much as possible the jargon of design research, as I learnt in the context where I used this module before, that this represented a barrier for non-designers, rather than a point of access. The training describes the various research phase and skills that are needed in plain language as it refers, for instance, to methods like

exploration, understanding, chatting with people, instead of ethnography, observation, analysis and interviews. In my experience this proved quite helpful in bringing people from different backgrounds and education to connect with the research approach. The training is very practical, and during the day the participants usually use a fictional case to develop the research questions, prepare design research tools (like persona or storyboard), collect insights about their theme (either by practicing between them or by going out and engaging in real conversations with people), and do some initial clustering of emerging themes and analysis. For the purpose of the training during my field-work I brought some practical examples from previous design projects to draw advice on what to do before starting the research (like sampling, research guidelines, how to frame a good question, etc.), what to do during the research (touching on things like introducing yourself and the aim of the inquiry, listening, taking notes, being silent, observing, saying thank you and getting the informed consent signed) and what was important afterwards (like how to do the de-briefing, noting down key quotes, looking for themes, listening to recording, etc.). Although sometimes in other projects we had sent people out in the streets to test a fictional research brief, as a way for the people involved to familiarise with the approach, this time as the day was quite short (10am to 4pm), I had to leave this exercise out and did some role-playing instead. Using the tools and the interview guidelines that we had pre-prepared, and that we refined together on the day, residents started to interview one another in turn, and reflect back. This was for me a really useful exercise, to get feedback on the guidelines themselves, the wording of some questions, the tools to use. It was also a moment for everyone to reflect together on some practical aspects of doing research: how difficult it was to listen and to take notes at the same time, how different people behaved differently during the interviews (talking a lot, or answering short answers, engaging with the tools or ignoring them completely) and reflect together on how this was something to take note of, and to react to accordingly. Everyone felt really confident, they liked the exercise, they felt it was something they could do on their own, and actually, based on their comments, observations from the interviews, subtle things they noticed and reported, etc., I felt it was evident this was something they could do quite well (as I wrote down in my note-pad).

The training went so well that also PM1 felt really positive at the end of it. She was much more relaxed. Almost like finally a big weight had been lifted from her chest. But still, when we were about to close the day and to give each one of us a task to take away for the next meeting, she kept for herself the main task of doing the final rewriting of the interview guidance - based on the feedback we collected during the role-play - and the task of coordinating the communication with everyone in the group - as she found yet another excuse to not share the contact details of the co-researchers with me. In fact, I only got access to the co-researchers directly later in the process, when the interviews started, and we planned to call all of them on their phones for a de-brief after each interview was done. This was 4 people interviewing at least 3 people each, and this was simply too much for PM1 to do on her own. So, she accepted (she had to) to be helped, and for me to be more involved.

At the end of that day I wrote pages and pages on my note-pad with things I noticed, thoughts, observations and frustrations as well. I noted down how difficult it was to get participants to reflect on the meaning of the things they were hearing, beyond taking what was said at face value. Everyone was just sharing and repeating a summary of what they heard and not elaborating on that. But I was definitely being too harsh on them - as I came to reflect later - as they were all learning and doing this for the first time. I wrote a lot about language, as it became evident as the work unfolded how the language of design was the first point of exclusion, since this was not immediately accessible and sometimes complex, with no purpose (concepts like *personas*, *insights*, *ethnography*, *clusters*, etc. could have been for instance expressed with simpler words). I wrote about the power dynamics in the room, reflecting on how this time it was me holding the power, as I was the trainer performing the training role in front of everyone. In fact, there was a lot of me talking on the day, me checking that people were doing it all right, me asking and me answering questions. Despite this, it was a great day as everyone left the room energised and looking forward to their task ahead.

### 3.3.4) What we learnt about Resilient Communities

During the 4 weeks of the research phase, co-researchers went out to talk to 18 people who were all neighbours. The research questions as we formulated them after the training day aimed at understanding more about people's lives, their routines and their sense of what was good and important about living in their communities.

From the Insights Report that was published as a result of the research phase:

*"Our brief when we started our exploratory phase was to understand a bit more about how we could support residents to engage in meaningful activity that contributes to their community. We wanted to know more about what motivates people in their life to be active and to give; what barriers they come up against and what support would be most helpful in encouraging them to do more and sustain their motivation in the long-term.*

*In identifying the themes below, we also drew on the local knowledge of our co-researchers.*

*The four themes that we identified are:*

- 1) **'I want to improve my life and my community'** People in (Area A and B) want to make their lives better; the community space and what this has to offer has a key role to play
- 2) **'A strong community makes me feel safe'** Where there is an open and welcoming community, people feel safer
- 3) **'Sometimes barriers to do things are not physical or external but in our heads.'** Several barriers make it difficult for people that want to, to give and do things in their communities
- 4) **'The hardest thing to learn is to let people helping you'** Some people felt that the way they behaved and were active in their community was linked to their upbringing"

(From the Project Insights Report – Jan 2017)

The people our co-researchers spoke to, told them that they wanted to make their lives better, and that the community space had a key role to play in this. We learnt that a sense of purpose, a social network and personal contacts were really important for people to help them feel positive, calm their anxieties and feel in control. We learnt that there were many people in the communities who were willing to do more and be active, but that they need some support and encouragement in order to do so. Sometimes barriers to engagement were there that could not be easily surmounted (like the lack of transport or a language barrier), but many times barriers were not just physical and rather they were in

people's minds too. These barriers took the shape of anxiety and fear of failing, the feeling of insecurity that people had nothing to give.

But we also learnt that majority of the residents believed everyone had something to give. What was needed was to create and identify opportunities for giving, in a protected and supported way. Participation, we discovered, was something that people thought it could be learnt, by doing it. Everyone can participate, if they choose to, and benefit from doing so. We heard these stories of people who do so much in their community, and we learnt that whilst this is rewarding, it could be tiring too. We discovered how the hardest thing to learn for the most active people in the neighbourhood sometimes was in fact to let other people helping them, as they were always taking on too much for themselves. We reflected on the importance to balance the giving with the receiving, so people did not burnout. As one of the residents told us "*people sometimes simply think that their problems are too small to ask for help*". The time of the analysis turned very quickly into a very intimate session, where residents, staff and myself had very intimate conversations.

Together with the Insights Report, we also took some time to develop together our design principles, for what we wanted to inspire us during the design phase, and the group together came up with the following:

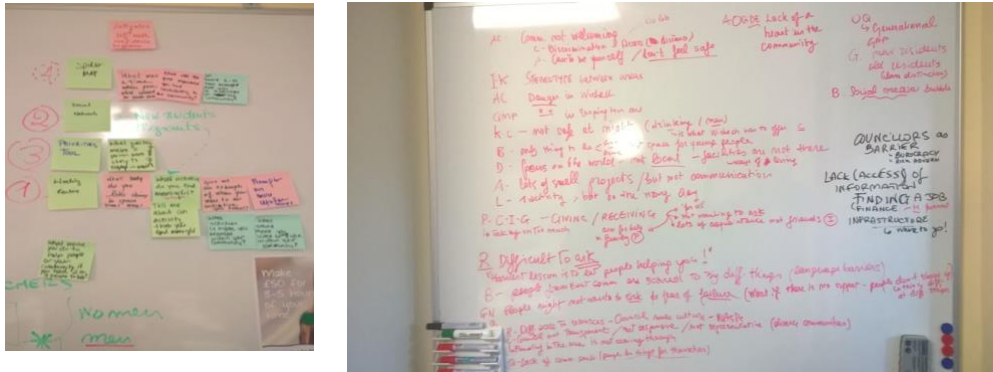
*"Our (..) Service is*

- *Accessible: to any resident with a desire to contribute to their community. Special care will be taken to make it accessible to people with low literacy and whose primary language isn't English.*
- *Grounded: in what matters to the community (meaningful and relevant) and therefore builds the community from the bottom up.*
- *Holistic: as it promotes the community as a whole, rather than a select group of individuals.*
- *Sustainable: as it is easy to implement and facilitate.*
- *Innovative: doesn't duplicate what's previously been created (especially not what's already available in the community).*
- *Scalable as it is relevant to a national audience."*

(From the Project Insights Report – Jan 2017)

Although the whole analysis process – including the coding and the finding of the themes - was done collectively (see Figures 1 below) with all the residents and

staff involved, much of the final writing of the report was done by PM1 and by myself, both for practical reasons and because we felt the residents had already given us so much. So we took the task to give final shape to the findings and present these back to them in a nice format.



**FIGURE 1:** EXAMPLE OF THE ANALYSIS WORK DONE IN COLLABORATION WITH CO-RESEARCHERS FOR PROJECT 1

Once the ‘Insights Report’ was ready, we decided it was time to open up the conversation and reflections around our findings to a wider audience. We organised in the two localities a World Café style event, where the plan was to invite other residents to join in, but also professionals, community builders, civil servants, other local organisations, *etc.* The World Café format, as I learnt, uses a scaffolded discussion approach to combine different ideas and come up with innovative ones. It aims at building up the conversation on different tables, with each table addressing a specific theme, and people moving across tables in rounds, so each group builds on the conversation of the previous one. You have as many rounds as tables as needed, so that everyone has a chance to contribute to a table’s theme. The themes we brought for the group to discuss were the four themes that emerged from the research we did with residents.

I personally only took part in the first Café, mainly as an observer, and took many notes from the day, which we used with the team to improve the plans and activities in the run up to the second event, which was going to be totally led by the organisation and the residents of Area B.

We had four tables at the first World Café and a total of almost twenty people attending (excluding facilitators, staff and the co-researchers who were also there),

which made up quite a mixed group. As I was roaming around the tables, observing and taking notes, I could not notice some clear issues of power imbalance among participants, as people at the beginning sat around tables without mingling too much, residents with residents and professionals with professionals. Moreover, although the event was hosted in a common room in a local school from Area A, so there was no need to do this, some professionals kept wearing their badges during the whole event. These issues were also evident in tables discussions were professionals felt attacked or felt that they had to clarify things, as they felt indirectly targeted by people's comments about what was lacking or not working locally.

I also noted that for some people who had been involved in the previous design phase, this workshop maybe felt somehow a repetition of things they knew and they had done before. We talked about the importance of being aware of the risk of 'participation fatigue', as people are generous and keen to be involved, but they expect to see things progressing and they can become impatient with the next steps. It was at the end of this workshop activity, in fact, that one of our residents' co-researchers, came to me and asked me "*... for the next event, we don't need to participate again, do we?*". I took this as a sign, that he perhaps started perceiving his role as being no more relevant in the next phases. He had given us lots of insights and ideas from the research phase; we had enough to keep going on our own.

### **3.3.5) Familiarising with Creativity**

Following almost religiously the phases of the design process, at the end of the two World Café we moved into generating new ideas and started thinking about solutions and what our intervention could have looked like, as a result.

For the idea generation workshop, I worked with the PM1 to do all the planning and preparing. We planned a 10am to 3pm workshop, hosted in one of the rooms of the organisation, and we invited 8 people – 2 of the co-researchers/residents, 1 commissioner, 1 senior manager of a community centre, 2 new residents who had not been involved before, 2 internal members of staff from different teams and departments, that could bring a new perspective on the work. We started by looking at the ideas that had been initially collected and developed from the World Café events. We also looked at the examples of inspiring services and ideas that

that co-researchers had collected during the research phase and presented through an ‘horizon scanning’ exercise (see Annex 8). In order to guide the group towards the creative part of the design work I used a method that I learnt from when I worked with professional designers in the past, which was based on the use of different “*Thinking modes*”. The idea is quite basic, and it goes around the principle that during the creative part people can perform different modes of thinking, which might be all useful at one point or another of our work. I presented these different thinking modes and invited participants to reflect on what thinking mode they felt more comfortable with, which one they used more often or more naturally and to be aware of them, as they moved through the different phases. The point of this exercise was to highlight how creativity is not about making everyone becoming what they are not - or even pretending they could - but to offer to everyone a ‘mode’ of thinking, that they could find comfortable, and invite them to be reflective of their own attitudes during the different moments of the workshop. For this workshop, for instance, I used the following ‘creative thinking modes’:

- **Grounded** - this was about staying connected to what people said from our research and stay grounded in their realities, needs and assets;
- **Critical** – was about asking all the difficult questions to really test an idea. It was not about being negative but about thinking about an idea from different critical perspective, asking what could possibly go wrong, who could be damaged by our idea, who would benefit;
- **Visionary** – this invited people to think beyond what existed around them, by using their imagination to see how things could be possibly different and not let our thinking to be constrained by what was possible now;
- **Pragmatic** - was about considering ideas in reality and start asking how could they be made possible in practice with what is already available or with limited resources.<sup>17</sup>

We used these different thinking modes in the different phases of the workshop, starting by being visionary and then getting grounded in our data, becoming critical of our own ideas or pragmatic, regarding what could be done and achieved and by when. People worked into two small groups, experimenting with their thinking and switching or modifying their attitude as we were going along, by making the conscious effort of knowing in which thinking mode they were, in

<sup>17</sup> I developed these creative thinking modes to also reflect the learning from Lawson (2005) on different modes and ways of thinking for creativity in design, which include the imagining, the visualising and moments of verification as well.

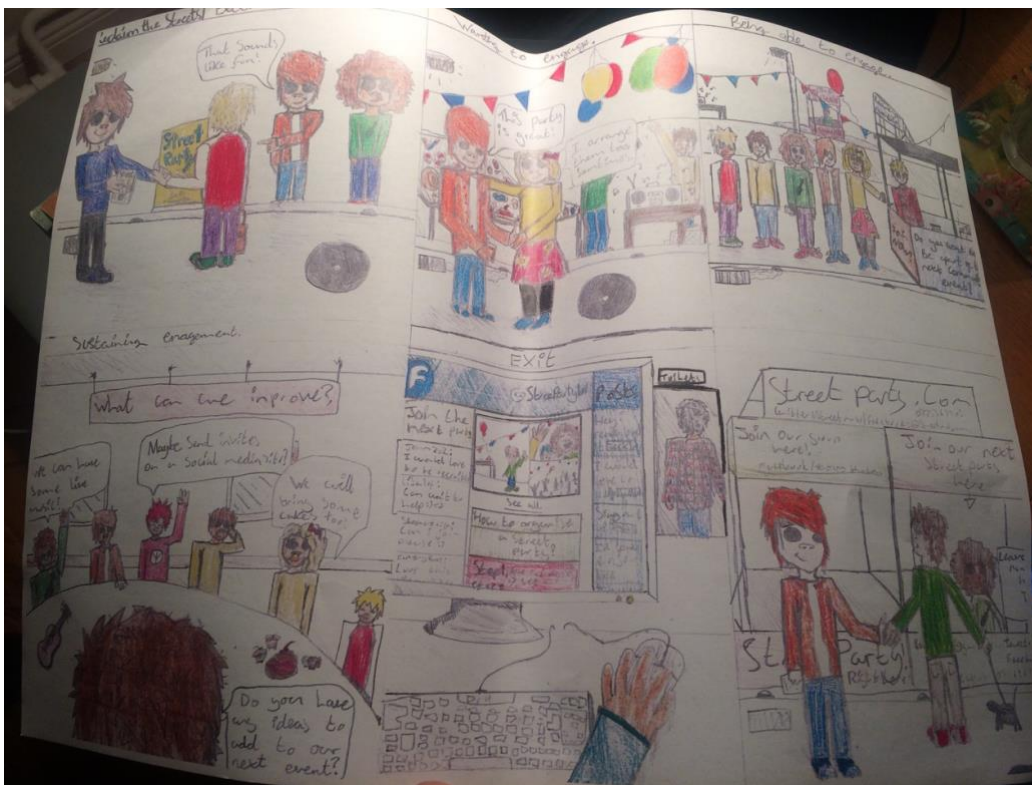


which one they wanted to be, and how it felt to move from one to the other, or simply being *stuck* in one. Allowing people to work with different styles and by helping them visualising their ideas, the two groups came out both with some new key concepts.

I took many pages of notes about this workshop, as I was trying to learn as much as possible about creativity *through* design. Workshops, and especially idea generation workshops, can be quite an intense type of activity to take part in. These kinds of workshops are designed to reproduce what are considered the ideal conditions that are conducive to the ritual of creation. People need to be in the mental space to be able ‘*to take a horse and a moon*’ and make a service out of them, as one of the designers I interviewed once told me. They are made to be ‘energising’ and ‘fun’. But playful language and attitude are not just spontaneous, they are part of the currency that design generates. Being in a fun, creative, buzzing, energising room, full of people who are busy trying to be creative, might not be the best experience for instance for somebody with social anxiety, and maybe not the kind of favourite environment for other types of people too. Once you are in the idea generation workshop, there is almost no escape from the tyranny of creativity, you have to go at that speed, play with the rules, have fun and energetically brainstorm new ideas. I have witnessed many instances in which the playful and disengaged language of design did not resonate with the people in the room. And this was not because people working in the community sector - where most of my practice is based - did not appreciate having a laugh, or working in a playful environment (as I heard a designer commenting once); but more as a reaction, I would say, to what I have defined before as the *tyranny* of the playful, which I find designers can sometimes impose on people, in an unbelievable lack of empathy. I will elaborate much more on this in the next Chapters as I move to focus my attention and analysis on the role of creativity in design.

As I also noted down in my field-notes, there is not much alternative ways to take part in the creative act, as this has to be generative, vibrant and loud. And when you have in the room a shy young guy, who speaks with a very low tone of voice, looking down to his hands, avoiding eye contact, due to previous problems of social anxiety, these contradictions become a friction, something you cannot avoid

noticing. This resident, which I am going to call M., was a young guy who had in the recent past had some issues with social anxiety. He had been involved in the project and worked with one of the community builders to improve his self-confidence and he found slowly the motivation to go out again. For him to come to the workshop, with other 8 new people he did not know before, was a big deal and the member of staff who had worked with him during the project made this very clear from the beginning and was very protective of him during the whole day. To allow M. to take part in the creative act - but in his own terms - we had the idea of giving him some work to do in preparation for the workshop. As he happened to be very good at drawing, we asked him to visualise his ideas for how a resilient community could look like. This was in the deliberate attempt to achieve three things: give him some longer time – outside of the busy and sometimes chaotic space of the workshop – to work on his own and on his own ideas in silence; give him an opportunity to contribute using a visual tool, rather than having to contribute only verbally or in other ways on the actual workshop day; finally we simply wanted to use his drawing skills and ask him to do something he was actually very good at and that he enjoyed doing, by this putting him in a comfortable space where he could possibly grow in his confidence.



**FIGURE 2:** PHOTO OF THE STORYBOARD DRAWN BY M. FOR THE CREATIVE WORKSHOP

We took the ideas that were developed at the end of the creative workshop, although these were in reality more sketches of ideas, and worked together with the team and our co-designer to come out with something that looked more like a 'service idea'. After few iterations, we got to what was finally called 'Get together events', a simple format to allow residents to get together based on common interests or shared things they wanted to do in their communities.

During the testing phase, we learnt that people liked the idea of our "Get Together" being a sort of usual event, that happens at the same time in the same venue; that they liked the structure for the day to be quite informal. We realised quickly that these events were filling a gap that in both communities was present: a lack of places to meet new and diverse people, and a safe space for those who were less used to go out to take part in these kinds of events, or for those who had recently moved in the community and wanted to socialise. The key concept of our 'Get Together' was to give people a chance to simply start up a conversation with somebody they did not know. We had "speed chatting" conversations that we used as a warm-up for the event, and conversations cards for people to record names and a key important detail of the new people they met.

### **3.3.6) The other Project Manager**

By the time we got to our final 'service idea' it was November 2017 – many months had passed from the idea generation workshop, which happened in February and April 2017, and also from the research phase which started a year before on November 2016. In this time the team had gone through a series of more than 10 'Get together' events, in which they had learnt a lot and made lots of changes. My involvement with the organisation and the PM was constant, but compared to the beginning I had taken in the summer of 2017 a little step back, which allowed staff to take more ownership and take some initiatives without always having to consult me. Maybe because of the fact that I was one step removed, I did not foresee what was about to happen.

In the November call, in fact, the project manager announced me that for personal reasons she was going to leave the project at the end of the year. My first thoughts went to the project itself, and the impact that this was going to have on staff morale, the residents, and the activities that we had planned next. I have to confess

that I was also very worried about my research: I had invested all this time on training and supporting the project lead and now I was going to lose her, 1 year before the end of the project. Other changes had also happened in staff and this was going to have an impact on my research and on the project as well. Far from being a very unique issue, I know from my personal experience working in the community sector that high staff turn-over is a well-known phenomenon in social and community work and this for multiple reasons (e.g. from low salaries, to precarity of jobs, to the tiring nature of the job itself). With all that was going on in the UK at the time of the project (2016 – 2018), with the changes to the health and social care services in times of austerity, these instances of staff leaving had increased, and I had a way to witness this first hand in the time of my research.

What I will call PM2, who was immediately identified and introduced to me by PM1, was an internal member of staff, who had also had the opportunity to be exposed to the design work of our project. PM2, which I will call J. from now on, was coming from the private sector where she had been working for many years. She joined the organisation on a secondment opportunity in the Spring 2017 and had stayed in the organisation since, becoming a full member of staff. She took the project in its final year with the not easy task to deliver the service that we had designed together, to capture the learning, and of course to re-establish the connection with the neighbourhoods, the steering board, and the rest of the staff as the new project manager.

*“When I first came in... I realised that had been a high turn-over of staff in the project and I think the project at that point was not where it needed to be at all, and there are reasons for that. What I came to learn was that **working with an ABCD approach was not easy**, because it is nothing like traditional community development and workers were finding it hard on the ground.*

*I have had conversations in my team where they told me **they felt like they had a sales role, because you go in the street meeting and approaching people and you have to tell them what you are about and is almost about selling it. It is something like cold calling...** That also explain the staff turnover, I believe. I also think there was a **big gap between the theory and the practice**. There had been a lot of training about what ABCD was in theory, but people found it difficult to grasp, or at least they understood the theory, but what that meant on the ground, the practical application was hard. People didn't really know what it was and what it wasn't. And when I joined there were conversations between staff about how they were working and whether that was ABCD or not. The first couple of months in the role*

*were quite challenging as I had to look at what happened and then I had to quickly decide what to do to turn these things around.”*

(Interview with J. member of staff)

J. introduction in the team proved actually to be very useful. As she came in the project totally new and highly motivated to make this work, she found a way to get staff on board very quickly and quickly assessed what the situation was, what was missing and why *“the project at that point was not where it needed to be at all”*. Most of the issues, it turned out, were about the difficulties in the practical application of the ABCD approach. Although staff was highly motivated to work in that way, this approach was very new and very challenging of their own role: as community-builders they had the aim of activating the community and being involved in supporting local activities and networking; but the moment they took on more a leading approach in order to do their work, they were not operating according to the ABCD founding principles, so they felt they were doing it wrong. The problem, as I heard staff describing it, was that a lot of the principles of ABCD had been developed in theory, but the same people who developed the principles were not involved in the practice. This is where the issues came out and I will reflect on these in the next section, when I will talk about the role, the value and the limitations of the ABCD approach from a design perspective.

J. decided that in order to help staff to get *un-stuck*, and find a way forward to keep using ABCD and service design together in the best possible way, she needed to put some more support in place. Therefore, they started using a reflective approach focusing on their ABCD work. She organised fortnightly reflective meetings, where the team came together for two hours to have quite structured conversations. Each member of staff in turn was asked to bring a dilemma to the group, regarding something that happened in their field-work and the rest of the team would ask very open-ended questions and challenge the community builder to find out whether they were working in an asset-based approach and if they were not, how could they have done that more truly. This approach seemed to work very well and also helped the team to open-up more with their manager, which meant J. could finally understand more about the issues staff experienced on the ground and was

able (maybe for the first time) to address them. From these sessions, it came out that staff did not like the Service Design approach as they saw this conflicting with the ABCD approach.

### 3.3.7) The Staff ‘secret’

It was a particularly hot day of June 2018 and I was in the office of the organisation I have been working with to take part in a meeting about the project sustainability after the end of the funding. We were in fact in the final six months of the three years long project (project 1) and going through a workshop for eliciting the key learnings of our work and plan for our exit from the field. We were having a quick break in between activities, when somebody from the management team approached me and, acting as she was telling me the biggest secret ever, whispered to me: *“You know, staff don’t like the name Service Design, so with them we’ve been trying to avoid it! This is because in the ABCD approach services are professionalised and are bad, and this is not what the project is supposed to do. We are not here to design services!”*.

I have to say I was at that point profoundly deluded by this ‘confession’: how could something as big as this not have emerged before. I was particularly deluded, as I knew this was something we could have easily addressed, as I called what we were doing ‘service design’, as I have illustrated before, because I thought it resonated with the language of social services and the projects we were running. In practice, my approach to design in the field-work had always been quite improvised and eclectic, as I was experimenting myself with different tools, sensibilities and practices, also for the purpose of this research.

During that workshop, I did not have the chance to ask them more about this, as after the quick break everybody came back in the room and we went back to our busy schedule for the rest of the day, until I had to leave to catch my train. But this was something I could not leave un-explored and I asked staff explicitly about this topic when I had the opportunity to interview them in the final 3 months of the project. I am going to report here an extended extract from one of these interviews:

*“If I am honest, the project took a form of its own and that form **didn’t really have too much space for the service design part**. The main reason, is because the more we learned about ABCD, the more it felt uncomfortable, **doing the service design felt uncomfortable because although this is***

**about co-creating services, it still focuses on the deficiency and creating a service** which has a very strong professional input.

*What came out of the service design, the “Get together”, was actually really good. We managed to create a lot of the connections that I have now. So, there are benefits in that. I contradict myself a bit here (...). Although ABCD in its purest sense clashes with this, but as I was trying really to understand it, **I saw the clashes and stepped away a little bit.** But if a community building team put on an event, then service design is the one, it’s the way to not doing ‘for’ or ‘to’ but doing ‘with’ the residents. Sometimes you can’t just... residents will not just do for themselves. You have to do it with them to empower them, and so in a Community event the service design process was a really good one to use.*

*I think the project initially had 3 components ABCD service design – these two running along in parallel - and the mental health awareness. But **they are quite similar, although they were trying to keep them separate, until the last year, when we felt that although ABCD ticks the boxes of service design, we had agreed to do the service design work so we had to do it... sort of thing, and in that, there was this thought about trying to create a hybrid and using a service design approach to create a space that will benefit our ABCD work.** (...)*

*It is the word ‘service design’ that I don’t like, it clashes a bit. They contradict themselves. ABCD is about saying that services actually are not needed if you have a very connected community, because they look after one another, **but if we said community invented design, or something like that, then it did have a place in ABCD itself.**”*

(Interview with member of staff B.)

Talking to B. finally gave me a glimpse of what had been going on from the staff perspective. Lots of my notes of frustration for an attitude or a sentence, that really did not make sense to me, finally found a place. Service design had been loved and hated by staff. After a moment of excitement, which corresponded with the initial introduction of the approach and the work we did with the residents on research and analysis, staff realised the contradictions with the theoretical principles of ABCD and its values, and raised these with their managers. But because the process had been chosen, because I was there to deliver it, and because the senior management and the CEO herself had supported the process from the beginning, staff felt (in their own words) that “**we had agreed to do the service design work so we had to do it... sort of thing**”. B. was not more explicit about who was the first ‘we’ and who the second, but based on what I observed and my understanding of the project as it developed, I think I could very well re-write the sentence as: ‘**Managers**’ had agreed to do the service design work so we (**staff**), had to do it. Similarly, when B. talks about service design and ABCD being quite similar,

'*although they were trying to keep them separate, until the last year*', the 'they' here is again, as I had the occasion to ask B., referred to the senior managers of the organisation. Whether this was one person, a team, the CEO or generally a feeling that these ideas were coming from the top, this I cannot possibly confirm.

I felt on one hand so relieved, of finally making sense of what had been going on, or at least start formulating my theory about it, but on the other hand, I felt extremely disheartened. What B. was saying was incredibly powerful, and if only this had emerged a bit earlier during the project, we could have done a lot with this together. For instance, we could have explored what shape this 'community invented design', of which B. talked about, could have taken. When I asked him to define what it meant with the idea of an 'hybrid' process, he said:

*"The hybrid I guess is merging principles. In ABCD is important to go in bumping spaces, spaces where people naturally mingle, and you can get into natural conversations. These places are vital for communities. In (Area 1) there are no such spaces.*

*I think we consciously did the hybrid. In my eyes, what the service design ended up being, the "Get together", was a bumping space. Then the ABCD work was really affected. **We were very intentional about creating those bumping space, and because we used the service design approach with you, I am classifying that as a hybrid.**"*

From this extract, it seems like B. and other members of staff had been engaging in conversations to make sense of this hybrid before, and thought about ways to combine these approaches together intentionally. I had no idea this was going on, and although I would like to claim a merit in this, I have to admit I had nothing to do with it. What I had to sadly realise is that - in what seemed from B. words to be a hostile environment, where things could not easily be brought up for conversation - service design and my role had been presented as a given, that could not be discussed. I was also very sad to hear that the three components of the project (service design, ABCD and mental health awareness) were perceived to go ahead in parallel and not in conversation with each other.

Also, I am in debt to B. for finding a possible name for this new form of design, that I had been trying to develop, and which I will explore fully towards the end of this thesis: *community invented design*. What he was describing in his own words, could



in fact epitomize the seed of what a design practice for the autonomous project should be. Later in the same interview B. said:

*“I just wanted to add on the ABCD and service design conversation that I think there is the classic diagram doing ‘for, with, to, and by’. I think ‘to’ and ‘for’ is community services, **‘with’ is where service design lives, and ‘by’ the residents is where ABCD lives.** ABCD and service design differ here.*

*(...) I wonder whether service design could be a better way of **influencing professionals**, which is a major part of ABCD as well, asking the question: how can we challenge the culture? And Maybe **service design is better placed to take professionals out of that ‘to’ and ‘for’ and putting them one step closer to the ‘by’.** That could work. I hope this helps...”*

<b>For</b>	<b>To</b>
Community services	Community services
<b>With</b>	<b>By</b>
Service Design	ABCD – Asset Based Community Development

**FIGURE 3:** MY VISUALISATION OF B. DIAGRAM ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SERVICE DESIGN AND ABCD

B. had definitely been thinking about the use of design next to the ABCD approach during the months of us working together, and without perhaps realising it, he had come to a very interesting and relevant reflection, which highlighted quite crucial points that resonate with the thinking of some design scholars (of the like of Arturo Escobar) and perhaps expand on that thinking with very practical solutions. Namely the points that I took away from B. were the following:

- A practice of design built on a problem-solving attitude and based on meeting people’s needs will not challenge the culture within social service, conversely it risks to reinforce it by mirroring it;
- A different practice of design might play an important role in challenging the professional culture from within social services (of course if designers are first themselves challenging their own culture and boundaries). Working in this way design would be consciously supporting the shift towards more autonomous ways of designing for local communities (from *with* to *by*).
- Cohesive and connected communities would ideally not need external experts to come in and do things together *with* them. They can in fact do

thing *by* themselves and only need to recognise the tools, ideas and resources that they have already.

The questions that B. was asking himself was similar to the broad question with which Arturo Escobar opened his book, which is how and whether design could be “*creatively re-appropriated by subaltern communities in support of their struggles to strengthen their autonomy and perform life projects.*” (Escobar 2018, p. xi). I believe B. gives to this question an interesting answer: yes, it can, but only if design learns from ABCD its tactics and its ethos, and it recognises the natural design that is already there, in the creative work that local communities do in their everyday.

### *3.4) Field-work nr2: Traditions and Futures-Making*

My second field-work involved the same organisation, but working on a different project. I joined for one year a small team of three members of staff (only one of which was also involved in project 1) in a wellbeing intervention engaging the residents of a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community site. The aim of the project, as the organisation stated was:

*‘to improve the wellbeing of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Community by:*  
**Raising awareness** about wellbeing and mental health and increasing levels of activity that support good wellbeing;  
 Building **social connections** and supporting residents to build on their **strengths**;  
 Increased skill/capacity/confidence of non-mental health professionals already working with the Gypsy and Traveller community to respond to individuals in mental distress by **delivering training**;  
 Design an innovative ‘blue print’ for a bespoke **early intervention** service specifically designed by and for individuals from the Gypsy and Traveller communities experiencing mental distress”.

(from the introduction to the Insights Report for the project)

The Gypsy, Roma and Traveller population is the largest ethnic minority group within the area in which we were working, but the organisation realised that they were hugely under-represented in mental health services. Professionals working with the community in the area had found poor mental health was a serious concern and reported a need for specialist mental health services. The site where our design activities and research were based was a site owned by the local Council and was opened in 1993, undergoing a refurbishment in 2004. At the time

of our project, it offered sixteen pitches which could accommodate a total of thirty caravans, and it had approximately forty-eight residents. The residents were of Romany Gypsy descent and were aged between one month to sixty+ years of age. The site was next to a motorway, which was an incredibly busy and loud road. There were plans to extend the width of the road which would have brought the road right to the backs of the plots. This is apparently the norm for many other sites like the one where we worked. In fact – as I quickly learnt - when local authorities look for a land to host a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller site they usually look for areas that are considered not attractive for other purposes, like near a motorway, or near dumping sites, and similar.

Because of its location, the site could only be accessed by vehicle from the opposite side of the motorway. Residents living in the area were expected to pay rent, council tax and water rates and as such the site was self-funding and did not take any additional funds from local taxpayers. Residents of this sites had lived there for twenty-five years.

#### **3.4.1) A different type of Engagement: on getting Trust**

When we started the project around June 2017 we had the intention to hire somebody from Gipsy, Traveller or Roma background to do the design and the ABCD work on the site. Applications were open for a while and a suitable candidate, who was from the Traveller-Gipsy and Roma community but not from the site, was identified. Unfortunately, nearer to the final confirmation of the job and the starting of the activities, the candidate had to pull out. She was a young woman, living in a site quite far away from ours, and the fact that she had to travel that distance, or perhaps even sleep not at home at times, and engage with all the members of another site, including men, was not considered appropriate by her family, and she had to renounce to the job.

Recruitment was re-opened and the final appointed staff was a woman in her late forties, called S. She was a former school teacher with a great energy and previous experience working with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. Although S. was coming from a different cultural background, she proved to be extremely sensitive and able to engage people on the site and establish trust. She also proved extremely good at doing the design research, as she had a special touch for

ethnographic observation and accounts, as her reflections, analysis and the reading of her diary – from which I will draw extensively - did demonstrate.

Because of the context and the difficulties associated (and perceived) with getting access to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, it was decided that S. was going to be the only member of staff involved who was going to interact with the site. In fact, we had only one year of work to do, and that was considered not enough time to build trust and relationship with a whole team of people. Also, having one person regularly attending the activities and visiting the site made it feel less like other social and public projects, in which the community every now and then has been involved before, where no personal relationships or attachment was built, and mutual distrust was usually the norm. We decided that we wanted to give another message and feeling to our presence on the site, which was more authentic and with a personal touch. This meant though that S. took all the physical and emotional burden of the work and this inevitably ended up having an impact on her, as I will describe later, despite all the support she received from the rest of the team and from the office.

This also meant that I was myself never on the site to meet the people of whom I am going to talk about in this work, or to visit the places I am going to describe. Everything I will describe and say of the life in the site comes in fact from the work of S. as I have used her diary, which she compiled with an incredible richness of data, emotions, and descriptions, as the main source of my data collection for this project. As S. did her work so well, though, the reader should not notice the difference and as she reads, she should feel that she is there with me and with S. talking with the people on the site and walking the alley among the plots. I will now leave it to S.' words to describe more of the site (please note that I have anonymised or changed all references to locations and names from the original text):

*"It is only as you pass under the (motorway) that you notice that the left side of the underpass has been painted with a welcome mural to the site, this was completed by residents in a past project. There are no other signs to highlight that you are driving into a residential community. Residents use this underpass to walk off the site, walk pets and take young children to school and for walks.*

*The underpass is used by individuals who are not from the community as a place to use a variety of substances away from public view, Police have been made aware in the past and the site warden regularly has to clear this area.*

*The road is uneven and potholed, with no public street lighting or road markings. As you come out from the underpass there is a small pathway to your left which is a footpath that is used by residents to walk their pets, students from the school can be seen walking onto it and at times cyclists. This path is public and is used daily by the neighbouring education institution, students who wish to smoke can regularly be seen walking up it at break times. The path leads behind and away from the site into the countryside.*

*Once you have passed this you are then coming onto the site, there is a hump in the road which acts to slow down speeding traffic, either side of the road are large metal barriers that can be closed so traffic access can be stopped, if needed. There are a number of metal bollards along the roadside. The site is managed by the council and they have placed a wooden building just outside the site which is used by the site warden. There is no Wi-Fi, running water or toilet facilities for staff to use. There is electricity and heating. The building is locked using padlocks and contains no valuables.*

*(...) From the windows you can see the (motorway) and hear the traffic, this is very loud and lorry drivers will press their horns when they pass the site and continue to do so for the full length of the plots. This is something lorry drivers allegedly do to all roadside communities. I was told this when I first visited the site and have heard this happen very regularly. There have also been occasions in the last 7 years where cars have been involved in collisions and left the (motorway) and come down into the site from the bank.*

*Members of the community come and go past the site office in vehicles and will drop in to have a chat or ask for assistance in reading mail and queries relating to benefits, fines etc.. XX, the site warden (...) does not stick to routine days and will visit both sites at different hours. This is to avoid any regular routine so individuals are unable to use this to their advantage if they think the site is clear from council staff. There have been, in fact, occasions in the past when Trailers have been moved on the site without permission.*

*Visitors to the site are limited to the residents and family members, on occasion YY, who works for the council, comes to complete maintenance. Currently some of the residents are applying for Sky to be installed so engineers will come on site to complete this work. Delivery of purchased items at (the site) tends to be okay. Although Royal Mail no longer delivers to the site following a past incident with the Post person. Following difficulties trying to get this resolved it was agreed that (the warden) would collect the mail or meet the Post person. If (the warden) is away, the means that the residents can go a number of days without receiving any post/parcels. The Community magazine from (the area) is not delivered to the site.*

*(...) Adult female residents who work, leave the site early to do shift work in cleaning roles at the local XX park. These hours tend to be 7-10 am and then again later in the day. This also fits in with child care.*

*The Men have not yet shared what work they do, however I have seen gardening service lorries and car trailers come on and off the site.*

*There are children attending Primary school, Teenagers appear to be not attending Secondary school. There are also a few younger children and two new births on the site at the end of September 2017.  
There are a number of older residents who are physically/emotionally unwell.  
I have not seen these residents as yet."*

(From S diary)

Accompanying this description in S. diary there were photos of the site and of the view from the office where she was allowed to stay, which was at the gate of the site, so not inside or near the plots. The location at the gate, although initially perceived as a limitation, proved in the end to be quite strategic. During the few initial weeks that S. was there, in fact, many people passed by the gate and started stopping by to ask her who she was, what she wanted and what was she doing there. Later as residents started getting used to her, the gate from being the border of the site become a point of encounter, where people stopped by to share some stories with S., ask for advice, or ask for help. S. was there every week for a 9 months-long period of observation, always on her own, sitting in the shed at the 'border' of the site. It took her a lot of patience and time (and skills), to gain the trust that we were hoping to get, and only after few months there, she was able to walk on the site for the first time.

### **3.4.2) Designing from the Gate**

The first three to four months were, in our plans, the months of the design research phase. But considering the initial low level of engagement from the residents, and the conditions in which we were allowed to get access (staying at the 'border'), we had to be creative in planning alternative ways to do our investigation. In fact, it became evident quite soon that we could have not done anything that looked like a more traditional design research activity. Organising a design workshop in that context appeared to us immediately as being entirely inappropriate, as most of the residents could not even read or write, they had very low education levels, and they were very mistrustful of S. and the project at the beginning. We later learnt that the people on our site (and more generally people from Gypsies, Travellers and Roma communities) had been many times the 'object' of research activities, done by different professionals. These people all wanted to learn more about them or engage them in new services, promising solutions and

interventions that in the end were never realised. The worst episode that everybody recounted was when the community was involved in a journalistic research and featured in a documentary. Sadly, when the residents saw the final results of the research and how they were represented, they felt their ideas, identities and thoughts had been totally distorted. It was because of episodes like this, that the bias and the mistrust of the residents of the site towards people 'doing research' were confirmed and reinforced.

We were very aware that, similarly to other services before us, our presence was also going to be time-limited and that we could not offer more than the little we had, which was a one-year funded intervention to learn more about their mental wellbeing and to co-design an early intervention for mental health, which aimed at being culturally appropriate and respectful of the community. S. and all project staff were very conscious of the context in which they were working and what had happened to the people living on the site before their arrival. They were also conscious of the impact of their presence and the expectations - both positive and negative - that their presence was going to generate, and of the limits of what they could truly achieve in what we all considered to be a too short time for a real engagement with a community that was totally *stranger* to us.

In a summary, we had the challenge of doing collaborative research with a group that was quite hostile to people from the outside, as we partly expected them to be, and that overall had probably very good reasons to be that way.

Below is the description of what we did, as result, as described in the Insights Report that collected the findings from our project:

*"We chose to do our research phase in a very light touch way, whilst still ensuring it was ethically and properly done. S. introduced herself as a worker from a mental health organisation who wanted to understand more about the barriers that the community currently faced, what was important to them, what stresses they faced, their support networks, interests and hobbies. We used S. observations, her diary and the ethnographic interviews (what we called contextual conversations) that S. did with 13 members of the Gipsy, Travellers and Roma Community (8 women and 5 men of different ages) as our data collection. Below is an overview of some of the key findings from the Insights Report.*

*The five themes that we identified were:*

- ***Caring for others is important*** - *Caring for younger and older family members is a duty felt strongly within the community. The community do not place the same importance on self-care.*

- **Specialist workers in the community can unintentionally create barriers and become 'gatekeepers'** - Professionals who specifically support the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Community can prevent residents accessing other services.
- **The community does talk about mental health** - Mental health is recognised in the community, but in a different way and using different language.
- **Residents do talk about their feelings** - The community will discuss their feelings, if they have a private, confidential space.
- **The community has a strong sense of tradition and duty** - But this can in turn result in a lack of control and choice within their lives."

(From the Insights Report of the project)

S. inquiry made emerge some really interesting findings. We understood, that contrary to some of the assumptions usually made, the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community was indeed engaging and talking about mental health, but simply they were doing it in a *different way* to how professional were expecting. We learnt that the group was not 'hard to reach', as often suggested, but rather it was the service model and the approach that needed to adapt, in order to offer support that was relevant to them. Alongside, we learnt the importance of creating a safe and confidential space in order to build trust with the community. As things like fixed appointment and more traditional service set-up had not worked in that context, our 'shed at the border' proved to be a really crucial space for providing support and engaging residents in an alternative and respectful way, without invading their privacy. In the following pages, I am going to present the data, the analysis and what we learnt about the group we worked with in more details, by letting as much as possible S. to talk with her own words.

The language of mental health was the first main discovery of our ethnographic work. This was probably our most important learning: it was not true in fact that the community did not talk about mental health as they were talking about this all the time, just using different terms. They used 'stress' when talking about the strains of everyday life, and 'nerves' when talking about a diagnosed mental health condition or medication. We learnt in fact that 'mental health' could be considered



as an offensive term from the residents, so paying attention to *learning the language* was an important part of the phase of getting access to the field. As S. noted down in her diary, soon she learnt to “use a ‘new’ mental health language’. Below is an extract from S. notes, where she tries to make sense of what she hears, and experiences and goes through the process of learning this new mental health language:

*“Stress is used as a way of expressing poor mental health  
 \* Nostalgia – my place was with my Dad on the road – homesickness/ grief and loss  
 \* Bereavement not addressed  
 \* Lighting a fire to feel better – mental health strategy for coping- Get away from the bricks  
 \* People seek help for physical sickness – practitioner sees mental health  
 \* Stress and worries are my life – smoking weed stops it – they just seem to accept it  
 \* “I take pills for my head” “have you got a headache” “No, it’s for my nerves”  
 \* I am really, really stressed, I am seeing and hearing family, they torture me (be unkind)  
 \* Directness – struggle to go in between – still key, will speak briefly about how they feel, “I will when I’m ready, catch you soon, don’t tell anyone”.  
 \* They talk about mental health, but not in the ways we would expect”*

(From S. Diary)

I have decided to keep in this extract the editing that S. herself did when we were going through the different phases of taking notes and analysing the data, to start exploring what was going on in the diary and see what themes were emerging. As I went multiple times with S. through her stories from the site, trying to make sense of them together, I know how she discovered quite quickly that the residents of the sites could be at times too open, rather than ‘difficult to reach’. For instance, they were stopping every now and then, when passing by the shed, either walking or by car, to pop-in S. room and offload what sometimes were very personal, very tough and emotional stories. These were not perhaps fully articulated stories, and I will reflect more about this later, but were deep and engaging stories that were told quite abruptly and quickly, sometimes without leaving the time for any answers at all: “(...) *catch you soon, don’t tell anyone*”. In one of our chat S. said once to me: “*They never seem really relaxed, like coming to me and enjoying the conversation... And no one has ever asked me ‘how are you?’.*”

### 3.4.3) Negotiating the Entrance

As I said briefly already, working on this project on her own was for S. not an easy task. She was spending all this time in this shed, at the entrance of a Gipsy, Traveller and Roma site, near a busy and loud motorway, with no facilities, poor internet (the organisation did provide her with a mobile Wi-Fi later), no one to talk with for entire days, and then having maybe somebody popping-in one day, like in a rush, just to offload thoughts about stress, feeling unwell, having nerves, or maybe complaining about physical health problems, sharing frustrations, finance issues and more, and then just leave with a promise to come back, which was not always fulfilled. Especially the initial months were for S. particularly tough. She was highly scrutinised by the residents and initially not trusted also by the warden of the site.

It took S. many months, an incredible capacity, strength and a lot of support to start feeling accepted. But episodes happened at different points in time, when S. felt that what she had built with time and tenacity, was being put again in discussion. Like the episode, for instance, when the police came on the site to confiscate some drugs to some of the residents. Although this had happened many times beforehand, in fact, it was easy for the residents to blame S., and the rumours spread quickly that she had been the one to call the police and tell them about the drugs.

Even when she finally felt that she managed to get some trust, that did not translate in people engaging more with her: "*Now that I have been here for a while, the novelty has gone, I am part of the furniture.*". We discussed these dynamics and the difficulties her field-work involved many times with S. "*I know they come to see me, only because I have Wi-Fi, so I could do things for them*", she told me once. She knew during the project that the relationships that she had established were not deep or meaningful enough. She was maybe trusted by some of the residents now, she was accepted by majority (like *part of the furniture*), but still she was not *part*. And how could have she?

Negotiating the entrance and the exit to the field-work is something that ethnographers learn very soon to be quite complex. It requires professional ethnographers lots of training, theory, practice and support to do it well. S. was a

social worker who was learning and reflecting on all of this on her own, with my little support through our regular coaching calls and meetings. As she herself said many times, her past as a teacher in school is what had helped her the most in engaging with people who were different from her, in listening, giving, being patient, noticing, empathising, but at the same time maintaining the distance and the clear mind to reflect and be aware of what was going on around her.

#### **3.4.4) From Needs to Assets and Back**

In addition to all the complexities that I have illustrated so far, it is worth to mention that the project had initially the intention of using an ABCD approach to engage with the residents in a positive way. S. found this task to be too difficult “*as whilst we were able to see the skills and assets of the residents, it was difficult to get individuals to recognise these in themselves and show motivation to be involved in community building activities.*” (extract from the Insights Report).

She noticed that the residents focus was on much more immediate needs - such as issues to do with finances, not having a job, or their living situation on the site – ant that these immediate needs were so present, that talking about anything else with the residents proved very challenging. In this case the discrepancy with the theory and the value of ABCD was even more striking than in project 1. We could not even get people to talk about passions and desires, as other basic needs were always coming first in the conversations. After lots of discussing these issues and trying to find our way around, staff realised that they had to adopt a different approach.

In one of our meetings – and unexpectedly - the staff introduced me with the Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which they had started using as a framework for them to make sense of what was going on. They found the Maslow’s Pyramid helped them to understand the dynamics they were observing, since it provided a theory to explain why people’s motivation could not be fully articulated before their basic needs are met. Applying this model to our experience, it became evident that many of the communities’ basic needs were in fact not met, as for instance their shelter was not suitable or at risk, they had limited employment options and their access to resources was far more limited than the wider population.

*“Maslow found that our basic needs must be more or less met, before our motivation would move to higher needs, such as engaging in community building activities or those which we would conventionally consider linked to improved wellbeing. We must therefore not assume that a lack of motivation to be involved in these activities is the community not engaging, instead we need to think creatively and adapt our approach to suit.”*

(From the Insights Report)

Although I have to confess I never liked the shift to Maslow Pyramid<sup>18</sup>, I had to trust the team and their attempt to find a way to make sense of the difficulties of dealing with the apathy of the people involved, and to address the frustration of trying to raise issues of empowerment and social justice - in a context that needed these so much – but always with no success.

As the team was still not ready to abandon the ABCD approach, they developed the visual below to suggest that at each of the stages of the Maslow’s pyramid - next to challenges - one could still find strengths too.

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



**FIGURE 4:** VISUALISATION OF THE PYRAMID OF NEED FROM MASLOW AND HOW THIS COMPARES WITH ASSET BASED APPROACH

<sup>18</sup> I will come back to this theme again in Chapter 5, but I take the main reason to critic the Maslow’s Pyramid from Castoriadis himself, and his idea of the human as a ‘mad animal’ – opposed to the Aristotelian ‘rational animal’ – who can neglect its biological needs to pursue the needs of the imagination. Self-transformation in fact – instead of self-preservation - is for Castoriadis the quintessentially human characteristic (Klimis, 2013 p. 139).

What the Maslow Pyramid did in the end was to show how majority of the needs of the community, in the lack of external resources and support, were in reality met though the community itself, who started using very *creatively* - I would say - its own resources and connections. I will come back to this point in Chapter 5.

### 3.4.5) Proudness, Nostalgia and Time

A theme that emerged from the observations and became later crucial to inform our design choices, was the incredible sense of *proudness* that the people on the site had. Despite the difficult conditions of their daily lives (and something that was difficult to explain by looking at them only through the prism of the Maslow Pyramid), they had in fact a great proudness of their traditional Gipsy, Traveller and Roma cultures. This was especially true of the older people on the site. The passage below from S. diary exemplifies this point very well:

*"We spoke about the past and again how old traditions are fading, technology is making life easier for the younger community, washing machines, kettles, it appears that females still cook traditional meals and are taught these by older females. I asked about the fire comment N. made and C. said that a fire welcomes other and you can sit for hours talking. They would put sheets up around them, so it would trap the heat. She will go to her sister's fire behind the trailer. When she was young a fire would burn all day, it would be a source of food and drink, Christmas food is important, however poor the family were, food at Christmas would be plentiful even if they didn't have presents.*

*Bacon and egg pie, Christmas pudding, Christmas cakes, sultana sponge, plain pudding, stews, meat pies would all be cooked on the fire. When you sat around a fire to talk, potatoes would be chucked on to cook and be eaten, bread would be toasted and buttered, butter and lard and beef dripping are still C's preference to use in cooking.*

*In the days of tin baths on a sunny day you would lay a sheet over the bath like a tent, pull the bath into the sun so it would warm the water then pull the bath back under the tent and get in to wash."*

(from S. diary)

Conversations like this were frequent on the site, where people were recollecting memories of their past, made of campfires, trailers, travelling, and other things. It was almost like, in their difficult present, the past was a place for them where to find refuge. Nostalgia was also a recurring feeling that one could perceive clearly in the community, from the many conversations reminiscing about family members

who had passed away, or reference to this glorious past, when *fire would burn all day, it would be a source of food and drink*.

In her diary S. also noted that the relationship with the tradition and the past was not a straightforward one. First, because when out of their group these incredibly proud people had to hide their identity to the wider community for fear of losing employment, being bullied in school or being discriminated. This was a striking contradiction, a possible fracture of their identity. Telling a story of themselves in one way internally, and having to hide who you are externally to the wider community - which represents the majority, and which does not understand your values, or does not share them - was a very difficult position to be in. Whereas in the past Gipsy, Travellers and Roma were warmly welcomed whenever arriving in their caravans to a new village, because they were considered highly skilled people that could do works for the communities, nowadays a Traveller site is something that no one would want to have near their houses, and the people that live there are not always welcomed in schools, jobs, or many other social occasions. Second, discourses about traditions emerged as discourses of resistance, a resistance that was possibly deemed to fail, as it was like a too fragile thing, exposed to the huge movements of a world that was advancing around them, but in which they seemed to find no space for themselves: "*You watch, in 20 years' time our traditions will be forgotten.*" Finally, the attachment to the past and the community traditions were widening a generational gap, which was becoming increasingly evident. Again, I turn to S. words and what she wrote in her diary to illustrate these feelings: "*Community can oppress you. You are 'TRAPPED' - Tight reins are held on younger people who are now starting to pull at them!*". As we learnt during the project, the community had clear role models within the group, especially for men, who for instance were expected to be tough, work hard and support their families. This put a huge responsibility on members of the group from a very young age. The life of young people living in on the site who is trying to resist change is not easy. They care for each-other, they bond tightly, but these bonds could easily become *oppression*, a trap for anyone who wants to deviate, who has different aspirations and wants to take a different route in their life. The community uses all tactics to *hold tight reins* on younger people and preserve the conservation of their traditions and themselves, including stigmatising those who

did things differently, excluding them, but also –paradoxically – by providing them with a strong (and perhaps unsolicited) source of care and support.

I will talk about these feelings in the following chapters (*cfr. Section 5.2*) but for now, I would like to go back to the design work and what we decided to do, to confront and build on these issues. We thought this relationship with the past, the nostalgia and the proudness were crucial topics to further explore, and that we wanted to find new ways of celebrating the Gipsy, Traveller and Roma culture of today. We thought we had to start by unpacking the contradictions of being proud of one's own culture, on one hand, while on the other having to hide their own identity in the everyday life. Why was this happening? What should people outside of the site know and understand about the Gipsy culture? We realised that we had to start dealing with the traditions, in order for us to move towards the aspirations and what the community wanted their future to look like.

#### **3.4.6) The Photo Exhibition**

In January 2018, we organized a photo exhibition on the site, using that 'shed on the border' where S. had spent all that time, and which had slowly become a point of reference for the residents, as children went there to do their homework, people stopped by to use the Wi-Fi and many came in to have a word with S. or ask for some help. We learnt that photos were central in the discourses about traditions that we were hearing, either mental pictures or real photos. They were the material of which their memories were made of. Many times, for instance, S. was invited into the site to see families' photos and photos of Gypsy fairs, and these moments, of looking at the photos together, were moments of celebration, of proudness, of optimism. The idea was to start with the photos, as the materialisation of the shared memories and the community traditions, to open up conversations about people's ambitions for how the future could be. The place of the traditions, although filled with nostalgia, was also a familiar and safe place to be, a place, we thought, that could induce more optimistic and constructive thoughts about the future, for people to be able to formulate their aspirations and affirmative thoughts about how they wanted to be and what they wanted to achieve for themselves and the wider community. So, the idea was to organise a photo exhibition as a way to gather people from the site and reach out to new

people that we had not engaged so far. The exhibition would have provided us with an 'excuse' (like a workshop but in a different format) to talk to people about their culture and the changes they were going through, and through the remembering of the "old good times" we hoped to invite people to think about what would be helpful today for the people living on the site, in order for them to stay well tomorrow. In the preparatory workshop we elaborated a list of "talking points" of things we wanted to cover. We also decided that the exhibition, being a moment of opening of the site to the exterior, was providing us with an opportunity to bring in new members of the team (beyond S.) who were going to visit the site for the first time and to meet up with the residents. Our talking points were the following: Why tradition is important? How does the community deal with change? How are things different now: what is better - what is worst? How people support each other through change? What would they like to see in their future? What would be similar - what would be different? We also discussed the possibility, depending on how the conversations were going to pan out, to use the space of the exhibition for asking questions about the differences between the older generation of the site, the wider community and the youngers, and try to tease out examples of when these might get in conflict.

S. collected various photos from the people she knew on the site, and also found a professional photographer who had taken photos of a very famous Gipsy, Traveller and Roma fair, which was held years before nearby, and which had never been seen by the people from the site who attended the fair. These fairs seemed to be huge events, that gather and celebrate the whole community across the country. They are both a social gathering of Travellers, Gipsies and Roma from across the country, who are deeply linked (also by blood) but are rarely together; and a joint moment for celebrating and remembering as well. We wanted to make the exhibition an important event for the site and finding these photos really helped us. We invited all people and families living on the site and produced some leaflets to inform the residents of the exhibition. S. also thought about designing a logo for the event and asked a young girl that had been engaging with her during the past months, to create the visual design. The result was this particularly beautiful and meaningful drawing (figure 5), which had the trail's wheel at the centre, and which



ended up becoming the logo for the whole project that we used in all future materials as well.



**FIGURE 5:** LEFT, FIRST DRAW OF THE POSSIBLE PROJECT LOGO FROM A RESIDENT - RIGHT, FINAL DESIGN OF THE LOGO

The event happened at the end of January 2018 and, despite all our efforts, it was not the success we expected, at least not in terms of number. Only 13 people came (of the 46 living on the site) but the staff managed to have very interesting conversations, and I took lots of notes afterwards, which also opened up some interesting themes about how the rest of the staff perceived the community to be, and the stereotypes that they were also holding, despite all good intentions.

In the de-brief meeting we had after the exhibition, we went with the staff through some key points they had noticed. First, everyone noticed how all the residents who came enjoyed the exhibition and talking about their culture and history but the feeling of nostalgia, again, dominated the conversations. As one of the members of staff described it: *“Bereavement is a big thing in the community, and is almost like they feel bereavement for their culture, history and skills.”* This comment was made by a trained mental health practitioner who was applying the lenses she had in order to make sense of what she was observing. If we look up the definition of bereavement, as described by organisations operating in the field of mental health, we can understand this to be:

*“(...) the experience of losing someone important to us. It is characterised by grief, which is the process and the range of emotions we go through as we gradually adjust to the loss.*

*Bereavement affects everyone in different ways, and it's possible to experience any range of emotions. There is no right or wrong way to feel.*

*Feelings of grief can also happen because of other types of loss or changes in circumstances, for example:*

- *the end of a relationship*
- *the loss of a job*
- *moving away to a new location*
- *a decline in the physical or mental health of someone we care about.*

(From the mental health charity Mind's website:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/bereavement/#.XXUhpFCxXFQ>)

We learn, therefore, that bereavement is a profound feeling of grief that could be associated with different types of loss. On the same webpage, we also learn that there are different type of grief and also one called *Secondary Grief*. This secondary grief manifests itself when after the initial loss, one might struggle to imagine future experiences that will be happening without the loved ones that are not with us anymore. Maybe the comment from the member of staff was therefore not totally inappropriate as we could see this secondary grief as very well describing the feeling of a community that has lost its history and culture, and is currently struggling to image itself in future moments and within the wider society. This was a key finding for my research as it raised the issue of how (and whether) is it possible to engage with creativity when our engagement with the future is somehow hindered. I will come back to this in Chapter 5.

Staff also noticed how men who came to the event were more difficult to engage with, *"they came, but they were holding their hand on the door all the time."* This is somehow in line with what S. has described in her diary, but it is a simplified version of how things are in reality. We have in fact learnt with S. how men are yes, the most difficult to engage with, as they do perform according to clear roles of masculinity, and they might not want to be seen as weak or nostalgic. But we have also seen that they can also open up to their most intimate fragility, that when they need to talk about themselves they are not afraid of their sentiments. Of course, what staff could capture in one day on the site, was a simplified and perhaps mono-dimensional understanding, compared to what S. told us, and it could have not been otherwise.

Finally, confirming what S. had many times described, staff also noticed how guiding the conversation during the event was somehow impossible: *“they talk about what they want to talk about. It is really difficult to get them to talk around our agenda.”* This meant that all our prompts, questions and conversation guides that we had prepared meticulously for the photo exhibition, were left mostly unused.

Despite the photo exhibition did not go exactly as planned and we did not manage to get in the conversations we wanted, we learnt new things about the residents:

- The fact that all staff from the organisation were women did not work well with engaging with men from the site. This might explain why more generally and during the project women were more likely to engage in our activities;
- Men, especially young men, were those who felt more the weight of maintaining the traditions. They had a very clear role in the community and this was linked to protecting the family and the group more broadly. They would not do things that might lead others to speak badly about their family, as these will bring shame on them and their family as well;
- Doing things together and openly with the whole community was not a good idea in the first place. What we had underestimated is that – in S own words - *“Families do not like others knowing their business”*. People, in fact, opened more easily in one to one conversations with S. or with other members of staff, than in a group event. Confidentiality was a big issue, as there seemed to be a huge concern that information shared could circulate in the site and beyond (as all sites are quite linked between them by family bonds); or that things might get to be known by the Council, which might have resulted in something bad being done to the residents (the idea that their benefits could be taken away was one of the main concerns). The idea of having a communal event then, proved unsuccessful as people were very resistant to open up in public and they mostly performed a role;
- Finally, we realised that our decision to open up the event to other members of staff was also not a good one. In the words of S. *“They did not feel comfortable with too many new people. If you have gained a certain*

*amount of trust where they are willing to speak with you, that doesn't mean that trust passes to a third party. Unfortunately, it takes time to build a relationship with members of the community and is very easy to dismantle it – perhaps not even due to your own actions.”*

In terms of getting the community to celebrate their culture and talk about what they were proud of, the exhibition was a huge success.

### **3.4.7) Planning the Exit Strategy**

After the event S. went through few weeks of frustration. She felt she had reached the maximum point of engagement she could have possibly reached. She had been invited to walk in the site, she visited some of the trails, she had engaged in conversations with many of the residents who opened up about very intimate things, on one hand, but on the other, she never managed to engage with all the residents living on the site, was never able to lead a 'normal' conversation with any of the residents, where she could ask things and build confidence, she was often asked to help them and often felt like they were 'using' her (although in the good sense of the word). The opportunities of engagement were always random, as weeks of intense activities and contacts were followed by weeks when the residents went totally silent again, and she felt left out. She struggled to communicate what was going on to the rest of team, as the expectations from more senior managers started becoming more pressing, as people who never went on the site and never engaged with the Gipsy, Traveller and Roma community failed to make sense of what was going on and to understand why things were proving so difficult and why the ABCD approach never took shape. Moreover, the relationships with professionals from the other services that were involved with the sites, on which S. and the team had counted a lot from the beginning in order to get from them the insider knowledge and a 'way in' the community, in reality did never materialise, as they failed to engage with the project.

We knew from the beginning, and S. was also aware of this, that for her to engage as the sole member of staff in this project was going to be tough- due to the work conditions, the emotional burden and the mounting frustrations - and that she needed a lot of support. She found reflexive practice to be something beneficial, but the sessions either with me or her manager were not enough, as we – as

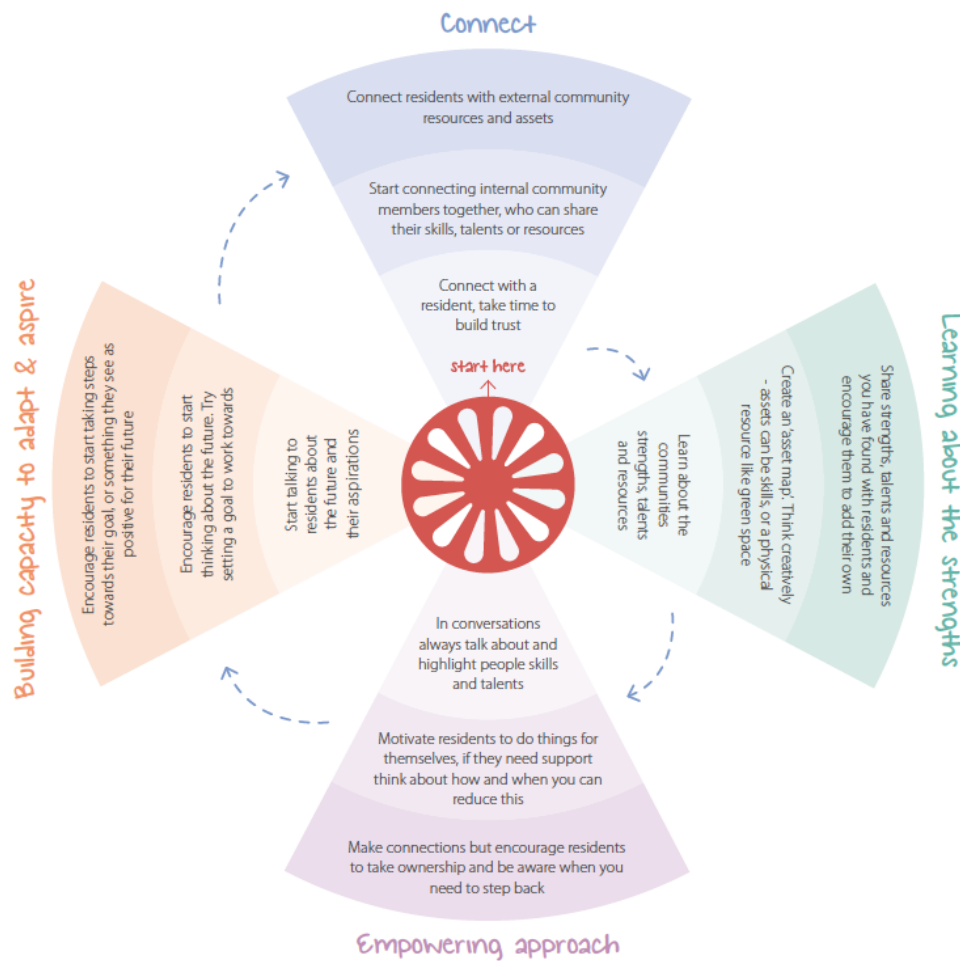
outsider - were all missing pieces of knowledge from the project and a real understanding of the context in which she operated and of the challenges she faced to really be able to help her.

Towards the end of the spring 2018 we started talking about the 'exit strategy' for S, as the time of the end of the funding was coming and we were going to leave the site the following August. It had been 8 months of intense ethnographic work and project work and, thanks to S. and her incredible skills as a non-trained ethnographer<sup>19</sup>, we had collected a huge amount of insights and learning about the Gypsies, Travellers and Roma communities.

In the spirit of the whole project we thought about ways of making these findings available to others, but mainly of ways of giving them back to the community itself. The final two products that came out of this project were a guide for professionals to help them approach and understand the Gipsy, Traveller and Roma community and a series of tips for the residents, for them to look after themselves and their wellbeing in the future, which were built with them and based on their own context and cultural understanding of mental health.

The guide for the professionals collected all the learning from the work of S. and the team and made a sort of blueprint out of that practical experience. It also collected practical tips and myth-busters to try and change the assumptions and the attitudes by addressing and dispelling some of the prejudice and the stigma that existed among professionals as well. Finally, the guide made an attempt to build a model, that used the symbol of the wheel, which was so central for the Gipsy, Traveller and Roma tradition - as we have seen - to visualise a possible path to build resilience and confidence and move people towards building a capacity to adapt and aspire.

<sup>19</sup> S. started reading about the culture of the Gypsies, Travellers and Roma Communities, and also went around talking to residents from other sites and with professionals working with these communities in order to gain a deeper knowledge about this group's culture and traditions.



**FIGURE 6:** VISUALISATION OF THE KEEPING WELL WHEEL FROM THE FINAL PROJECT GUIDE

The “Keeping Well Wheel”, as they called it in the final guide “provides a stepped approach to building this resilience. Starting with the key element of a trusting relationship, it then recognises the different stages needed to gradually building on this, which then allow us to start linking resources and talents within the community, empowering residents and encouraging them to think positively about the future.” I was very pleased with this stepped approach and also pleased that this meant moving away from the Maslow Pyramid of needs and its deterministic approach. Specifically for the community, the team produced an adapted version of the “5 Ways of Wellbeing”. These “5 Ways of Wellbeing” are 5 steps and actions that have been proved to be effective in supporting somebody’s wellbeing. They are very well known in the mental health field in the UK and its key elements and principles are built in many mental health services. The “5 Ways” were initially developed by

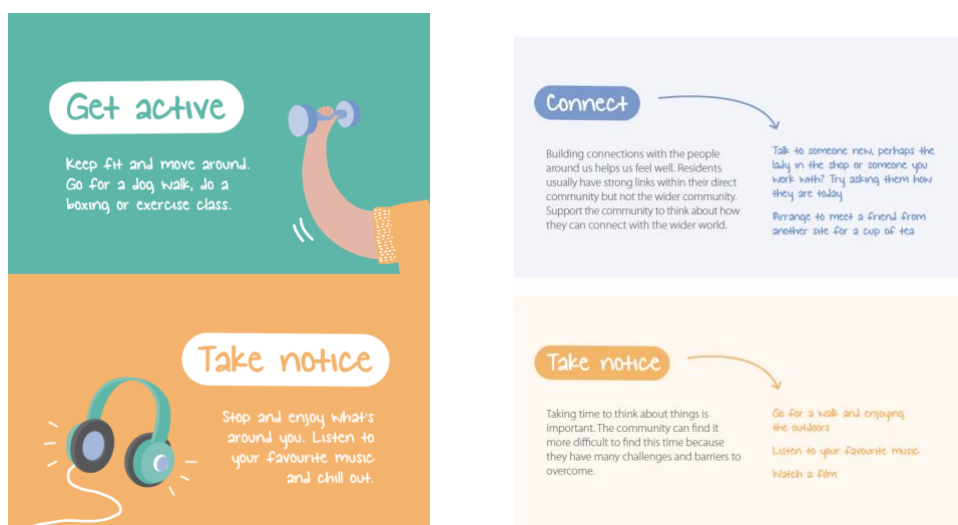
the New economics foundations (NEF) in the UK, which was commissioned by the Government's Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing to develop a set of evidence-based actions to improve personal wellbeing. From the NEF website:

*"The 2008 Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project aims to analyse the most important drivers of mental capital and wellbeing to develop a long-term vision for maximising mental capital and wellbeing in the UK for the benefits of society and the individual.*

*The concept of wellbeing comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are characteristic of someone who has a positive experience of their life. Equally important for wellbeing is our functioning in the world. Experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one's life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of wellbeing."*

(from <https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing-the-evidence>)

When S. and the team tried to use these "5 Ways" with the residents in the site, they soon realised that these resources (the way they were developed, the examples given, and the way these were communicated) did not relate well to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. Thinking about the residents' motivations and their everyday life, S. and the team adapted the 5 Ways to Wellbeing and made them more relevant, culturally appropriate, and meaningful. This adapted version of the "5 Ways" was the third final output of the design work and something tangible that was left to the residents on the site. Below are examples of the material produced.



**FIGURE 7:** EXAMPLES OF THE CARDS PRODUCED WHICH ADAPTED THE 5 WAYS OF WELLBEING

### 3.5) *Concluding remarks*

These three years of field-work – which I have recounted here in only few pages - were the most intense years of my doctoral journey, as I was immersed in the theoretical reading about design, creativity and action, and trying to apply my reading in my everyday work, while reflecting on what was happening in my practice and struggling to make sense of this all.

As anyone who has had to deal with the joy and the sorrow of field-work would appreciate, my main frustration, as I will describe again later, was with the fact that most of the time my data did not *correspond*, either because what I was expecting to happen did not happen, or because data emerging from the reality of my practice were neither linear, nor harmonised, or simply not clear. It took me a while to start making sense of things, and only months after the end of my field-work, as I was going through another reading of my data and my memos, I started seeing some threads emerging that provided me with renewed ways of reading of my work. The main threads and themes is what I will describe in the following Chapters, but for now I would like to share three reflections which emerged from my ethnography and analyse the differences between: designing from within versus designing from the gate; research as empowerment versus research as a weapon against; designing with motivations versus designing with nostalgia. On the first point - designing from within versus designing from the gate - the 2 projects could have not been more different in terms of where design was situated. In project 1, in fact, we experimented with a form of design literally from *within*, as our researchers where from the local area where the research was carried out, our research questions were coming from the residents themselves, and the whole research idea was about mapping the positive things that were going on and understanding more about what was important to the people in the neighbourhood and what motivated them to act. Project 2, instead, was trying to perform this sort of ‘design from the gate’ as for all the reasons I have described above we were physically at the gate of the site, as S. was not allowed on the plot until much later after the beginning of the project. It was a sort of design from the gate also metaphorically, as we found the whole engagement with the community much more difficult. More than the physical gate, the gate of project 2 was in fact a



symbolic one, that suggest the feeling of doing design in a context where one has not been invited. I am very aware here of not reinforcing the classic stigma that usually accompanies these so called 'marginalised communities', often depicted especially in the field of social services as 'hard to reach'. If our experience of working with this group taught us something, in fact, it was that the engagement process and the process of getting trust was actually much more nuanced and in some ways complex, than what the 'hard to reach label' ends up hiding. It had to do with offering multiple ways of engaging, with listening beyond the use of jargon and to learn different languages, and it had to do with dealing with previous bad experiences of negative engagement. Although the process of getting trust, was always problematic and probably never fully accomplished (despite the big efforts of S.) we also learnt how people were actually easy to open up, also about the most intimate things, as S. stories of people's dreams, nostalgia, death and financial crises showed us. Engagement, we could therefore say, does not come in a unique form and shape and is not something linear, as people can engage and dis-engage differently at different times during the same project, as we have seen for project 2. We learnt that participation is not static – like something that happens at one point in time - but rather we should think of it more like a process (Snow *et al*, 1986) where the decision to participate is taken over time and frequently re-considered and re-negotiated. Whilst, on one hand, we could in fact not really say that the residents of the site were all aware and active part of our design work, on the other hand, we could also not simply reduce the project as a failure on the side of engagement.

Part of the complexity of the process of engagement also came from the different ways in which project 1 and project 2 considered research and saw their role and their place in the investigative effort (as this leads me to my second point about research as empowerment *versus* research as a weapon against). What happened in project 1 – as I have described – was a positive example of committed residents who were able to engage as they had the skills, the interest, the willingness and the time to participate in the training and carry out the research work. The residents who become co-researchers had a clear willingness to do something for their neighbourhood and saw the process of doing research as an opportunity of getting

active and learning things in order to change them. In the case of project 1, as I have illustrated before, then research might be considered as a first step towards empowerment. The residents of the site involved in project 2, on the other hand, came from a very different place. They had previous experience of being the 'object' of research (where *object* here has a special negative meaning) as the research had been used on them, as a weapon against them. No wonder they did perceive research as a threat and could not appreciate anything positive coming out of it. Although this question of the attitude towards research was the main issue, the questions of skills and time were also present. The question of skills mainly materialised in the fact that majority of the residents in project 2 could not read or write. This is where design proved particularly helpful, being a practice of research *as* intervention, that could accommodate for other ways and languages (like visuals, embodied action, artistic practice, etc.) to do the research work. Nevertheless, although we did find other ways - through design - to engage the residents of the site in an inquiry of their conditions (like with the photo exhibition and other events we ran in the shed), we were not able to pursue any sort of *emancipatory* research, as I have defined it before. There was in fact no opportunity to provide alternative ways of distributing the material and social conditions of the research. More than anything else, there was perhaps a lack of the *aspiration* which is initially needed to push a group to wanting to know more in the first instance. The main outcome of the design research we did in project 2 was instead for us (as staff), as we learnt a lot about a community we did not know before and also learnt about ourselves, our prejudices, our assumptions and the limitations of our tools. We realised for instance how the gate - of which I was talking about before - was in reality a *boundary object* (Linde, 2014 p. 274) in the sense that, depending from the point of view, it could determine who was in and who was out alternatively. What we initially saw as being our gate to a community that was leaving us out, appeared in fact later as being perhaps the opposite as well.

Finally, the two projects, and the role of design within them, proved to be very different based on the role that ABCD ended up having. As we have seen, project 1 was all built around the idea of designing from and for motivations; whilst for

project 2 we ended up designing for needs and from nostalgia. I will elaborate on these differences later towards the end of this monographs (*cfr Chapter 5*), as these distinctive operative modes of the design practice proved to be quite revealing of wider consequences and characteristic of the role of design for the project of autonomy.

This chapter, which recounts my empirical work and where I have shared my reflective notes and learnings could prove useful to design practitioners in order to inform their ways of working. The following are what I believe to be the main learnings that are worth sharing:

- The examples and reflections on how to plan when design is used in community settings the following key phases: entering the field, the role of the gate-keepers, the process of getting trust from the community, the ways of working in collaborative ways and finally my reflections on exiting the project (as this is also a delicate phase for design interventions in community work)
- The sharing of the design research phase (what I have called the material and social resources of knowledge production) through a training workshop so that non-designers can also familiarise and use the design autonomously (see Annex 5 and 5bis for more details)
- The reflections on modes of engagement and the sharing of practical tools to organise this – like the Engagement Contract (See Annex 2) that can support designers in re-considering the power dynamics during participatory processes also through the lens of who gets paid to take part and who is not
- Finally, I believe the whole ABCD approach could be of inspiration for designers in several ways: through its critique of the needs-based and experts-led approach, for its tools and resources (like the Asset Based conversations presented in Annex 8), and the principles it brings forwards (also exemplified in the scheme from the ABCD approach as described from the ABCD mentor on page 94).

## Chapter 4 - An Anthropology of Creativity in Design

*“There is no script for social and cultural life. People have to work out as they go along. In a word, they have to improvise (italic in the original)”*

(Hallam and Ingold, 2007)

Creativity seems to be so much an essential part of the design process, that its unpacking and explaining appears at times redundant to the point that in my opinion this has not achieved in the literature of design theory the space it deserves. But what are we exactly talking about when we are talking about creativity in design? If we look at it from the dialectical perspective of internalisation and externalisation, following from Nygaard Folkmann (2013, pp. 69-72) creativity is both the internal process that happens in the mind of the designer, at the point of the creative act; and the external output through which designers give shape to what they imagined, as in the act of prototyping. In the tradition of an anthropology of design, as described above, I started my exploration of creativity in design by exploring first-hand (either through published self-accounts or in a series of interviews I did with them) the ways in which designers build the discourses around their mental processes and their creative acts. I am well aware that this is not an easy task for at least two reasons. Firstly, as the making explicit of the inner sequences of thoughts and choices that move a designer to take one or another direction during the creative phase, is something that design practitioners and scholars have started looking at only very recently, as their work was put under increased scrutiny while becoming more and more professionalised. As Nigel Cross (1982) has explained, there is a crucial part of the design process and knowledge which is *tacit*, and therefore not prone to be communicated, hence not accessible. Secondly, since the creative part is

considered the core of the design sets of skills and capacities, designers' accounts on this topic ends up being predominantly promotional, therefore not truly self-reflective and rarely critical (at least not in those accounts that come out in the public domain). In fact, the tone of some of the literature on the topic, and especially industry reports, is clearly performing the task of packaging (for the purpose of selling it) the creative part as something intrinsic to design, and perhaps unique to it. Although these kinds of sources have the primary aim of self-reinforcing the mantra of design as a creative endeavour, they are still particularly relevant for the purpose of my research as they can make more explicit the ways in which public discourses of creativity in design are in fact built, validated and disseminated inside and outside the design world.

So, in order to gather a full picture about the meaning, the functioning and the role of creativity in design, both on a practical and symbolic level, and in light of the limitations just described, I turned to external accounts of ethnographic studies of design and design practice as well, as these can illuminate the theme from an external and interesting perspective, providing different understanding of creativity as a social and cultural process.

In the following sections of this Chapter I start by providing a broader understanding of creativity (and imagination) from within design and outline the contours of a possible 'phenomenology of imagination' (as Nygaard Folkmann calls it) in design. I will then present my data from a series of interviews, which I did at the beginning of my research with a group of designers who were active in the field of social design or design for social innovation. I will continue presenting an historical perspective on the literature about the rise of creativity as a central part of the design process, in order to explore how discourses around creativity in design have been formulated and developed as a result of specific economic, social and cultural conjunctures. Towards the end of the Chapter I will focus my attention to explore how the concept and practice of creativity can be described and understood differently – for instance in their relation to tradition – by adopting an anthropological lens.

#### 4.1) *Towards a phenomenology of imagination in design*

The role of the imagination in design appears to be surprisingly under-theorised. Mads Nygaard Folkmann, is to my best knowledge, one of the very few design scholars who fully explores how the role of the imagination links to design, what it does to it and vice-versa. Following from his work, I would not focus on imagination as a celebration of the genius of creativity, but I would rather look at “*the imaginary as a structure of meaning that can be centred in objects, but points back to subjectivity*” (2013, p. 4).

I will then, from now on, draw extensively on his writing, which draws on phenomenology, philosophical theories, literature studies and design epistemology to answer key questions, which resonate with mine, of how designers imagine when they design? And how could we detect traces of the imagination in the designed and the design process? In fact, coming from a humanistic perspective, Folkmann is interested in exploring how imagination works in connecting the sensual, as in the visible object of design, with the conceptual meaning, which is in the idea of the design object, a process that he refers to as *schematization*; and how design becomes the medium through which this is made possible and tangible. In this respect imagination appears to be key to design, both in its process (as a mental capacity) and in its object as well (as this is permeated of the imaginary meaning). In other words, the process of imagination in design seems to appear first as the mental capacity to form ideas and concepts in our mind (so from within), and only later, and this is key in Folkmann’s work, this imaginary meaning is externalised and, through this process of externalisation, it becomes actual on the level of the tangible design object. Between the processes of internalisation and externalisation a dialectical relationship occurs, that sees imagination not only taking place in the mind of the designer, but finding its way into the externality of what has been designed.

What I found particularly interesting in the work of Folkmann is his attempt to make explicit how does design perform the act of imagining something that is not there, and therefore *ex-nihilo* (in Castoriadis words). By doing this, the author argues, design opens the doors to ‘pure possibility’, which is something that is not

an echo of a reality that was already there before, but transcends any previous dimension of what is real, whilst still finding its space in the real. This is what I would call the *performative ontology* of design that allows it to deal at the same time with the pure abstraction (without being abstracted) and connected to an empirical foundation (without being limited by the boundaries of what is already there). This - I would argue - is also the key character that makes the design discipline close to the social imagination of the Greek-French philosophers. This is finally the apparent paradox of thinking imagination in design, both as mental process and its artefacts, as design becomes the medium for what Bruno Latour (cited by Folkmann) defines the '*immanent transcendence*', as design is at the same time the medium to the possible which is not there yet - hence the transcendence - but also the linkage with the reality, through what is designed - hence the immanence. Bringing an example to illustrate what this means in practice, I use Folkmann words:

*"Imagining a new chair (or any kind of design object) does not mean that the chair evaporates into thin air, not least because the process of imagining is part of a design process that will ultimately result in a new design of an actual, physically present chair. Of course, part of the process takes place in the mind without any claim of a result. On the whole, however, the dynamics of imagination operates with the empirical foundation of chairs (the idea of a chair, the knowledge of existing chairs, the cultural contexts of chairs, and, in most cases, the client brief) as the basis for an abstraction whereby new syntheses of, for example, applied materials, crossovers of functions, and interpretations of contexts for chairs can develop."*

(Folkmann, 2013 p. 80)

As the author develops a phenomenology of imagination in design, he unpacks how the sensual, the conceptual and the contextual base of imagination are at play, though three processes, which I will explore in more details in a moment: *negation*, *unrealisation* and *transfiguration*.

'Negation' is for the author the first step of the sensual phase of imagination, which is where imagination is at play by internalising the object, which then disappears in the process of being imagined. It is through this negation of the object, as the chair of our example is not there in the imagination of the chair, that the sensual process unlocks new meanings and allows for new possibilities to emerge, that could not be there if the object was. But starting with a movement of negation,

imagination also seems to take a distance from anything that is real and material, including the past, the present and the context more broadly intended. Thus, the imagination, by creating this *distance*, leads us to the process of 'unrealisation', where the act of negation becomes fundamental in order to allow the imagining to relate to the real in new and unexpected ways.

The concept of unrealisation is anchored in the phenomenological thoughts of Merleau-Ponty, one of the founding fathers of phenomenology (who was also very influential in the development of the work of Castoriadis). For Merleau-Ponty, the imagined (what he calls the invisible) is intimately linked to the real (what is visible), as the imagining is not secondary to the bodily experienced, as this duality can be also reversed as the imaginary becomes present and embedded (although through its negation) in what is materially made. Going back to the example of the chair might help clarify this passage: the chair can be imagined only through the knowledge of other existing chairs, but also the chair that is finally designed carries within it the chairs that will never be designed (the unrealised). It is then through the act and the outcome of design (its object) that we can get access to the idea (and to imagination) of what is there but also of what is not but could have been.

While the concept of un-realisation opens up the dialectic relationship between the imagined and the real, 'transfiguration', as the last part of the phenomenology of the imagination in design, regards the object as it becomes a socially engaged artefact. We are here in the realm of the contextual aspect of imagination, where the ideas of what is possible, and its materialisation, enter the domain of influence of the cultural meaning, of what might and might not be possible in a given specific context. Through the process of transfiguration, design objects both materialise the imaginary and enable the construction of it. This space of the transfiguration is where meanings and imaginaries are created inter-subjectively and collectively.

Is this unique performative ontology, which results from the process of negation and unrealisation – thus performing imagination through being and at the same time not being in the object - that makes design the discipline that more than any other deals with the *possible*. It is in the temporal development of the design process, the before, the within and after the object of design, the author claims,



that we can possibly locate the domain of the possible (2013, p. 19). The process of transfiguration instead, as briefly illustrated above, elicits how in the work of Nygaard Folkmann design performs the act of *possibilizing*, as it abstracts from the materiality of what is already existing and, through the process of imagination, creates and re-creates new meanings that end up shaping the experience of what is possible and not ‘yet there’, dwelling somehow on the verge of actuality and possibility (2013:191).

*“What makes a chair possible? This sentence can be interpreted in more than one way. It can mean: (i) What are the factors that make the chair possible? That is, which conditions enable the possibility of the chair? Or, if we rephrase the sentence and see the chair as the subject of the sentence – what does the chair make possible? – it can mean (ii): A chair makes what possible? That is, which are the possibilities that are created or achieved by the chair?”*

(Folkmann, 2011 p. 1)

Then, following Folkmann, we should frame our thinking, first, on the role of the possible in the becoming of design objects, and, secondly, on how these objects, once designed, shape new horizons of possibilities. This passage and the inclusion of the object of design into the realm of the possibilities is an interesting one, as it expands the ways in which design is about the possible, which is therefore not just about the design ability to explore and make tangible infinite possibilities during the design phase - which then disappear when the design materializes - but it is rather about an expanded notion of the possible, as the possibilities are created *by* and *around* the design object (Folkmann, 2011 p. 5).

What I found particularly relevant for the purpose of my study is the way in which Folkmann elaborated on the knowledge domain (see Annex 9 for more details on this). What is the right amount of knowledge that designers need to have to create something new in a particular field? When does knowledge of the existing become a limitation to the capacity to think something anew (*ex-nihilo*)? Folkmann adopts an interesting position on this point:

*“From the perspective of imagination (...) the question is not so much how to gain information from the outer world (data about users, tests, market research, etc..) but rather what kind of knowledge is present in the designer’s consciousness, and how it is employed and transformed here. This pushes the relationship of known vs. unknown in another direction. Seen in relation to consciousness, the structure of known vs. unknown can be regarded as a*

*mental setting in relation to the design problem and thus as a method of filtering experience and meaning. Awareness of this structure of knowledge can be an asset in the design process; if one is aware of its tacit workings in consciousness, it may shed light on the inner dynamics of the design process and its material envisioning of something new that not only was not there before but was also not-previously-knowable.”*

(Folkmann, 2010 p. 4)

As we learnt before (Chapter 1) the concept of knowledge is also central in Castoriadis for the understanding of the concept of praxis, as he articulated at the same time the impossibility of ever achieving exhaustive knowledge with the possibility of still achieving conscious action. This is possible, for Castoriadis, thanks to the concept of *provisional knowledge*, which is enough knowledge to put action in motion, but it grows in the action as new knowledge is in fact produced by praxis. I would argue that this concept of provisional knowledge make explicit what this space of knowledge between the known and unknown is and what it can do (as in the generating of action and the production of new knowledge). Following this argument, we could start then considering *praxis* (in Castoriadis sense but also in the sense of a design *praxis*) as what can allow us to bridge this gap between unknown and known – or possibility and actuality. This is where design is better placed than any other disciplines when it comes to reflect and explore the concept of creativity and imagination (for the purpose of democracy), as whilst the other disciplines usually deal either with the known or the unknown of the world, design can do both and position itself in that *in between* (of the known and unknown) where imagination thrives.

By providing a better understanding of how creativity and imagination are at play in design, the work of Folkmann performs the fundamental task of trying to unveil the *code* of design, which operates in the phase of translation from an idea (an intention, a need, a wish) to its external representation, through the object of design. In doing so, he also addresses a series of key question of design ontology and epistemology, of how imagination and materials are ultimately influenced and changed by each other in the creative process of design, and of how designerly ways of knowing and practicing are formed and reproduced, not by examining

tools and techniques that makes this possible in concrete ways, but by exploring the epistemological foundation of the operations of imagination in design.

This major focus on the *object* of design, which characterises the work of Folkmann, is where our journeys depart as the kind of design that I look at is increasingly less material and is aimed at the production of *more* than objects. What I found also missing in the work of Folkmann - which I hope to integrate with my researcher - is a deeper consideration of the role of the *subject* in design together with an articulation of the role of praxis (or practice) to enable the subject to bridge the known and unknown. Even when he refers to the question of imagination as a question of the designer's consciousness – as in the passage above - he risks to generate two misunderstandings, as on one hand, he remains too much focused on the *quasi*-mythical figure of the designer, as the only active subject of the creative act; and on the other hand, he is too much focused on the inner world of this individual designer, which risks providing us with a monadic understanding of the subject. But I will come back to this in the next two Chapters.

#### *4.2) "Why people cannot take a horse and the moon and make a new service"*

As part of my anthropology of design I have spent the past 5 years hanging out with designers, working with them in different capacities on projects, or simply observing them in different settings, from more informal gathering of professionals and design festivals or exhibitions, to academic conferences and events. As part of my PhD I also did 6 interviews to a group of experts and practitioners in the field of social design or design for social innovation and the question of 'creativity' was one the theme that I investigated, in order to understand from their own words what perspective designers have on this topic, and what is that they do or know, that make them sit comfortably in the circle of the 'creative class' (Florida, 2005).

As I have also briefly touched before, differently from Folkmann and other design scholars that have been looking at design, my focus and areas of work are less involved with the traditional design object. The kind of design that I have been

observing, studying and practicing is in fact less interested in the making and the materials of the object that comes out of the design process and increasingly more interested in assembling the social and, therefore, in processes of immaterial becoming. This might be the reasons why, for instance, I found very little references to objects and tools of design in my interviews about the creative methods. I believe this is not a small difference and something that should be acknowledged.

From all my interviews the centrality of the creative act in design came out strongly. An interviewee even said “(...) *I wouldn't do a project if it wasn't creative*” (Interviewee no.2). But what this *creativity* was about was rarely defined - let alone questioned or approached critically - since this was spoken as something obvious. Nevertheless, from the different interviews creativity emerged as described differently by the different designers, as something *magic*, or something *special* that individual designers do or have (Interviewee no.2), or as something that *society does* (Interviewee no.1). Usually described as less materially bounded - as it is in the act of creation of a physical object - and less process-oriented, the act of creativity from my interviews came out strongly as a *relational* and *participatory* act, although critiques towards the collaborative act of opening up the creative process to non-designers - through well-known techniques like co-design and co-creation - were also presented:

*“(...) When you are co-creating, do you let the people come up with an idea and then, that's it, you take that idea? I used to be like that but now I think with co-creation, **you do listen and then interpret and add the magic**. Otherwise you end up with lots of really generic **services that are quite boring**...”*

**(Me) How do you talk about creativity when you are in a co-design group with service users?**

*Oh, that is different, when you are encouraging people to think differently... But is about **how you structure people to get there**. Sometimes it's like you design an activity but you realise the leap is too much and people **can't take a horse and a moon and make a new service**. Some people can. For instance, if you are running a workshop with creative people... And I think that everybody is creative, but some people take longer to get warmed up... it takes a lot of flexibility and patience to guide people to that. I do think they can all get there, but it's just about the time that you have.”*

(Interviewee no.2)

This long excerpt from an expert designer active in the field of public services, I find, highlights many interesting elements. First, it presents a version of creativity as something more than the single ‘idea’ or the idea generation process - as he later in the same sentence added “*they think that James came up with an idea and that will do. No, you got to kind of push it a bit more.*”. We learn from this extract that creativity is not something as *simple* as coming up with an idea, as he also added: “*it takes something from being an idea, to being a brilliant idea.*”. Presented in this way, creativity seems to be more than pure *novelty*, the ideation of something that was not there before. It has to be more than that, it requires listening to different points of views; it requires the act of interpretation – to take two unrelated concepts like *a horse and a moon* and make a service out of these; it requires hard work as one has to *push it a bit more* for transforming a simple idea in an act of creation. To get from an idea to a *brilliant idea* we need something that is more engaging, desirable and somehow active in the domain of affective engagement (“*Otherwise you end up with lots of really generic services that are quite boring...*”).

Second, it emerges from that excerpt a change of attitude, or perhaps just an honest account, of the value of co-creation techniques. Despite mainstream discourses that place a huge value into the collaborative element of co-creation, Interviewee no.2 reveals quite a different story. In the extract above in fact the designer’s role seems to remain quite central, as she is the one that can add *the magic* that otherwise would not be there. By making this honest statement, Interviewee no.2 challenged (at least implicitly) the *mantra* of user participation which is prevalent in social design practices, by questioning whether these collaborations were ultimately going to benefit the innovation aspect of the idea or the creative part in itself. I would agree in saying that if the only reason for inviting other participants to be there was to enhance the creative act of design, designers could also well do without them. The question of participation, in fact, is for me, as I explained also elsewhere in this monograph, a more complex and profound one and ultimately a question of democratic engagement.

Thirdly, in the extract we should notice the use of this concept: ‘*creative people*’, which emerged multiple times in the full interview. Interestingly the interviewee never felt the need to explain it further or to define it, as this was an uncomplicated

and perhaps self-evident concept to use in an interview about design. But actually, when comparing the context in which the word was used, and what it referred to also from across the different interviews, it appears immediately clear that this is not the case. Creativity and creative people are not self-evident concepts, not even among designers.

Talking about creativity, in fact, opened up conversations about the identity of the designer, sometimes intended in an inclusive way – reasoning with the trope about creativity which sees this as being ‘something that everybody has’, like everybody can also be a designer - sometimes articulated in a very restrictive or even conflictual mode. Some of the interviews, in fact, framed the loss of control of the designer to be a serious issue, as tensions materialise in the relationship with commissioners or with others that might collaborate in the design endeavour.

*“Coming out and seeing almost the opposite being there, that actually you are not equipped to work in the complexities of real challenges and finding myself reinforcing the same things I was meant to fight against, and that the tools and the ways of thinking of design having the potential to do the opposite to what I was hoping to do... I felt the risk of losing any form of ethical agency in the work. When you are bound by contracts and relationships, where your role is there as facilitator, and you can provide some tools to the work that is going on but you are not there as co-producer, and therefore how that process is used, how those tools are used, you don’t necessarily have the ethical agency. So things can be used beyond what you were hoping they could be used for or what your moral agency might be about. I am very confident about how design could work to serve me, but then there is the risk that you could be a sort of slave to what it produces, as much as it can be a way that helps you producing what you don’t want to.”*

(Interview n. 6)

I would say that this extract resonated with a diffused sense of a crisis of agency, which I perceived from other interviews as well and by reading the academic literature especially regarding practice of design that deal with complex societal issues (Manzini, 2015). From my interviews this feeling materialised in two distinct ways, as loss of control or as incapacity to deal with the tasks ahead. The extract above reflects an example of the first instance. The designer is in fact expressing a sense of risk for the loss of control over the ultimate output of the design process. She feels to be a *slave* of the process itself, *bound by contracts and relationships*, with a role as *facilitator*, rather than *co-producer*. She is aware that her role is limited to lending the tools and the skills of the designer in order to

produce something over which she will have ultimately a limited agency. What would come out, in fact, is likely to be the choice of those who commissioned the design work, perhaps of those who were identified as stakeholders, or key actors, or participants but not the choice of the designer, or at least not her choice alone. The process, in fact, might end up even '*reinforcing the same things (she) was meant to fight against*'. As we will see later in this chapter, these feelings are not at all unique of this designer, as increasingly designers seem to be going through the painful journey of realising their loss of control, be this either through more participatory forms of design, or by working in the public sector where the design output is put under heavy scrutiny by the wider public, whom it aims to engage.

But there is a second part to this, which is also hinted at in the quote above and which deals with the feeling of not been well *equipped* to work with the complexities of the social challenges ahead. Let me bring in two other interviews (and designers) to illustrate this point:

*"The sort of design I wanted to do, really was only possible if aligned with other perspectives and disciplines... I start to see limitations to the role of design as a standalone practice. I think I have been hungrily trying to learn and work a lot with allied perspectives and approaches"*

(Interview n. 5)

*"As designers, we need a bit more critical sense, like in the field of social science, which is something we don't have. We are too much about 'doing' and too much oriented towards the future perhaps and... does this make sense? Is not that we don't know... and the interesting things is also that social science often don't have the answer either."*

(Interview n. 1)

These two quotes are only an example of many other instances when these thoughts of the complexity of the task of more socially oriented practices of design were raised, but I think they very well portray two different attitudes.

The first quote introduces the interesting concept of *allied perspective*, the need for design to look beyond itself and work alongside professionals from other disciplines to fill gaps and enrich it-self. In the second quote, instead, the centre remains the designer and her need to acquire some critical thinking from other disciplines, which nonetheless are still not directly involved in the design process.

Moreover, these other disciplines here are not portrayed as allies at all, they are critical of the design work and critiqued by the designer for their incapacity to intervene. Later interviewee 1, for instance, clearly built on this point:

*“I always say: I am not a social scientist but I understand how something has been designed for the society and this is my hat when I sit down with others. But I think that I also would need, to really talk about social change to work more in partnerships with sociologists, but I don’t know how to do this. Anthropologists seem a bit more approachable. Especially those who study products and they have more an interaction with design. But the thing I am talking about as social change, this is a different level. I have started studying sociology on my own and I have found an author that is really aligned with what I would like to do. (...)”*

And later she adds:

*“I think the question is that on one hand we need to be more critical, as sociology and humanities do, but I think those from these disciplines don’t respect us, they think designers do just little products, etc..”*

(Interview n. 1)

Here the relationship with these other disciplines, from possible allies, becomes constructed in more contentious terms, as the designer seems to complain about a lack of respect for the value that the design approach could bring to social change. Designer n.1 talks about sociologists being aggressive, because of this sense of superiority but later she clarifies: *“I don’t feel unconfident with sociologists. They critique but have no solutions.”*

I have found this contrast many times articulated in my anthropology of design, as humanist disciplines accuse design of lack of critical tools to analyse and address the challenges they face, and designers in turn – even when they feel themselves the limit of their approach - accuse humanities of only being able to provide analysis, at their best, but incapable of formulating any solutions. I believe, although this tension is not new – because designers have since more than ten years come to deal with the realm of the social - the conflict is nevertheless still present.

*“I don’t know what it is but I’ve seen that social sciences don’t talk to design, design don’t talk to social science. One only critique, the other one does innocent change, if I can use this term... we are a bit innocent... naïve but beautiful as we are proposing visions.”*

And later she adds again:



*"I know, that if I lose my tradition which is in the value of the project, still I would not become a sociologist."*

(Interview n. 1)

The identity of the designer is, therefore, like the identity of 'creative people' definitely not a given. It is many things and somehow an identity that it is still in the process of negotiation and becoming: is beautiful, innocent – or perhaps naïve – but is also a slave, somebody who can only facilitate but has lost her moral agency on what she creates.

During my interviews, I never provided a definition of creativity of any sort, neither did I ask for a definition explicitly, and that was done with intention. I simply used the concept without any further explanation, while allowing for the implicit definitions of it to emerge from the designer's words. In some cases, what emerged was a very unsophisticated understanding of creativity, as for instance being simply about the visual language of design.

*"A lot of our methods are very visual. You have to draw things go out on the wall, sketching. That is not common practice. These practices are different for those trained in business school and the corporate world. They only make it look good in power point or spreadsheet. Confidence is this little barrier, a mental barrier, that makes them think 'oh I can't do that. You can, but I can't' but that is just not the case. My training is practical, and they also learn to sketch, draw etc.. Once they do it once, they are going to do it again."*

(Interview n.3 – a designer embedded in a corporate company)

But more profound and inspiring definitions also emerged, from those who saw creativity as a 'force for change' (Interview n.4), to those who defined it as something that scares people (Interview n 2), to that designer who started talking about death, as we were discussing creativity:

*"(...) is the idea that attending to death and loss could create big social opportunities, that death is something that will happen to everybody and that on a smaller scale we all experience loss at different time and this is linked to our ability to deal with, and is a sort of precondition for, being creative and create something new."*

(Interview n.5)

I found this extract to present an interesting intuition, as it somehow links creativity to the creation of the subject, although from its opposite manifestation, which is death. The fact that creation could evoke its logical opposite - the sense of death and destruction - has been explored in design philosophy for instance in the work of Tony Fry (2012), but I found interesting that the interviewee talked about death - and loss - as a *pre-condition* for creativity, almost as the creative act is the other side of the same coin, together with the destructive act; and as the destruction (the death and the loss) has to happen first, for us to be allowed to fully be creative. This interestingly resonates with some mainstream definitions of creativity developed within discourse of *disruptive innovation* - like in the famous work of Clayton M. Christensen (2015) - which were based on the idea of creative destruction, popularised by the Austrian economist Schumpeter. This idea is based on a specific vision of creativity developed within a specific phase of the economic theories of capitalism, when capitalist cycles were seen as dynamic processes that generate value by continuously destroying old structures in order to create new ones (Pfarrer and Smith, 2005). I believe this conceptualisation of creativity to be quite problematic and also profoundly different from that of Castoriadis. Although this might be somehow related to the subject formation (through death), and to the cycles of never-ending shaping of the social institutions, it lacks in fact the affirmative ethos of the Greek-French philosopher and assumes the destructive character of the capitalist growth. In Castoriadis moreover the focus is on creation, and the destruction is rather articulated as a renovation within a radical democratic discourse.

Remarkably, the one above was not the only interview where talks about creativity evocated deep and intimate connections. In another interview in fact, a designer brought in the conversation spiritualism, as something being connected to creativity:

*"(...) if we create societies of design thinkers what would the world look like? It's an interesting question. Particularly when it comes to education and how we knock creativity out of children, so many people out there think are not creative. For me personally, I am really interested in spirituality, in shamanism and creativity and I think that they are all very closely linked and I just think that if we were all more creative in nature we will be much more connected to ourselves. It's an interesting space but I don't know the answer. It would be an interesting shift if we could get more people to think like that*

*as we could change people's perception of their daily lives, the things they buy and they do. Does this make sense?"*

(Interview n 2)

What I found puzzling of these deep and complex definitions of creativity is that they both, although in different ways, seem to push creativity in a *mystical domain* where this becomes very difficult to grasp. These definitions in fact do not define creativity at all, as by linking it to death, or loss, or magic or shamanism they make it even more vague. What they give us is an impression of it, which could not be a substitute for a definition. What these impressions did do, was to make evident how symbolic and deep the concept of creativity was for a designer. A sort of a ritual that performs much more than what is visible to the external audience since it has for the individual who practices it – or generally for those who believe in it – a much deeper function: *"If we were all more creative in nature we will be much more connected to ourselves."* I found of course these symbolic modes of thinking and framing creativity particularly fascinating, since they could be considered somehow in line with the *radical imaginary* of Cornelius Castoriadis.

Before I move on to introduce the next section, I would like to share a final reflection that I elaborated as I was going through the transcripts of my interviews again and again, looking for what was in there but also noticing what was not there. As I briefly touched on before, I did not find in all my interviews any critic of the concept of creativity or even an allusion to what has been named the *'dark side of creativity'* (Gamman and Thorpe, 2016 p. 94). The idea that there can be *bad creativity* is not new neither contradictory in itself (Livingston, 2018) but definitely overlooked. As Paisley Livingston clarifies there could be in fact creativity that aims at destroying – as we have also seen briefly before – or simply aims at something that is immoral – like those in Gamman and Thorpe examples who perform creativity for criminal acts. In mainstream accounts of design - and my interviews resonate on this point – the idea of bad creativity or of the negative impact of creativity seems to be not contemplated.

### 4.3) *The surge of the 'creative class'*

Creativity and innovation came to the fore of economic and political discourses as immaterial fields of competition for mature economies of more developed countries around the 1980s (Moor and Julier, 2009). As economies started competing on their creative edge and their potential to innovate, design took a central role in what have been defined by Lash and Urry as 'design intensive' economies (cited in Julier and Moor, 2009 p. 1). As Lawson also says in his book: "*What else is a designer selling if it is not his or her creativity?*" (2005, p. 234). Richard Florida and his theory of the 'Creative Capital' are usually referenced to illustrate and explain how creativity has become the main economic source of growth brought into cities by the surge of what Florida names 'the creative class' (2002). In the book that he published two years later the success of "The Rise of the Creative Class", Florida clarifies its key concepts, also in response to his numerous critics. Contrary to how his critics had in fact understood it, his concept of the creative class, rather than an elitist and exclusionary one, frames creativity as something that all human beings have. The fact that the creative potential of the *majority* of the population is neglected within economy and production, through the encouragement of only a *minority* of talented creative people, is for Florida the main cause of exclusion in our societies. The point that his work was trying to make, Florida himself clarifies in the second book, is therefore not to stress the importance of the fact that one-third of the population in industrial advanced nations is involved in creative jobs, but to wonder how could still be possible that the other two-thirds of the population are actually not employed in creative jobs, and what is the impact of this on the creative economy. Creativity, Florida holds, is actually a great leveller, as this is shared equally across the population and the choice of who will be the next creative genius (the next Andy Warhol he says) "*defies gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and outward appearance*" (2005, p. 5). Interestingly to note, social class is not in the list of social and identity traits to which creativity seems to be indifferent. In fact, the creative class is not all the same. As Florida illustrates there is a *super-creative core* of this new class, whose members engage in work that aims to *create meaningful new forms* (p. 34) and to which designers definitely belong, together with scientists, academics, artists.

Beyond this core group, there are other creative professionals, who also engage in *creative problem solving*, but for whom creativity is not part of their job description. These are for instance the workers of the financial sector, healthcare professionals, business management workers and others who have a high level of formal education and which sometimes, in looking for new solutions to existing problems, could possibly come up with new methods and products that could prove to be useful to others. Two-thirds of the working population though, is made of that part of the working class who is not paid to use creativity in what it does and whose jobs are rather centred on automation and routinised tasks. These two-thirds of workers who are cut out of the benefits of taking part in these creative groups are seen by Florida as the real inequality, as their potential rests untapped and their contribution to the Creative Capital unused.

*"I chose the term (the creative class) because I found it to be both more accurate in defining the real source of economic value-creation – that is human creativity - and because it is an intellectual construct that extends to all forms of human potential: the vast storehouse and virtually limitless resource that is human creativity.*

*Tapping and stocking the creative furnace inside every human being is the great challenge of our time. Finding mechanisms and strategies to make this happen is the key to greater productivity, improved working and living conditions, and more sustainable patterns of development."*

(2005, p. 4)

Although some of his claims before might sound – through a superficial reading- apparently similar to those made by Castoriadis, in this passage the abyssal difference between the two authors becomes evident. Florida understanding and building of the '*creative*', in his theorising of the creative class, is deeply anchored within the realm of the economic value of the concept. The language he uses (*value-creation, storehouse, stocking, furnace, etc.*) seems to almost want to evocate creativity as something industrial, that has the force and the drive to shape economies and modes of production and accumulation. The passage to creative economies is in fact, something that Florida describes as having the same magnitude of the industrial revolution, which brings with it transformative changes to the way we work, and live, how we organise our time, our families and societies. All these changes are obviously ancillary to the changes in the economic realm.

But it is when we frame creativity more broadly, also including its political and social context, that we can start seeing things from a different perspective and undesirable '*externalities*', as Florida calls them (2005, p. 172), start emerging: housing affordability, uneven regional development, ecological impact, raising stress and anxiety, are only few of the negative impacts that creative peoples and creative hubs tend to generate. All things that ultimately contribute to a raising social and economic inequalities.

Florida does not seem too much interested in these *externalities*, as he reserves only few lines to these issues in his final chapter titled (tellingly) "Open Questions". His theory, in fact, takes creativity a-critically as a fundamental ingredient for a raising economy and the only problem he sees emerging – as we have seen- is that one third of the population's creativity is actually untapped and not utilised. More creativity, he assumes, will only do better to the economy, if only this was well managed and distributed. What also lacks in Florida book is any deeper understanding of what creativity is, in the first place, and what inner processes are at play that make some workers and social classes more creative than others. As I try to develop a vision of creativity beyond its economic implications, I turn here to design literature to try and unpack the broader creativity questions.

#### **4.3.1) Creativity '*Cut & Paste*'**

Partly dispelling the myth of designers' creativity and providing an interesting account of design processes as everyday mundane work practices, which are influenced by tools and technologies increasingly used to efficiently manage the design process itself, Guy Julier and Liz Moor's book (2009) looks at creativity as a more complex phenomenon that is framed within specific economic, political, social and cultural landscapes. Their work unveils the changes in the role of creativity within design, as a result of the changes in the designers' labour conditions within the so called 'New Economy' paradigm. As neo-liberal economies demand '*faster, better and cheaper*' products and services, the role of design moves from one-off creative acts, to iterative creative work that needs to be managed efficiently, communicated and evaluated by its external audience and clients, who are increasingly demanding high-quality design outcomes. The book explores how creativity changes in the design work as a result of an increasing demand for accountability, which requests the design process to be more and more

systematized into controlled productive steps that need to ensure creativity as an outcome in itself. As design agencies and designers are increasingly demanded for their capacity to be creative and bring their creative process to new products and innovative public services, in fact, their creative work ends up being *routinized* in the attempt to make creativity more accountable and a reliable outcome of the work. What happens then when creativity is *engineered* through the increased use of sophisticated management software; and how designers deal with the tensions between codified design processes and tools, on one hand, and the creative design practices, on the other?

This could be described as the ‘industrialised imagination’ of which Fry talks about (2012, p. 181), which comes paradoxically as result of a creative overload on behalf of the creative industry. Within this framework, the creative agent (in our case the designer) simulates imagination via re-assembling already used imaginary. Julier talks about the adoption of a ‘cut and paste’ approach as a main result of these tensions. In fact, when little time is given for design to do the envisioning part, designers end up re-using old concepts and ideas a-critically, in the attempt perhaps to cut costs, design out risks and demonstrate creativity as a secure outcome, as this is demanded by a plethora of new stakeholders and new bureaucratic processes.

Although Moor and Julier’s book offers an interesting analysis of the creative part of the design process from a much-needed systemic perspective, that expands the arena to new actors and dispel some old myths around the designers’ work, I have to say I was not convinced by the way the book itself is structured. Contributions from different authors are in fact presented and organised according to different sectors, but examples from design in public policy are presented as a section on its own. I find this representation quite disproportionate, compared to the reality of the presence of design across different areas, and I believe this structure ends up leaving the reader with the impression that the main culprit of this loss of creativity is in fact the public sector and its bureaucracy, rather than for instance the increased demand for productivity that is pushed upfront by a neoliberal economic agenda in fields like marketing, financial services, tourism and the creative industry and so on. The clear impression one is left with, once one reads the first part of the book, in fact, is that design creativity has been sacrificed on the

altar of public sector policies and bureaucracy. One can almost build a picture when there was a time, before design got involved in the public sector, where creativity was allowed to freely develop and grow, and that this time came to an end as design was trapped by the strings of the public services and the public scrutiny. As the chapters fail to articulate a wider critique of the role of bureaucracy and of the New Service Management ideology – for instance in their impact on the *quality* of public services for those who use them - these approaches seem to be emerging as problematic only as and when they hinder the creative process. In this way, the case studies presented inadvertently portray the notion that design creativity is in friction with the public scrutiny and control, almost suggesting an idea of creativity as something that can only thrive in a *vacuum* of social rules and behaviours, that is arguably a-social or perhaps even *anti-social* (in the moment it goes against social norms). Of course, this anti-social or a-social creativity would be a non-sense from the point of view I am adopting in this research, which is the one from Castoriadis. I cannot overemphasize how creativity is in fact – following from the Greek-French philosopher - neither a-social, nor anti-social as it is never indifferent to the social but actually produces its own forms of it.

I am not arguing that these points represent the real authors intentions and opinions, and that they deliberately wanted to acquit the neoliberal system and its values from any responsibility to what happened to creativity in design – I am sure the opposite is possibly true - but the choice in the ways of presenting the findings and reflections, as I just said, leave us exactly with this impression: the main culprit of the crisis of creativity is the public service design.

It is when the book moves to analyse the commercial side of the design practice that more interesting internal accounts of creativity in design emerge, that dispel the myths and look critically at what role mainstream discourses of creativity perform in the field of design:

*“Even the vocabulary used within the studio setting is centred around a playful practice: whether playing with software, playing with a concept, or playing out an idea with a client, the self-descriptive language of the studio-workplace suggests many spaces and times for unstructured play/work.”*

(Dorland, 2009 p. 106)



'Playing'<sup>20</sup>, as the author unveils, is then not just a spontaneous tool for creativity but a business asset, as a playful studio is not just productive, but simply a very marketable feature of what clients that buy design would expect to buy.

Nevertheless, the reality of the studio setting, Dorland exposes, is very different from the way it is marketed to client:

*“Contrary to the ways in which the ‘creative workspace’ is marketed by design studios, designers in the studio setting commonly work within an elaborate series of measurements and audit procedures. They are asked to continually record and project their time needs for each stage of the design process, to tailor their creative solution to the expectations and needs of diverse internal audience groups, and to find quicker and more effective work practices to substitute for lengthy explorations and creative generation practices.”*

(idem, p. 107)

Here it is an insider designer's account that is truly self-reflective and self-critical of the internal dynamics of the commercial design world. Contrary to what majority of the insider accounts say about the design process, these quotes and the full Chapter from which these are taken, unveil an unusual view of design as labour, that is subdued by the rules of productivity and efficiency, and in which creativity plays almost no role. What makes this account particularly interesting is that it represents a rarity in the ways and in the arena in which public discourses of creativity in design are built and disseminated. What I also see, by stretching what Ann Marie Dorland openly says in her chapter and bringing this to its most logical consequences, is that creativity again seems to exist in *principle*, but not be able to find its space, in the *practice* of the design work, as something that seems again to exist and thrive only outside of all frictions that any social and material arrangements would in fact create.

Julier and Moor propose the framing of creativity in these modes of design as a sort of '*scripted improvisation*', where routines and scripts co-exist with the creative ethos and practice that generate novelty and the new. What Julier and Moor describe as the process of scripting of the design practice resonates, I believe, with

<sup>20</sup> I expressed in Chapter 3 my critiques to the excessive focus on playing which happens in design and defined this as the 'tyranny of the playful'.

the analysis of Bryan Lawson on what he calls self-conscientization, which is the process that happens as designers become more professionalised and, therefore, more aware of their thinking and creative processes (Lawson 2005).

Continuity and innovation then, seem to both play a crucial part in the design process:

*“What drives creative practice is consequently the tension between repetition and invention, continuity and innovation. The requirement to balance the old with the new, to abide by general conventions while trying to break the rules, to conform to genre while aiming to establish a unique selling proposition – all these provide opportunities and incentives for original and creative thought.”*

(Owens in Julier and Moor, 2009 p. 200)

The relationship between originality and creativity is also something that interested Bryan Lawson when he stated that *“being creative in design is not purely or even necessarily a matter of being original”* (2005, p. 153). Pure novelty, in fact, is what is usually acclaimed in the more commercial world of design, just for the reason of being exactly that, totally new. But what is perceived as new and original is not a clear-cut definition. What a team of designers might, for instance, perceive as original, could have been previously designed in different contexts and be rather a variation of the same theme and idea. Margaret Boden (also cited in Lawson) introduces an interesting distinction, which can be useful to bring in at this point, between what she calls H creativity and P creativity (Boden, 2018). H creativity is the one that could be perceived from an historical point of view: it is fundamentally new in the history of the world; P creativity, includes ideas that can be perceived as new by a group of people involved, but that is not new historically, as it has been thought, developed and made before.

*“Throughout a complete design process we are likely to see more episodes of interpretation than of initiation, and more episodes of development than transformation. However it may well be that what we recognise as originality of creativity in design depends more on interpretation than development and more on initiation than on interpretation”*

(Lawson, 2005 p. 297)

This concept of the new is, together with the idea of creativity, surprisingly another under-theorised concept of design. The 'new' is what allegedly is created through our creative act of design. But what is novelty should not be given for granted, as Reckwitz warns us, in fact what is new *"always depends on often controversial patterns of observation and perception that allow things to appear as not old (italic in the original), as dissimilar, as divergent from the habitual."* (Reckwitz, 2017 p. 25)

At this point I turn to anthropology, in my attempt to deepen my understanding of what creativity is within design and how people perceive themselves - or are constructed socially - as creative, in order to develop a more nuanced approach to novelty, from the perspective of diverse cultural settings.

#### *4.4) The new, the old and the habitual: an anthropological outlook of design*

Anthropology had since recently spent a little effort in exploring and understanding the cultural role of design, as a social and political practice; a cultural phenomenon that in the words of Keith M. Murphy (2015) is *"an assemblage of actors, practices, forms, and ideologies that all sit at the very core of (...) 'ways of worldmaking'."* (p. 2).

With the growing interest around the discipline of design anthropology (Clarke 2011, Smith *et al.*, 2016), an increased number of scholars from anthropology are currently making design the centre of their enquiry and investigation, by means of ethnographic projects that explore design as an anthropological object and turn their attention towards the creative act as well.

*"When exploring form giving in action, my approach treats the messiness of interactions between designers in the studio, the suggestions and assessment they make, the sketches they draw not only for themselves but for one another, their ways of talking and habits of movement through space, as not simply context for some greater embodied expertise, but in fact what constitutes the very conditions with which a designer's skills is performed, calibrated, evaluated, and controlled. In other words, I locate creativity between (italic in the original) designers, rather than in (italic in the original) them."*

(Murphy, 2105 p. 27)

In his book exploring the social and political meaning of Swedish design, Keith M. Murphy makes this interesting move that dislocates the locus of creativity from the individual to the contextual space of the interaction. In his observation of the design studio, Murphy depicts the space as highly social, and a space where design ideas are collectively made, through a process of interactions that are sequenced by precise ‘assessment points’. These can be sometimes explicitly asked, like when a designer turn around her monitor to show her colleagues her initial ideas and ask for their feedback; or they might happen unsolicited, when designers offer one another their unrequested advice. In both cases, what Murphy highlights is that it is in the interactive and social space of the design studio, through these different *assessment points* that creativity happens.

*“Every time a designer utters the phrase “It could be...” or “Let’s try...”, the horizon of possibilities expands; every time he shakes his head at a suggestion, or draws a line through a sketch and turns the notebook page, the horizon of possibilities contracts. (...) Indeed form giving is fundamentally centred on the asymmetrical accumulation of all sorts of perlocutionary inscriptions made by designers – and for each other – in the studio (...).”*

(idem, p. 147)

Much has been written on the performative role of language and Murphy draws extensively on Deleuze and Guattari perspective on the use of language, as more than something simply functional but as something deeply connective and highly performative, that makes the everyday by giving shape to things around us. Although it would not be appropriate in this context for me to expand on what is known in Western philosophy as the ‘linguistic turn’ and its impact in the performance of creativity, what is significant of Murphy’s account for the purpose of my research is the definition of creativity as something that – like language - is inherently social and contextual. Finally, and contrary to many of the definitions of creativity in design we have encountered so far, it seems that the anthropological lens provides us with a description of creativity that is not hindered by what surrounds it, but it is made *in the* context and by means of language, which is also quintessentially social.

James Leach is another anthropologist who explores creativity as an emergent aspect of *social relations* (Leach, 2012). It is the relation itself, a space that no one person owns (like the *in between* of Murphy), that carries the creative potential, shifting the locus of creativity from the individual mind, to the social realm.

Leach is a social anthropologist who developed his interest around creativity while studying the role of kinship, personhood, and place in the Rai Coast people from Papua New Guinea. From his anthropological work, Leach builds his understanding of creativity “*without possessive individuals*” (Leach, 2007 p. 110), as Reite people do not claim authorship as coming directly from creation. They seem to exercise a “*displacement of agency*” as they claim what they have done, was actually done by somebody else, it was already in the ground, or in the spirits, so the spirits did it and not the person herself. Therefore, the authority that comes from creation, in the Reite people, is not in the recognition of the individual act of creation and the exclusive control over it, but it comes from the opportunity of being connected and part of a wider group, made of the family, the connection with the ancestors, the spirits and the land. It is always a ‘we’ (or rather an individual well established in his or her relationship) who creates, never the individual on his/her own. Inspired by this original understanding of creativity and possession without property, Leach focused his attention on the implications that the Euro-American ways of celebrating creativity has on the subjectivity, as it reinforces particular models of individualism and of beings together:

*“What does it mean, however, to say that every individual is potentially creative? Why it is so important? One answer lies in what is called ‘personal self-fulfilment’. One uses one’s own internal creativity to remake one’s sense of worth in the world. The mechanism seems to be through producing and developing things, which in turn ‘develop’ the self. Thus, artistic endeavour is supposed to make a more round and fulfilled person, and so on. Perhaps the contemporary interest in creativity does indeed signal a preoccupation with the creation and recreation of the self, of the person. If that is so, then it is happening in a very specific way, which produces very specific kinds of person.”*

(Leach, 2007 p. 108)

I find this passage from Leach very much inspiring for my work on the role of creativity for the autonomous political subject, and also in line with some of my

findings. Although I will come back to this topic later, this deserves here some initial clarification.

Leach describes creativity (from a Western perspective) as consisting of three major elements: combination, the direction of the will, and novelty of forms *or* outcomes. The idea of creativity as combination seems to come down directly from the work of Levi-Strauss and his suggestion of the *bricoleur*, as someone who reuses existing elements to novel purposes. The second point, regarding the presence of the will, introduces the question of the relationship between creativity and the existence of subjective *agency*, which descends directly from our Euro-American conception of agency and of the individual agent that express herself through creation. Leach in fact suggests that the distribution of creativity is somehow linked to the distribution of agency (Leach, 2004 p. 165). Drawing from Tim Ingold, Leach likewise poses that *“There are two facets to the meaning of creativity, as it is commonly understood. The first is the implication of subjective agency: to create is to cause to exist, to make or produce. The second, (...), is that what is brought into being is novel. There is no creativity in the mechanical execution and replication of a preformed project (...).”* (Ingold, 1986 p. 177). Creativity as we are seeing assumes, at least in its Western definitions, the centrality of the will. If something comes to exist that is new, but that was not a deliberate act of a willing subject, that cannot be considered an object of creativity.

Novelty, is the third element that Leach describes of his modes of creativity. There is no creativity in fact, from the perspective of current discourses from within Western culture, in mechanical evolution or replication of an already performed action. Only what is produced novel by an agent in fact, can be considered an act of creation. This statement has a whole series of implications and namely: the positioning of the locus of creativity in the object, rather than within the subject; the fact of considering the mind being separated from the environment; and the act of assuming that the collective bears a very little implication in the creative process, as this is all about the individual will. As I will return on these themes in the final Chapters, I would like to get back to where I started this section and further explore this idea of ‘novelty’ and what is new, as other modes of

understanding of novelty can also be considered which comes from different cultures and challenge our definition of agency.

An interesting contribution to the debate around creativity that challenges the simplified distinction created and perceived between 'novelty', on one hand, and 'convention', on the other, comes from the work of Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (2007). In a book titled "Creativity and Cultural Improvisation", the authors challenge the idea that creativity is something individuals do *against* the conventions of society and the culture in which they are immersed. They rather define 'improvisation' as the way in which people construct their culture, as they go along in their life to respond to the emergent contingencies that present to themselves (something which is intrinsic to our social life).

By posing 'improvisation' at the centre of the creative act, rather than (and differently from) 'innovation', the authors propose a way forward for reading creativity, which sees this as productive force, as creativity is a process for improvisation, and not merely as a consumable output like when in discourses of innovation the creative act takes shape in the final product that emerges from the process of creating.

The authors continue by describing the key characteristics of improvisation, which is considered: *generative*, as improvisation does not simply come out from a design blueprint; *relational*, as it takes its shape by being responsive to what else happens in the context; *temporal*, as it cannot be collapsed into an instant and is rather *the way we work* (Hallam and Ingold, 2007 p. 1).

I would like here to expand on the third element that Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold attribute to improvisation, which is its temporal attribute. The backward reading of creativity, in fact, as the authors illustrate, judges this based on the innovativeness of its results, while overlooking the improvisation that goes into the act of producing these results. A forward reading, on the other hand, allows to appreciate not just its future manifestation (as in the final shape it will take) but creativity as a duration, which is "*the continuous process of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances*" (in Hallam and Ingold, 2007 p. 11). This view of creativity, through the lens of time as duration, implies that the future

loses its supremacy as the only temporality of creativity and that we can finally appreciate how the past and the present can be creative too. I will come back to this point as it also emerged from my field-work in Section 5.2.

What is relevant of these temporal accounts of creativity for the purpose of my thinking, is that they draw a blurred line - whereas western traditions build instead a neat distinction - between concepts like new and old, tradition and disjuncture, the past and the future, agency and structure. These anthropological accounts of creativity, therefore, allow me to open up new ways of interpreting the creative act outside of mainstream discourses of the creative individual and the creative agency, where continuity and tradition have also a creative edge, and creativity is not just related to newness and disjuncture. A suggestive example of this comes from the work of Felicia Hughes-Freeland (2007). As she beautifully describes in her study of traditional Javanese dance of the court city of Yogyakarta, what an external viewer sees only as tradition could actually be described as pure creative expression. Whereas in fact a Western way of framing creation might come to perceive the choreography, the dressing and the performative act of this dance as deeply constrictive and limiting of the individual expressivity, the accounts deeply differ if we listen to those that perform this dance traditionally. The dancers and the choreographers, in fact, see themselves as profoundly creative, as they go along interpreting the dance and its choreography in the attempt to apply variations to and within the tradition, as they see the latter being their source of inspiration and not its limit. Drawing on Margaret Archer (2007, 2013) Freeland argues for tradition to be seen not simply as the same as a structural constraint, and for agency to be understood in a much more complex relationship with creativity and the creative subject. In fact, tradition too, she claims can act as agent, which does not only preclude, block or constraint, but *allows* for the past to be moved forward and become itself creativity and creation. I will come back to this account in the next Chapter as this sheds light upon some of the conditions I encountered in project 2 and provides me with a possibility to articulate creativity differently in that context.



Without any unnecessary attempt to simplify or to make closing remarks on the concept of creativity, there are a couple of elements that I would like to bring forward from the literature that I have explored so far as an attempt to provide an initial working definition of creativity as it emerged from my anthropology of design: firstly, we can position creativity in the 'in between' rather than in the individual mind, as something that takes shape and shapes relationships in the social space; secondly, creation emerges as something layered and complex that deals with novelty and the 'new', as well as the tradition and the repetition; finally, I take the connection with agency to be crucial but far from focusing on the concept of authorship or on the idea of the individual will, I would rather put forward the idea of *interrelation* (like in the work from Leach) where the authority that comes from creativity is situated in the collective.

In the next chapter I will move to further explore the limits and possibilities that arise when creativity moves out of the realm of design and the designer's creative mind and into the world. I will in fact present my initial findings from my practice of anthropology *by means of* design, which has explored what happens to the creative part of design when this is practiced, appropriated and modified in the vernacular of the everyday designing.

## Chapter 5 – The Creative Performance Anxiety

*“Our ‘personal’ experience is our personal home - and this home – would not be a home, but a solitary cave, if it was not in a village or a town. For it is collectivity which teaches us how to build homes and how to live in them. We cannot live without a home but neither can we remain hermetically enclosed in ‘our’ home.*

(Castoriadis, 1994c p. 142)

I move here to describe what I learnt about creativity in its applied vernacular expressions, when this is used and performed by people who are not designers, and who are confronted with the process of design and try to make sense of this. I start by facing what I have named the *‘creative performance anxiety’*, the act of refusal to perform the creative parts of design. But where more usual explanations - that have been provided from within design – have so far understood this attitude either as a lack of confidence or as fear to fail, I am proposing a different explanation. Although these sentiments might in fact be true, I articulate in this chapter the *‘creative performance anxiety’* as being about three elements of a very different nature.

First – as it emerged strongly from project 1 - I am proposing to consider the refusal to engage in the creative act as a deliberate act *against creativity*, in the way this is performed and understood in certain practices of design. I reflect on the attitudes and feeling towards creativity, as they emerge through my ethnographic notes and interviews, and present them as different ways of being critical of creativity and, by doing so, performing what Mould define as the role of the *‘radically creative’* (2018, p. 114).

Second - and this emerged strongly from project 2 – I advance a critique about the unidimensional temporality of creativity of design that seems to only privilege the new and the future, and risks discarding the creativity that is also performed in the present and in the past. This understanding of creativity ends up discarding or framing negatively what is related to past or present conditions, rather than appreciating them as resources for creativity in their own right.

Third, I reflect on the impossibility of any creative act which focuses exclusively on the object and does not engage with the quintessentially political question of the subject instead, her perception of herself and how this perception is in line – or it is not - with the image that society has produced of her. By doing this – as I will articulate – design risks failing to elaborate any political role for the creative democracy.

I am going to present each of these themes in more details in the following sections.

### 5.1) *“The invention of creativity”*

*“I am a realist... I can't imagine things that are not here already!”*. (workshop participant 2017). I stopped counting how many times I have heard similar statements, coming from participants during co-design workshops and activities. The quote above is from a young woman who had been involved with me and the team during the whole phases of the design process for project 1. That sentence is what she said during the ‘idea generation’ session while I was introducing the ‘creative thinking modes’ – and specifically talking about the ‘Visionary’ mode (*cfr. Section 3.3.5*).

By making this statement, she essentially decided to not engage in the creative activities that the team was undertaking, precisely in the moment we were trying to move from what we had heard and learnt, to imagine what a more cohesive community, one where more residents were engaged in sharing their resources and skills with each other, could have looked like.

She disengaged (perhaps voluntarily?) from the process, depriving us of her ideas and contributions, and not allowing herself to partake in the “creative act”. Why was this happening? Why somebody who had been *brave* enough to learn and

practice design research in her neighbourhood; who had patiently gone through the painful process of making sense of the stories we listened to and to analyse the meaning of what people were saying to us; who had many times taken the initiative to organise activities in her neighbourhood to share resources, to discuss common issues, or just to dance Gaelic dances together, then decided that to ‘imagine’ a better community to live in was a too difficult task for her to do, or perhaps simply one that she did not want to engage with? What was she really doing (and communicating) by disengaging from the act of creativity? What was holding her back or making her feel uncomfortable? The usual answer one might think is that she was simply not confident enough - as designer n.2 said - to *‘take a moon and a horse and make a service’*. I had the impression that the reasons for such a disengagement might have been more complex.

Unfortunately, I did not have the chance at the time to ask her these questions, so I was left with my thoughts, which with time brought even more thoughts and unanswered questions: what is that people expect to do or to happen when they are invited to take part in the ‘creative’ element of design? What is the craft (the skills) that people feel they should have (or feel they do not have), when they say for instance that they are not “creative enough”? Likewise, how much creativity is ‘enough’ creativity? And what makes this task of ‘imagining’ so distant or difficult (or perhaps scary) even more than the ‘doing’?

Differently from Chapter 4, where I presented my anthropology *of* design, developed through the interviews with designers and the examination of the texts and the literature around creativity, I move here to describe what I learnt about creativity and imagination in their applied vernacular expressions, when these are used and performed by people who are not designers. In this Chapter I position my insights from my practice of design in conversation with my literature and the interviews with designers to let data clash and converge, in the attempt to build new understanding and new theory on the topic.

I would like to start by drawing again on the excerpt I presented before from practitioner designer n.2:

*“Yeah, when you are encouraging people to think differently... But is about how **you structure people to get there**. Sometimes it’s like you design an activity but you realise the leap is too much and people can’t take a horse and*

*a moon and make a new service. Some people can. For instance, if you are running a workshop with creative people... And I think **that everybody is creative, but some people take longer to get warmed up... it takes a lot of flexibility and patience to guide people** to that. I do think they can all get there, but it's just about the time that you have."*

Creativity is something that everybody has (at least in the form of a *potentiality*), although it might take *structure, encouragement, guid(ance)* but also *flexibility, patience* and *time* for people to get there. Creativity then is there *in latency* and comes in different quantity or format: "(...) *I think that everybody is creative but some people take longer to get warmed up (...)*". As I was trying to make sense and recompose the fracture between what designer n.2 stated so confidently, on one hand, and what I was hearing again and again in my field-work, as participants disengaged or sat uncomfortably through the creative stages of design, I did realise at one point how my approach in the field-work was actually more similar to that of design practitioner n.2 that I was ready or wanted to admit. I too wanted people to take a '*horse and a moon and make a new service*' out of it and I was becoming frustrated as they were not doing it. Like designer n.2, I too wanted everyone to be creative.

I had put all the *structure* in place, through the design resources and the training, I had the *encouragement and guid(ance)*, which I was sharing through my coaching role, but also the *flexibility*, as we were tweaking the design tools together as we were going along, I had the *patience* and the *time*, as this was the whole point of my practice of a design that unfolds with long time and long duration. But my data still did not *fit in*. People failed to perform according to my script and refused to celebrate the power of design to unleash creativity. As my field-notes from that time recorded, this situation was causing me no little discomfort, as I was seeing these as 'contradictions' that were becoming more and more visible between my pre-formed and *unconscious* assumptions of what people would do and say, and what people actually did and said in context. I recorded these things in my note-pad as 'conflicts' and 'being unhappy' with how things were taking shape, as people were 'not being collaborative', 'not engaging' with some tools and phases. I did realise only afterwards, by going through the field-notes again, how much I had actually been 'annoyed' by these 'contradictions', how much I was immersed in my

own thinking and expectations, to the point that I was not able to see what was in front of me, whilst I was too busy writing down about what was not there and the frustration this generated.

“The invention of creativity”, which is also the title of this chapter, is the title of a book from 2012 by Andreas Reckwitz, translated in English from German only in 2017. In the Introduction to the book, titled “The Inevitability of Creativity”, Andreas Reckwitz says:

*“To be incapable (italic in the original) of creativity is a problematic failing, but one that can be overcome with patient training. But not to want (italic in the original) to be creative, consciously to leave creative potential unused and to avoid creatively bringing about new things, that would seem an absurd disposition, just as it would have seemed absurd not to want to be moral or normal or autonomous in other times.”*

(Reckwitz, 2017 p. 1)

The ‘creative ethos’ of which Reckwitz talks about, in which creativity and novelty do not just fulfil a function but are pursued in their own right, is what I found myself believing in. I was immersed in this creative imperative (and how I could have not been), which pervades modern societies and creative economies with a very specific definition of creativity.

This vision of creativity was very much at the centre of multiple discourses in the UK social services where, in times of austerity, people had come to believe that *‘Social services, charities and other third sector institutions are failing not because their funding has been drastically cut, but because they are not creative enough.’* (Mould, 2018 p. 10). No wonder that my participants – and myself – had somehow internalised these discourses and that the pursue of the mantra of creativity was the result.

What I was not considering, although it had been in front of me all the time, was that my participant simply had decided that she did not *want* to engage in the creative act, that perhaps I was not witnessing an act of *surrender*, but an act of *insurrection* through the denial of creativity and the choice of that woman *‘to leave (the) creative potential unused and to avoid creatively bringing about new things’*.

Further illumination came from the ethnographic interviews that I completed at the end of my field-work, as I went back again to some of the participants to get more clarity on the emerging themes and ideas. The following extract belongs to an interview with a member of staff, who was engaged in the design activities across both project 1 and project 2:

*“Also, I don’t see myself as a very creative thinker and **it intimidates me a little bit**, if I have to be honest with myself, **the idea of coming up with new things**. If I can sit back in that stage and let everybody else come up with the ideas, that would be...*

*It is that I don’t see myself as a very creative person, or certainly **not blue-sky thinking**, I would be more inclined coming up with **regurgitation of what is already out there**. It might be a little different. **Something that is new? I don’t think I could come up with that**. And that is fine, I guess everyone has different things.”*

(K. member of staff)

K. is a member of staff at the organisation where I did my field-work. She is a trained social worker and at the time of the interview had been working in the organisation for the previous 4 years. She was ‘Co-production<sup>21</sup> lead’, which as she said ‘*ends up encapsulating so many different things*’. In her job she “*make(s) sure (they) are doing co-production at the best of (their) ability*”, so in practice this means planning the co-production activities across the organisation to make sure the volunteers have opportunities to get involved in the development of the services and in the decision-making process of the organisation (and this is why she was involved in both projects).

The quote above comes from a point in our interview when I was asking her about how she felt, and her opinions, on the different stages of the work that we had gone through together. She was completely positive about the process, during the whole interview:

*“I always say, service design **I absolutely love it**, I am quite **process driven** and this gives me a pretty nice process to follow while also allowing me to explore all the different options. I guess **I have now quite a lot of trust in it**, when I talk to other people and they go ‘Oh my god I don’t know what is going on’, I can say quite confidently, just trust it and we will get there and it will be fine. I love hearing about people’s lives and what it is important to*

<sup>21</sup> Co-production could be defined as a model of collaboration in which citizens play an active role in the conception, design and delivery of public policies and social services. For more on Co-production in the UK, please refer to <https://neweconomics.org/2008/07/co-production>

*them and their stories and probably that is why I very much like the Explore phase of service design. Oh, but I feel I've got off track..."*

(K. member of staff)

Of course, part of what I was hearing was possibly an attempt to use the space of the interview to praise myself and my work, a way of saying thank you, and perhaps even a way to give me some 'good data' to use for my research after all. In these types of interviews and considering my role and relationship with the people involved, these dynamics might happen and have to be taken into consideration. I noticed in fact in almost all my interviews with staff and with residents a carefulness and wariness in sharing their thoughts with me, especially when these were perceived by them potentially as a criticism of the process or of the work done together. You could trace these instances, almost physically in my write-up of the interviews, by circling every time they used sentences like: "*if I have to be honest*", "*I am not sure I am answering your question*", "*I went off track*" and similar, in order to express their tentative ways of mediating between their own thoughts and what they assumed I was expecting them to say. This is a fairly normal process that any ethnographic researcher has to consider when trying to access people's most honest thoughts and ideas, as research participants might try to protect you from them or simply hide them, as they might believe they could hurt you. Or sometimes they say things only to match your expectations, or rather what they think about your expectations, and try to answer the interview questions in the 'right way', based on what they think the 'right way' for a good interview would look like for you, as the researcher. There is little one can do to avoid this but being aware and learn how to take people's opinions *with a pinch of salt*.

But getting back to K.'s declaration of love for service design, I have few additional elements to believe that that was authentic, as it was coherent with other things she did, other things I noted down in the two years we worked together, and also with the fact that after the time of my field-work, and once I was not there working with them anymore, she did organise autonomously some design training and used design techniques in new projects. What was also a good sign, is that she did not tell me anything about the training and the new projects, until it came out spontaneously in our interview. It felt to me this was a proof of the fact that,



although she was performing her interview with me - as one tends to do during an interview - that was not a complete *mise en scène*, as she was also using design behind closed doors and for herself only.

Although she was positive about the process in itself, and of the Explore phase particularly, when it came to talk about the creative parts, K. had very negative feelings, not only as she saw herself as non-creative – as many others non-designers when they approach the creative part – but also as she described the phase as *intimidating*, something she would rather leave to others to do (*‘if I can sit back in that stage and let everybody else come up with the ideas’*). This is an attitude that would not appear novel to any design practitioner who has been using design collaboratively, and this attitude is usually explained with the lack of confidence of the non-designer, on one hand, and the negative culture around failure, on the other. Although I believe these analyses to have some ground, I wanted with this work to look further and deeper beyond these explanations, to see if I could find perhaps other reasons that could explain this attitude.

When I prompted K. to expand and explain more about her feelings and thoughts about that creative part of design, she went on:

*“I found myself non-creative, but my dad always says ‘You are’, as **I have decorated my house, I have done everything on my own, I have redesigned my bathroom, etc.** I don’t know if it is just a lack of confidence, I don’t know. I just **don’t think I am very good at thinking like outside the box** and I think I can facilitate other people to do it but for me it is like... and I don’t want **to impose my ideas** I guess, I don’t want to be ‘I think this is what should happen’. I think my role is more facilitating other people **to have ideas and make sure these are heard**. And I think it is quite an intimidating thing, sitting in a room and be there like ‘now we have to come up with some ideas’. I know there is tools and there is activities to help with that, but I think is quite scary: **what if the idea we come back with is rubbish!?** You know that sort of... It is quite a lot of pressure I suppose.”*

She seems here to elaborate on what she said before and almost defining herself as ‘differently creative’, using a creativity that is somehow of a different sort from the one needed in a design process: she had decorated her house, re-designed her bathroom, all on her own, so she was describing herself as creative. But when it came to use that creativity in the design process, a sort of ‘*performance anxiety*’ emerged. It seems like for K. there is a difference in performing her creativity on

her own, in her house, where she is the only one affected by the changes she will make, but also the only one responsible for them (whether or not the final results will be considered good enough). But designing something for somebody else requires a different type of *confidence*, the confidence of doing *for* others, and accepting the responsibility that things could also go wrong, and that this will affect not only you but also the other people involved (“*I think is quite scary: what if the idea we come back with is rubbish!? You know that sort of... It is quite a lot of pressure I suppose.*”).

As I asked other members of staff about this issue, this is what J. (the second project manager of project 1) said:

*“I think it is **putting myself out there in a room** of people saying this is what I think, and then **if it gets rejected...** but I don’t know, I am very open to the fact that other people might have different ideas, I don’t know what is about that scares me a little bit... I suppose it is that **pressure of service design, you are making something new and innovative and that is the selling point of service design, and what if we don’t?** because you are setting up with that **expectation that is going to be new, exciting and different, what if we come up with neither?** I guess you have the evidence, if you have followed the process that this is what people said they wanted, then you have to trust it, **even if it is not new.** But I guess I would wonder ‘Is all that am doing right?’ **And if we don’t come up with nothing new, am I facilitating the workshop good enough, and all these questions...**”.*

(J. member of staff)

In this passage, and on a very similar tone from the previous interview, J. describes perfectly what I have called before the creative ‘*performance anxiety*’ that the design promise brings with it. It is about making something new and innovative, this is the selling point of service design – as we have seen before from Lawson and others as well (*cfr. Section 4.3*) The surge of the ‘creative class’) - and what if we do not make anything new? If the process cannot fail, then if nothing new comes out as a result of it, then it has to do with the ‘designer’ and the fact that she is not perhaps ‘*facilitating the workshop good enough*’.

I noticed how staff had some-how internalised a series of cliché about design (‘*the blue sky thinking*’, ‘*the outside the box thinking*’ ‘*the making something new and innovative*’ and so on) and that the trust they had built in the process was bringing with it an *a-critical* acceptance of a series of mainstream discourses around design

and innovation. These stereotypical (I would say even '*cheap cliché*') definitions of design, in fact, were not part at any point of the training they did with me or they were never used by me in any of our coaching sessions. Somehow staff managed to get to these *clichés* on their own, as these are quite well rehearsed and accessible discourses also from outside design and within more mainstream innovation speak, the kind of 'key words' that any quick Google search of the terms *creativity*, *design* or *innovation* will easily bring up.

Trying to understand what the words from staff meant for the purpose of defining creativity, I needed to go beyond the words themselves and try to identify and expand the themes behind them. Through the process of coding and analysing this data, I have come to identify at least three themes: the performance anxiety, a social understanding of the new, the concept of 'radical difference'. I will go now to expand on each of them, drawing on K. and J. interviews and other data as well.

The *creative performance anxiety*, as I have named it before, seems to be related to the fact that rather than considering creativity as an internal process, from which one could possibly also get some pleasure in and for itself, for my participants creativity in design raises concerns, which are all related to the question of the audience and of the outcome: what if it is *rubbish*? What if it is *rejected*? What if it is *not new, exciting or different* (as it is supposed to be)?

The idea of having to come up with something new (as in the framing of the value of creativity for what it produces) raises in J. and others I have worked with a deep sense of responsibility, which stems from the awareness that what we are doing is not just for us (like decorating our garden), but has a social dimension attached to it. But why something that constitutes for designers the powerful and exciting part of their job was perceived so differently from my participants?

This could be partly explained by looking at the ethos and concerns that are proper of the sector in which I was researching. People working in the social sector, in fact, tend to be people who, as part of their training and work on the ground, acquire a sense of duty and of accountability for what they do and the impact it has on the people and society. But it is also interesting to note how the pressure that my participants were describing - and that I am trying to unpack - is somehow very different from the burden of accountability that Julier and Moor described in their

book (2009). In the authors' account, the becoming responsible to others is portrayed in fact as a limitation to the act of being creative, a sort of annoyance, something external to creativity, as we have seen before, that hinders the performance of the creative act itself, reducing it to something that is *subject to* people scrutiny, measurement and judgment. For my participants, this is exactly what creativity in design is about. It is not about the individual pleasure of the act of creating, but it is about the serious consequences and concerns that the act of creating for others brings with it.

Like we saw from Leach (2007) before, the authority that comes from creation was for my participants not in the recognition of the individual act of creation. It is in fact always a 'we' (or rather an individual well established in his or her relationship) who creates, never the individual on his/her own. Creativity exists therefore in a web of responsibility, towards the others for whom we create and - I would add - towards the environment and the planet more broadly. In this alternative definition of creativity that seems to emerge from my field-work, responsibilities and the social dimensions of creativity, rather than being the blockage and the limitation of the creative act, are very much the essence of it.

The second theme that I saw emerging from my coding and analysis regards the idea that what is new is not simply what was not there before. For something to be defined as 'new', that thing has to be somehow accepted and recognised by others as being so, and as being useful. In other words, the new only exists in its social understanding of it.

*"I think this is a fear for charities generally with service design, as we know what we are doing and if we keep doing it again and again and then less people turn up, then is fine. But **what if we do it differently, and then less people turn up.**"*

(J. member of staff)

The fear of rejection that emerges from this excerpt, the fact that something we could design could not be accepted by the others as being useful, good or something for them to want, shifts the locus of meaning of what is new from the individual that makes it, to the people that receive it. Creativity and novelty, as they emerge from my design work and the anthropological exploration of it, are

not considered worth to be pursued in their own right, they have to fulfil a function and be accepted socially by the group of people they would refer to. Thus, a different value emerges to what is defined as *new*, where novelty is not a value in itself:

*“I know we talked about the pressure of coming up with something new, I think there is something for me (**rather than just being a new thing**) which is about **designing something properly**. Often in the charity sector we just have a lack of thoughts behind our process, while actually with service design... it almost forces you to take the time to think through all of the different process and stages. (...) **So even if you are not coming up with something new, it gives you the space to just actually design something properly** rather than just say, this is the idea, and jump feet first all the time in the delivery.”*

(K. member of staff)

I found this idea of design being used for doing things *properly* and carefully, rather than for making things new, as quite telling of how when used in the community sector the value of design is transformed. It goes beyond the mainstream discourses of novelty, transformation and success - which are entrenched in economic and consumerist discourses of design - and becomes something that builds on new key values and words, like respect, responsibility, achievement and caring. I find this a very interesting emerging topic, which would deserve further exploration but which fall outside of the remit of this work, although I will come back to the question of novelty and what is new again in the following section of this Chapter.

The last theme – the radically different - emerged strongly from talking to the staff that was involved in the project as community developers, and who did the work in the neighbourhoods and in the communities using a mix of design and ABCD approach. B. is a community developer who had previously worked in mental health and who joined the project initially as a volunteer. I would describe B. as being a champion of the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach and, of all staff, the one more critical of the service design work and its ethos.

Talking about ABCD B. said:

*“That is what ABCD is about. **Not much about creating something new, but (...), taking a picture about what is there and getting people to see it differently**. ABCD conversations are about what do we have already to get*

*what we need. When community functions top down, then ABCD is to have conversations to **encourage residents to envision how what is already there could function differently with them at the centre.***"

(B. member of staff)

In his book, 'Against creativity' (2018) Oli Mould talks about being creative in today's society has having only one meaning, *to carry on producing the status quo* (p. 3):

*"creativity under capitalism is not creative at all because it only produces more of the same form of society; it merely replicates existing capitalist registers into ever-deeper recesses of socioeconomic life. And it is this version of creativity that must be resisted."*

(idem, p. 50)

Reading this excerpt from Mould one might even think that within current modes of creativity something radical as 'creative democracy', the way Castoriadis intended it, could never be possible or be almost an oxymoron in itself. I do agree with the critique that Olin Mould builds, as I have noticed again and again instances of design where creativity is predicated on a false pretence of novelty. If we look closely, what comes out of it is only more of the same and maybe more the result of appropriation, more about stabilizing the conditions around us than allowing for voices of dissent to destabilise the status quo (Mould, 2018 p. 15). But alternative modes of creativity, I believe, are also possible and some of them emerged already from my field-work. What I call the 'radical difference', which came out from my notes, observations and interviews, is the idea that creativity does not simply mean to invent things that are new, as creativity could very well be a *regurgitation of what is already out there*, of which K. talked about. To be 'radically different' means to not pursue the imperative of creativity as it is currently framed, as novelty, disruption and success. It is about reframing creativity, *creatively* and *radically*. Paraphrasing Reckwitz, we could say that "*perhaps (design) has been too fixated on (...) creativity and at the same time not creative enough.*" (2017, p. 235).

As anticipated in the introduction to this Chapter, in this section I have started unpacking my critique of the mantra of creativity in design that seems to have

become the imperative of our days. I have introduced the concept of the ‘creative performance anxiety’, which many designers have encountered before, but proposed a novel explanation for this (which is not about fear to fail or lack of confidence in one’s own creative potential) which considers the refusal to engage in the creative act as a deliberate act *against* (a certain type of) *creativity*. I have proposed an alternative understanding of creativity and outlined alternative ways of being critical of creativity, by performing what Mould define as the role of the ‘radically creative’ (2018, p. 114).

I move next to unpack my second critique to the unidimensional temporality of creativity.

### 5.2) *Neither Backwards nor Romantic*

I draw for this section mainly on the findings from project 2. In this project, as I have described already, we all felt many times frustrated by the immobility, the fact that the residents could not desire or imagine anything more than just the *regurgitation* of what they already had in the past. This immobility was happening on two levels: on the level of the design work itself, as we were struggling to come up with a design idea that could be perceived and defined ‘new’ and meaningful by us and by the residents; and on the level of the group subjectivity, as I could not see change happening in the way people were relating to the project, they were framing the issues that were affecting them and elaborating their capacity to identify and to question – and perhaps later even to transform - the big or small things in their lives which were constrictive of their roles and their rights in the wider society.

From S. diary again:

*“The community uses all tactics to hold tight reins on younger people and preserve the conservation of their traditions and themselves: stigma, caring, exclusion. **Those who are different are targeted no differently than those living in any other community.** For example, those children who go to school will likely be looked down upon by others because it is generally expected that school is of no great importance and leads instead to the ‘gorgerisation’<sup>22</sup> of the individual in question. The issue with any tradition is that it is not the most pliable system and so change can take time and huge effort to bring in.”*

<sup>22</sup> ‘Gorger’ is the appellation that Gypsies, Travellers and Roma people gave to people that are not from their group. From S. diary: “Gorger- Wasteful people- Gypsy recycled and made things - other cultures were seen as wasteful as wasting opportunities.”

As we reflected, together with S. and the rest of the team involved during the project activities, the life of people who wanted things to be different was not easy in a group that was trying to resist change. In the examples from project 2 we started seeing the power of the 'community' to re-produce, maintain and resist change, as relationships and expectations became *oppressive* for those who wanted to question norms and values and try and imagine a different route for themselves and others in similar circumstances.

Change emerged from these accounts as something negative, as it threatened the status-quo and the permanence of the travellers' culture. Contrary to most of the literature in design, change was emerging from my data as something not wanted or, even more, something to *resist*, and this was creating an interesting paradox. What could have been easily reduced to a 'conservative' attitude from a backwards looking and isolated community, or romantically constructed as the attempt of a traditional group to preserve what was meaningful for them and their identity, proved soon to be the sign of something else. We identified how both these negative labels (the backward community, as well as the notion of the traditional community) were not simply unhelpful intellectually, to make sense of the situation we were facing, but as we later identified were one of the main reasons why this group felt so disempowered. We understood the attitude from some of the mainstream public services to be problematic in this instance, as this tended to fall in one or the other of the two approaches. Some of the members of staff we met were holding the view of Gypsies and Travellers' communities as backward-looking. This view alimanted the assumptions that no change could ever happen from within this group, and that the only way forward was to plan a role for experts, portrayed as those who could bring some modernity from the outside, to intervene and show the path that had to be taken. Those who, on the other hand, were fascinated by the romantic view, were for opposite reasons, not more helpful. They were in fact accepting (although behind the good intentions of protecting the traditions of that group) the conditions of inequality, the analphabetism, the received and internalised stigma, the paralysing nostalgia as cultural traits that should be preserved, in this way justifying these inequalities. The project team and



I were noticeably against this dichotomist dead-end (either we do it for you – or nothing happens – or should happen), but as external viewers, and by using the lens of creativity as framed by design, we could not see anything else than tradition and repetition. We needed to find a new lens, in fact, to appreciate how even the conservation of the traditional arrangements that this group was performing was in fact requiring them to do an incredible amount of creative work, as creativity is sometimes needed in order to resist to external forces of *change* that come from the outside.

By framing creativity in this way – as we have seen from Felicia Hughes-Freeland (2007) -tradition can act as an agent, and resistance to preserve the traditions could be considered a mode of creativity in itself. By shifting our understanding of creativity – as I learnt it from anthropology – we could finally see how residents from the Gypsies and Travellers' site were in many circumstances performing what Onoma calls "*the creative exploitation of institutional ambiguities and incompleteness*" (2013, p. 128). This was visible, for instance, when the residents changed the use of the allocated semi-permanent structures that had been built for the cooking, into spaces for cleaning and fetching hot water; or in their continuous re-making and adjusting of the spaces within the site, by creating paths where there was none or closing the passages which were supposed to be open; but also in their ambiguous relationship with the warden of the site or other civil servants who were regularly visiting the site (perhaps including S., our member of staff), as they were resisting them at points, boycotting them other times, or using them for their own purposes. This different understanding of creativity, that emerged from my anthropology by *means of design*, also resonates with creativity of the everyday, of which Arjun Appadurai talks about, when he refers to the '*production of locality*' (2013, p. 254) as a quite complex process which considers "*the imaginative work that ordinary persons, throughout history, have engaged in to assure that today was as near to yesterday as it was possible to make it.*" (idem, p. 254). In my field-work this effort was very visible, as the group was not simply and passively allowing for things to remain the same, they were neither perhaps just running away from change as a frightening thing in itself, but were *actively* resisting it, by telling the stories of the past, by building the nostalgia of the fire place. These instances that we initially saw as something to overcome, or perhaps -

like the photo exhibition - something to use as a starting point in order to move the residents to finally talk about the future, were instead act of *radical creativity*. As this group performed the task of trying to understand and picturing itself to itself and to the external society they were producing what Castoriadis would define a social imaginary of themselves (*cfr Section 1.1.2*). The main problem with this imaginary, as Castoriadis very well describes, is that when the interplay between the group and the social level is interrupted, the subject cannot be socialised, but remains isolated and alienated (Castoriadis, 1987 p. 132). This is – I would argue – what happened to the people we worked with in project 2, since their internally hold imagination of themselves (as a proud community) radically differed from the predominant social imaginary the wider society hold about them. When this condition materialises - as we learnt from Castoriadis - then the process of subject formation becomes dysfunctional because the subject is left incapable of imagining itself autonomously and can only imagine itself in opposition to the predominant imaginary. The problems with this negative (or heteronomous) framing of the subject are multiple – as we saw already in section 1.2 – as the group agency is framed as a residual category, the role of past experiences is overestimated (both by the group itself and by the external society), and the group ability to act in unprecedented ways is completely overlooked. I therefore propose – as it emerged from my analysis of the ethnographic data – to start describing these groups through a different narrative, which recognises the groups incredible potential for creativity, as this materialises in the act of *re*-producing their social imaginaries not just always identical to themselves, but as unauthorised recombination that creatively re-appropriates the stories of the past and of the present in unanticipated ways (Berk *et al*, 2013).

### **5.2.1) Why creativity is not just about the future**

An interesting attempt to elaborate theoretically the interplay between future, past and present in creativity comes from scholars of agency that tend to reconceptualise human action as a temporally embedded process of social engagement<sup>23</sup>, that deals with the structure but maintains an action-oriented outlook. According to these scholars our capacity to act is informed by the past (in

<sup>23</sup> I propose we look into the literature about agency since Castoriadis theory is ultimately an attempt to build a theory of action focused on creativity (Joas, 1996 p.196)

its habitual aspect - which is where the structure element comes from) and is developed in the present (through a capacity of the individuals to contextualise past habits within the contingencies of the moment and still experiment with future projects). In the words of Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, agency is “*the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments (...) which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*” (1998, p. 970). I will go through these three concepts (of habit, judgement and imagination) in more details in the following pages.

*Habit* is perhaps of the three predispositions the one that has received more attention in sociological studies and that refers to what Emirbayer and Mische term the *iterational element* (1998, p. 971), which is the reactivation by the subject of past patterns that can help us navigating the social universe by ensuring its stability over time. It is through mechanisms of *schematization* of the social experience (idem, p. 975) that social actors acquire expectations of how the future will be, which become naturalised and taken for granted, to the point of intimately shaping our real actions in the future (see also Bourdieu’s central concept of *habitus*<sup>24</sup>). Ontologically, this mechanism of iteration ensures the sense of identity of the social actors, and also the feeling of coordination and stability over time, which are fundamental for social assemblages. In fact, as Emirbayer and Mische themselves conclude “*These patterns of expectations give stability and continuity to action, the sense that “I can do it again”, as well as “trust” that others will also act in predictable ways.*” (1998, p. 980).

If we go back to my reflections arising from project 2, we could possibly see that what we framed as *traditional* and somehow backward-looking was actually an important element of the sense of identity for these groups, as it played the role of stabilising the group, the sense of the self and the relationship with the others. At the same time though, the sense of security that comes from the idea that the past things might repeat again, generating a situation that is familiar to us and that we

<sup>24</sup> The concept of habitus in Bourdieu has the value of going beyond the dualism of domination and resistance, as it understands change as generated by the interplay of necessity and contingency and, although not denying change, it positions this in the context of relations of power and internalised norms (McNay, 2008).

can therefore better control and manage, was threatened by the fact that the *embodiment* of past experience was at odd with the present ones, since where there used to be proudness, there was now scorn. It was in their missing reference with the past that the sense of agency of this community – and the creative capacity - was possibly being undermined.

*Judgement* is the second dimension of agency, which refers to when social actors choose how to act in the moment, among alternative courses of action. This refers, of course, to the time of the present. This *practical-evaluative* dimension of agency plays out through two key mechanisms: *problematization*, which is the first step of the recognition of something as ambiguous and problematic that needs to be dealt with; and *characterisation*, which is the process of getting this ambiguity away by relating it to schemas and typification. The instance where judgment is exercised, as the authors clarify, is the instance when the social actor can decide whether to activate iteration, in case the problem is configured as something that happened already in the past and was then successfully addressed, or to pursue new and alternative ways of action. This step, that following from Benhabib they term as '*epistemic identification*' (1998, p. 998), is the result of a rational process, as well as a very emotional and affective one.

A dialogical temporal understanding of creativity, which engages with the interplay between the past, the present and the future as all key to the creative act, would have therefore enabled us to see how our actors were reconfiguring past patterns into new arrangements. They were in fact not simply and passively allowing for things to remain the same, they were *actively* and *creatively* ensuring that tradition was preserved, as those stories of the past – that they kept telling - were acting as an agent for change. It was through these stories in fact that the residents could take a measure of what they were able to do and to be in the past, what they currently were (as in opposition), and what they possibly could do and be in the future. This forwarding of the role of the past, as this could not be overemphasised, should not be misunderstood in a conservative fashion, as the Gipsy, Travellers and Roma community were *neither backwards nor romantic* (as in the title of this section) but rather performing the creative resistance, where creativity plays a role in ensuring stability and continuation (Onoma, 2013 p. 137).

This dialogical temporal understanding of creativity should therefore provide us with both, an explanation of those instance when individuals faced with oppressive situation respond in new and unanticipated way, but also appreciate - when this does not happen - how the resistance to preserve traditions could be considered a mode of creativity in itself. I move in the next section to present my last (and perhaps most important) argument on the importance of the political subject for any meaningful act of political creativity to be performed.

### 5.3) *The Dis-illusion of Creativity without the Subject*

As I have declared at the onset of this monograph, by introducing Castoriadis work in the current discourses on design creativity I intended to advance the idea that there is a strong connection between the process of subject formation and the act of imagination. In this way, I also wanted to advance a critique to the excessive concentration of certain practice of design and certain designers on the *object*, and position my work as an attempt to get the forgotten *subject* back into the equation. This was partly the reason, as I have articulated, for moving away from Dewey and looking into the work of Castoriadis instead, in the attempt to recover a full political project for design.

As I have illustrated already elsewhere (Pierri, 2017), within majority of accounts on design the issue of the subject is rarely articulated or made explicit at all. It might be worth clarifying that here I am not talking about the subject of the human-centred design approaches, as in these more consumerist instances subjects are *users* and definitely not political subjects (but perhaps *subject to*). As users, they are considered central in the measure that they can support the design process to improve service efficacy and users' satisfaction. I am rather referring here to the subject as a democratic subject (the *subject of*), where the aim of involvement is to enable groups to have more control over the issues that affect their lives, and where the focus is not on the *passive* subject but rather on the active process of subject formation.

Although considerations around the question of the designer subjective stance, values and perspectives have been occasionally raised - for instance within recent accounts of transition design (Irwin *et al*, 2015) - very little has been written on

those who take part in the design activity and their subjective stances, values and perspectives, not even in more emancipatory design practices (like participatory design or activist design). Whereas it remains true that within these fields of activist design the link between design and the political subject is better elaborated (Julier, 2013; Markussen, 2013; Fuad-Luke, 2009), still – I would argue – even in this literature (Zajzon *et al*, 2017) the subject is often the forgotten part, which seems to find no – or little – space in the object-oriented analysis of design activism. As Ann Thorpe has also articulated:

*“On the design side, there is an often-narrow focus on ‘the object’ of design and studies look at a series of objects, or case studies to learn how to fit change agendas into particular objects.”*

(Thorpe, 2014 p. 278)

These accounts seem to narrate a sort of activism without activists, as the case studies that are mostly used to illustrate design activist practices usually present an object (most of the time an aesthetically pleasing one) or a process (for instance in the format of a workshop) and tell us very little or nothing about the subjects involved (I mean here both the designer and the participants) their social backgrounds, their struggles, what/whom are they opposing and what do they want to achieve. Although I perfectly understand the importance of the object in design, I advocate, together with others (Thorpe, 2014; Keshavarz and Mazé, 2013; Fry, 2012), for the need to foreground the role of the subject especially in more activist or socially oriented practice.

An exception in the literature, to my best knowledge, comes from the philosophical work of Tony Fry (2012), who looked comprehensively into the ontological role of design for making humans. In his book “Becoming Human by Design”, the author goes to the essence of humanity - the moment in which humans became humans and were not animals anymore - and traces this moment back to the point “*when our ancient hominoid ancestors first picked up stones and used them as tools.*” (2012, p. 10). This cornerstone moment, the author claims, makes visible the relation between the formation of the world – by humans - and the making of humankind itself – by design. The capacity that the ancient hominoid made visible was the capacity to prefigure the use of a thing before we materially make it an object of

use. In other words: *“It is this that distinguishes us from animals that use tools. It is thus neither the use of the tool itself nor technics which makes us unique. This is to say that, at an ontological level, we are all ‘designers’. Design (as prefiguring) is our key and defining attribute: as such, it articulated the transition from pure animal to the human/animal.”* (2012, p. 57)

But the subject is in Fry still ‘subjected to’. A subject with diminished agency which is not independent from the agency of the objects that make her: *“(…) as we learn from ontological design, the self can be as much a product of the agency of design as are non-beings (objects). Human being itself is based not on a subject/object division (italic in the original) but an articulation (italic in the original)”* (2012, p. 202). For Fry in fact the subject is subjected to the ontological power of what is designed, which makes her do certain things rather than other, by framing her as a *user* not just using a technology but being used by it. As he himself puts it: *“Here are ‘subjects who in their objectification are no longer subject’ and who have become designed, in their instrumentalized actions, as nonidentities”*. (2012, p. 206). I could not agree more with this sentence. But this is where, despite the points of contact with Fry’s work<sup>25</sup>, our understandings of the subject differ. Whilst he abandons the *real* subject in favour of a post (super)-human that he calls *humax* (idem, p. 84) I make the *real* subject the focus of my work, as I appeal to the humanistic agency on which Fry instead gives up (idem, p. 213). I am moreover interested not in the ‘*subject to*’ but in the ‘*subject of*’, the active subject.

What my field-work made visible was the limit of an approach of design excessively focused on the object. What made a difference in the two projects in fact – as the team initially used similar tools and approaches to stimulate creativity – was how our design objects were perceived differently by different subjects depending on their attitudes and world-view (we could well say here their *social imaginaries*). Where the subject was more open to participate, where they could perceive themselves as more resourceful – like in project 1 – the group developed a way of becoming critical of the *how* the imagination works, and consequently able to use this function to provide a critic of the reality itself.

<sup>25</sup> Differently from Fry I have also chosen, for the reasons I made clear in my introduction to this work, to not say *farewell* to Democracy (as Fry does) but to turn the focus of design on democracy and politics even more.

When for instance we invited the residents of project 1 to materialise and visualise future scenarios for their community - through the use of a fictional future first page of a local newspaper – the object we brought in the room sparked interesting conversations about how things were, how much they needed to be different, things that had to change but also things that they wanted to keep. When we tried at the onset of project 2 to do something similar with a group of residents and professionals involved in the Gipsy, Travellers and Roma site, the result was very different as participants used the exercise to share their grievances about their current situation, and tell us more stories about the past, but they did not envision a way of moving beyond the grievances and using it to mobilise against and to change it.

What I am trying to suggest here is that when a practice of design fails to achieve its aims - like we did in project 2 - this might not be strictly a problem with the design object *per se*, but rather with the 'design subject'. The other key point that I am trying to make is that once we add the dimension of the subject, the object is not simply present or absent ontologically, but acquires an epistemological significance as it could be read and understood in one way or another, depending on the level of awareness of the subject (Ricouer, 1994). I would argue that whilst design pays an incredible attention to the first element, the ontological character of the object, if fails to grasp the second element, which is the way in which the subject understands and makes sense of the object subjectively.

Mainstream accounts and practices of creativity in design seem to assume the subject, first as being already there, second, as being inherently creative. As we have seen in the pages before, from my field-work it emerged how both assumptions are in some cases wrong. First, as the subject (or better the *political* autonomous subject) might not be there; and secondly, because people might not be creative, or better not want to be creative, in the way that design wants them to be. For the radical imagination to exist we should have both: an object (which is an image that is not *reproductive* of the existing conditions but is radically new), as well as a subject (which can create this image and also understand and make sense of it subjectively).



I would like to make here an important clarification – as this cannot be overemphasised - on the understanding of the subject that I propose to bring forward through Castoriadis work. This is in fact of a very different nature from the ‘creative subject’ as developed within discourses of the ‘creative imperative’ inside the ‘society of creativity’ – as Reckwitz defines them (2017, p. 201). In these instances, as we have already seen, creativity also applies prescriptively to the creation (and re-creation) of the self, and those individuals incapable – or even worse not willing – to create themselves differently are therefore socially excluded:

*“The social marginalization associated with the assignation of a creativity deficiency has a special structure that distinguishes it from other forms of social expectations. (...) the deficiency of creative achievement is thought to reveal a deficient personality.”*

(Reckwitz, 2017 p. 223)

Interestingly, whilst in the definitions of the performativity of creativity we encountered in Chapter 1 this is understood to be crucial in the development of feeling of empathy and solidarity, here creativity creates the social marginalisation of the non-creative subject. This critique to the non-creative individual could not be more distant from the critique that I am articulating, based on Castoriadis: the first is in fact closely tied to cultural neo-liberal values of individuality, originality and success, as developed in the creative economy; the second, as we have seen, is instead collective, political and inherently linked to democratic values. The ‘creative subject’ in Castoriadis is therefore the same as the ‘political subject’, and it could not be otherwise as the two represent in the work of the Greek-French philosopher perfect analogues. So when I talk about a deficiency of creativity I am actually not critiquing a deficient personality, but a political deficit of that person to act critically and politically – which following Castoriadis definitions is the equivalent to act *creatively*. Let me clarify this in more details.

As scholars from political theory and social movement theory very well know, imagining that different social and political institutions could be possible is the first step towards mobilising to make that possible. The reasons for imagining change can only emerge when one’s meanings, values and aspirations are reflected

in the way the problems are framed and the images of the renewed society is described. This has been defined as '*the individual's receptivity to change*' (Bate *et al*, 2004 p. 64). Alignment, as we also learn from social movement theory (Snow *et al*, 1986), is the quite complex process through which political actors find the right narratives and the right tones (the right *imaginaries*) that resonate with people and motivate them to mobilise.

Similarly to Ann Thorpe (2019) I believe that "*designers can learn a lot from thinking (...) in social movement terms.* (idem, p. 190), but whilst Thorpe mainly focuses on tactics repertoire, I would argue for other key concepts of the theories of collective action to be explored in order to better define the political deficit of which I was talking about before. Closely linked to the idea of mobilisation, but often overlooked, is for instance the concept of *de-mobilisation* (which is not dissimilar from the concept of de-activation we have encountered in Chapter 3 as part of the ABCD approach). As we have seen before it is usually understood that people mobilise on one hand, because of their grievances (especially suddenly imposed grievances), illegitimate inequalities or relative deprivation (Klandermans, 2015 p. 220) and on the other, because they can imagine change to happen and find their own visions reflected in those of others. But what I have learnt in my field-work, and as I observed first-hand in project 2, these two conditions although necessary might not be sufficient. The process of *de-mobilisation* is often a neglected area even in political studies of collective action and change (Fillieule, 2015), and this might explain why this concept is absent, to my best knowledge, from design scholarly discourses within the field of design for making publics or activist design. De-mobilisation is, as the word suggests, the study of the dynamics that stop people from taking action and mobilise.

In one of the few comprehensive studies of de-mobilisation (Davenport, 2015), this is presented to be a dynamic and interactive process, that is influenced by both external and internal factors. Some of the external factors could be understood to fall under the supply side of mobilisation, which is the external events and conditions that might generate the grievance, inequality and the deprivation that we have seen before. External could also be of course the opportunity to mobilise. The internal factors, more focused on micro-sociological accounts of action (Fillieule, 2015 p.278), is what I am more interested for the purpose of this study.

These include the so-called demand side and consider the motivation of the individual to take action. Here again – like with Folkmann and his theory of imagination in design (*cfr p. 151*) - is the *interplay* between the inner and outer dynamics that needs to be further understood. I would suggest, based on what I have articulated so far and by posing imagination as an embodied capacity, that this could be achieved in two ways: (1) by developing first a better understanding of the process of subjectification, and (2) by articulating how this process is affected by the *social imaginaries*. I am going to illustrate each of these points in the next sections.

### 5.3.1) The Creative Political Subject

In order to perform the first step, I propose to draw on political theory and philosophy (without any pretence to go through the full literature on the topic) in order to develop a better understanding of what the subject is and what she does. I propose to start from the definition of the term from the Dictionary of Critical Theory, which tells us that the subject can be “*a grammatical term (‘the subject of a sentence’) and a political-legal category (‘a British subject’), and at once active (‘subject of’) and passive (‘subject’ or ‘subjected to’).*” (Macey, 2001). As previously said, I am interested in the definition of the active subject.

I am aware that the use of the term ‘subject’ mostly derives from psychoanalytic accounts (like for instance in the work of Jacques Lacan or Julia Kristeva), and this is also where Castoriadis ultimately takes it himself. But I propose to move away from the psychoanalytic understandings of the subject, to refer to the ‘political subject’ instead, as – following from Castoriadis – the creative subject we have learnt is nothing different from the political subject, who can elaborate a critique of the status-quo, imagine a radically different social reality, and – this is key in Castoriadis – put this reality into existence.

So, if the creative subject is the same as the political subject, I am therefore interested in understanding the interplay of the subject as both actor and outcome of the political process, as it is “*the political process that produces its own subject*” whilst is also true that “*without an element of subjectivization there can be no politics.*” (Bosteels, 2016 p. 20). This means, following from Bosteels, that I posit the political subject as both the origin and the aim of political action. Similar to the intricate relationship that Castoriadis describes between praxis and the

autonomous subject, we can see here how, on one hand, there could be no subject before political action, whilst on the other, there could be no political action without the subject being there. This problematic relationship (between the subject and the political act) is at the centre of the work of the philosopher Alain Badiou, who also suggests that the subject develops an understanding of herself only by being involved in political actions, since political agency both defines political subjectivity and is defined by it. The theory of subjectification in Badiou is clearly related to the role of the ‘*event*’, which is something that interrupts the law, the structure of a situation and opens up new possibilities (Badiou, 2013 p. 3). According to Badiou is by being exposed to a political event that the individual is transformed into a *subject* (Keucheyan, 2013 p. 179). The subject, and this is the second key characteristic of the subject according to Badiou, has to be a collective subject for the event to be a political event. But then the question becomes what makes an event *political*? And could my field-work (or any similar design intervention) be considered a political event?

Badiou seems to be leaving out the possibility that a political event could be anything differently from a revolutionary act that is successful in achieving its ambitious political aims. The idea that a political event might rather be each event of the everyday and that it could, for instance, even be a failed event, which left those involved in a state of annihilation and alienation is not contemplated. Antonio Calcagno (2008) clearly highlights this to be a flaw in Badiou’s thinking, as he reminds us how a political event could for instance consciously aim at de-politicizing the subject, when this is borne out of more conservative ideals or because of its failures. In Calcagno’s definition therefore “*failed or non-interventions may still be considered political.*” (2008, p. 1053), as political agency might derive or be annihilated by non-intervention as well. In other words: “*(...) the absence of an intervention still has grave political consequences. Political subjectivity need not be determined solely by an active political agency that makes interventions. The absence of an intervention may result in a subjectivity being affected or disaffected politically.*” (Calcagno, 2008 p. 1066).

Calcagno’s critique very much resonates with the findings from my field-work and describes the intricacy of what was going on within project 2. The group of people we were working with was not perceiving itself or acting as a political subject, in

the sense that Badiou or Castoriadis would intend. But still the limited actions we experienced, like for instance when the group self-organised in response to some external threats or opportunities, or as they performed what we have termed before, following from Onoma (2013), “*the creative exploitation*” of the external conditions, could perhaps be considered political events in themselves. As Calcagno reminds us (2008) even these small episodes of self-organisation are significant for future mobilisation and the creation of the subject. We can in fact learn from these small events about the impact of mobilising versus – for instance – non-mobilising, and those who mobilise can reflect on the impact of them taking action, whether this was successful or not. Bosteels (2016) also has argued for those events that happen at the level of the micro (micro-events like my field-work) to still be relevant, both from the point of view of the action in itself, but also to learn more about the relation between political subjectivity and political interventions. I would like from this argumentation to suggest that a design practice (including my own practice) *can be* considered a political event. This does not mean that any design intervention can be considered political *per se*, as certain conditions would have to be satisfied in order for design to deal with the formation of the political subject, and first of all for design to develop a better understanding of how agency works: who is the agent of change, how that agent perceives herself personally and individually, but above all, what are the conditions and the systems at play around the agent (both the designer and the participant) that can support or hinder her capacity to become a subject, or better a creative subject. This is an area, as I have articulated in a previous paper (Pierri, 2017) which is sometimes dangerously overlooked in design. I am going to go here in some more details.

Even a quick term search of the main texts about design activism, for instance, shows how the term ‘*agency*’ is mostly used to describe the commercial entities that sell design to public bodies or NGOs (the design *agencies*); the term ‘*subject*’ is rarely there, but we can find plenty of reference to ‘*stakeholders*’ instead; ‘*object*’ of course is what we can find in abundance. Even when used, the concept of agency is often presented un-problematically to signify the capacity of an agent to act. But how agency is determined, negotiated, nurtured or undermined, for instance in its relationship with the social structures in which the subject is immersed, this is

rarely (if not never) exposed. Drawing on Johanna Drucker (2017), I would argue that the field of activist design seems to be naïvely built on an assumption of agency, which envisions a subject (both the designer and the participant) with full political capacity, and capacity of action. This leads me to the second point I wanted to make, which brings into the equation the issue of structure (or in Castoriadis terms the question of the *social imaginaries*).

### 5.3.2) The Trick of Neo-Liberal Creativity

What I learnt from my reading and what I observed through my practice is that imagination is an embodied capacity. Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) – as we have seen before - talk about imagination as something that is shared but also that is *individually possessed* (p. 226) in the sense that the ways we perform it – and, we could add, how it performs on us – might differ based on our complex identities. Olin Mould (2018) warns us against the neo-liberal trick of what he calls the *neoliberal creativity*, which is depicted as something that develops with no context around it, or even more, as context did not matter. In fact, everything and everyone, the neo-liberal creativity tells us, can be creative *the same way* (2018, p. 63): “*The trick of neoliberal creativity then is to convince us that you can only be creative by looking to your own agency; any appeal to wider structures do not matter.*” (idem, p. 61). As the affirmed designer, the design student, the resident with high-level education, the activist that works in the social sector, the unemployed, the manager, the single mother, the commissioner, the unpaid community worker, the poorly educated, we could be all simply creative in *the same way*. As I have briefly articulated before, I believe this to be the biggest affabulation behind the idea of creativity as predicated in mainstream discourses of the creative economy, which makes design so powerful as it seems to be infused - and able to infuse others – with this capacity to create, as everyone can partake in the creative act and be part of the *creative class* the same way.

This framing in design – although very influential in my early thinking as well, as illustrated before in this monograph - did not always resonate with my personal experiences and attempts to use creativity and imagination through design, as I have many times observed the difficulties in mobilising the creative capacity or the differences in the ways of doing it (like in the example of different groups trying to visualise the headlines of a newspaper from the future).

Oli Mould interestingly argues that a more pertinent question to ask – rather than ‘what is creativity’ – would be ‘who or what has the power to be creative?’ (2018, p. 4). Originally elaborated within the domain of the gods and religions, since the Enlightenment the answer to this question has been ‘the individual’. This passage of the creative power from gods to humans is what Castoriadis also describes, although for the Greek-French philosopher the subject who owns the creative power is not the individual but the *collective* subject instead. This focus on the collective is what has gone completely lost in current and more consumeristic forms of understanding creativity: “*So creativity, or more accurately the power (italic in the original) to create something from nothing, had gone from being a divine power, to a socialized and collective endeavour, to an individual characteristic that could be traded.*” (Mould, 2018 p. 8).

But we need to look through the lens of the work of Castoriadis again to appreciate the question of power and how this operates on imagination. The motto from Castoriadis ‘*I create, therefore I am*’ frames creation to be all about power, both the power that society exercises on the subject and also the one that the collective subject can exercise on society. Imagination is in fact for Castoriadis always and already *in power*, in the sense that it is imagination that shapes our ways of understanding and seeing the social. Imagination is in fact a sort of ground power - the *infra-power* that we encountered already in the first pages (*cfr p. 25*) – all creative individuals and collective possess. This *ground power*, which is the power through which individuals are socialised - tells us that the socially *unconditioned* actor – *alias* the creative actor of the neo-liberal creativity - is a fiction that the creative economy wants us to believe in, but that could not exist (at least not in Castoriadian terms). This ground power though is the most powerful but also the most dangerous of all forms of power, as it operates invisibly. This power only becomes apparent from the part of the social institutions – Castoriadis calls this the *explicit power* – when those institutions are put into questions and challenged by the autonomous individuals and collective who exercise their imaginative power against the status-quo. Until it is contested, the power of the social institutions would appear to us as completely self-evident. In other words: “*Heteronomous (italic in the original) power is conspicuous by its absence (...)*”

*Autonomy (...) it is the permanent attempt to make the power of the imaginary visible and shapable.*" (Wolf, 2013 p. 197). As the heteronomous power wants to stay absent (and invisible), the project of autonomy should aim at making this power present and visible instead.

In my field-work - and specifically for project 2 - this would have meant to unveil how the imaginaries of the group we worked with were in fact governed and developed *heteronomously*, and by other subjects (the mainstream service providers, the wider public and, partly, our team as well). What we experienced in project 2 - which as I said could have been easily framed as *stuckness* or, as a participant said, 'the *wanting of a better yesterday*' - could actually been understood as an act of refusing to perform according to norms and expectations set by others heteronomously.

Seduced by the neo-liberal trick of the creative mantra, I had fallen in the trap in which design has fallen other times, to concentrate on the power of the individual (the *agent*) to question, contest, oppose and change the structure, by this ignoring the incredible (and apparently invisible) power that social structures have.

A theory of social imagination, which does not take into account the power of social structures, the diversity of the social experiences of the subjects involved and the interrelations between the two (which is to say how our social experience shapes what we can and cannot imagine), risks to become politically inert. In assuming the universal capacity for imagination, we would not be able to explain the everyday political reality of in-action and consequently elaborate a valid analysis of alternative measures for intervention.

Our approach in project 2 was in this sense '*social weightless*' (McNay, 2014) as it failed to attend to some crucial features of social reality, and particularly to the lived experience of inequality, and assumed that everybody disposed of the same capacity to imagine - or in Maslow's terms that everybody could have stepped up the ladder in the same way and through the same steps - in this way overlooking the structural and the systemic conditions that unfold in the wider context where the pyramid is situated. As Appadurai powerfully tells us "*The better off you are (in terms of power, dignity and material resources), the more likely you are to be conscious of the links between the more and less immediate object of aspiration.*"



(2004). Locating creativity as simplistically being in the individual subject, therefore, risks overlooking the structural and the systemic conditions in which creativity happens, and obscures the differences *within* and among individuals, in this way obscuring the power dynamics at play.

To understand the dynamics at play in my field-work I had to zoom out from the immediate context of the field-work itself - the neighbourhood or the site, the residents and the civil servants that worked with them - to consider in my picture an analysis of the wider social structures in which my 'participants' were immersed. These were particularly visible in the context of the Gypsies and Travellers' site, as social and health care services - for instance the local councils' officials and other institutions (including perhaps our own organisation) - were often visiting the site, were always visible to the residents, as we could appreciate from the fact that these services and professionals were perhaps even *over-*represented in the stories the residents told us during the time of the project (it was always about what the health visitors had done, or what the warden had not done, or about the community worker who helped them with their benefit claims, and so on). This should not take anyone by surprise as social and health care are highly regulated and normative contexts, in which actors, rules and norms are developed that become entrenched and that end up impacting on the individual (or communities) that are affected by them. We can understand these contexts, following from Castoriadis as context of heteronomous power that aim to be considered self-evident. This is what a co-researcher from project 1 was describing, when I asked her whether she would have liked to be interviewed and tell her story as well, and she answered:

*"my story would just take for ever and ever to be honest. **It's quite nice to not have to talk about me**, actually it was good to talk about other people for a change, that was good, because **I had to justify myself a lot in my life**. A looooot. And this last year has just been **constant people asking me about my mum** and everything and how I came to be here."*

These kinds of stories, that people who have been in charge from social services, have been forced to narrate again and again make visible the friction between one's own perception and the judgement of some others. As her personal story did not fit into the norms, our participant had developed the feeling of having to justify

herself, of having to adequate her self-narration to a system of values and expectations (a social imaginary), which are based on a competing and normative narrative. In more extreme cases of groups routinely discriminated and whose identity is predominantly built through the lenses of social services, through stories of needs, norms and deviance, these narrative crises generate the absolute incapacity to narrate one self. As Lennon reminds us in fact “*dominant imaginaries are experienced variably from different positions within it.*” (2015, p.88).

This power – to bring someone to do or to not do what she would have otherwise done - is the power that Castoriadis materialises through the concept of *social imaginaries*. Briefly presented before (*cfr. Section 1.1.2*) social imaginaries, despite what their name might make us think, are self-representations of what is possible in societies that are as real as other social phenomena. These imaginaries are in fact not just factual but normative as well (Taylor, 2007 p. 24) as they tell us how things go and how they ought to go, as they have the power to deeply influence how individuals behave in specific contexts and in specific societies. Unveiling the *trick of neoliberal creativity* - which makes us believe the creative power only comes from within (Mould, 2018 p. 61) – means therefore that we start appreciating how power works on individuals and groups – through the device of the social imaginaries - and at the same time appreciate how power can also be changed through the making and re-making of these *social imaginaries* in other ways. Social imaginaries - in summary - can explain i) whether and how we are able to act in the world, since it is through the shared rules and imaginaries that it becomes possible for us to take action and do it together: ii) how the social structure in which we are immersed influence what we do or we do not do, and on an even deeper level what we can see as possible and what we cannot even see (what I have defined before at page 36 our *horizon of possibilities*); iii) how different groups and individuals within groups can act differently in similar circumstances. But through social imaginaries Castoriadis also provide us with an explanation of how change happens as the radical imaginations from feminists, proletarians, queer, and people from different ethnic background can only be built on the rejection of existing and dominant social imaginaries from which they are

otherwise excluded or alienated and the building of alternative ones. These social imaginaries are in fact for Castoriadis the main terrain of the social struggles.

#### 5.4) *Concluding Remarks: towards Theory Formation*

Before I move in the next chapter to present my main contribution to knowledge, I feel I should take a moment here to trace back the main steps of my argument so far and highlight the connection that might otherwise be overlooked among different parts of my thinking and its exposition across this monograph.

What I want here to ultimately emphasise is that the roots of the critiques to the mantra of creativity, as I have here articulated them, could be actually traced back to some of the key critiques that have been advanced to the thinking of John Dewey, with whom I started this monograph, exploring his contribution to the field of design for *making publics*.

It is starting from these critiques, that I have proposed to look into the work of the Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis to advance, as novel contribution to knowledge, a new understanding of creativity through the lens of his work.

In the table below, I have summarised the main differences in the ways in which the two thinkers answer key philosophical questions, which underpin their understanding of creativity.

<b>Key Questions</b>	<b>John Dewey</b>	<b>Cornelius Castoriadis</b>
<b>Common starting point</b>	The concept of creative democracy	
<b>How to frame the problem and the crisis of democracy?</b>	The problem of new publics that need to be formed and get access to platforms where questions are discussed	The crisis of those means to correct and improve democratic participation
<b>What understanding of a democratic society?</b>	Agencies appointed by the public to recognise and represent their needs	Democracy as a socio-historical creation and result of the radical imagination'
<b>What is the subject of the democratic society?</b>	The public: actors who become implicated in problematic situations that they cannot control individually	The collective Autonomous Subject that uses imagination to make society and makes it differently

<b>How is diversity in democratic society theorised?</b>	Diversity <i>within</i> the public is given little attention	Diversity is contemplated through the division in classes. No other identity traits are considered
<b>How does something critical of current democratic order appear?</b>	Through the exercise of Problem Solving applied to the problematic <i>situations</i>	Through the Autonomous Subject who questions and challenge existing institutions
<b>How to deal with conflict in democracy?</b>	Through cooperation and mediations between current and new publics ( <i>Democracy as a way of life</i> )	Conflict is unavoidable and part of the wider critique of the capitalist system
<b>What role for Structure and Power?</b>	Under-theorised	Power is always at play through the imagination - Theory of the ground-power VS the explicit power
<b>What is the role of creativity in democracy?</b>	Is a response to the new problems arising	Creation is the political act of <i>instituting</i> the conditions of the social life anew.

**TABLE 3:** A COMPARISON BETWEEN JOHN DEWEY AND CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS' THINKING

Before commenting on the table above, let me start by making two important clarifications. First, I think it is crucial to realise that the understanding of creativity that both authors shared and that they posed to be at the basis of a democratic, just and egalitarian society is what has profoundly changed in more current visions of creative economy, as I have described them in Chapter 4. This implies that to use these authors and their definition of creativity within current discourses requires in the first place handling this concept with care, otherwise we risk to profoundly alter their thinking. This is why in Chapter 4 already and in this Chapter again - assisted by my data and reflections from my field-work – I articulated a critic of the mantra of creativity – in the way this is currently predicated in design - and re-affirmed the power of my participants to deliberately act *against creativity*. Instead of framing this condition - against creativity - as problematic or in contradiction with the idea of creative democracy, I rather suggest we see this to be a key passage to recover the original understanding of creativity as a capacity with democratic potential. If creativity in design has become so much infused of the neo-liberal ideology – as scholars have highlighted

(Julier, 2013) – then a refusal of being creative *this way* and to think of radically new ways of being creative is the way forward that I propose.

Second important point of clarification concerns the fact that although I have been in this monograph playing on the differences between the two authors, I am very aware – as the table also displays - that the two have significant common theoretical points. Common is for instance their belief in the power of creativity; common their understanding of the importance of everyday practice as spaces for the embodiment and nurturing of the democratic values; common is also their valuing of practice (or praxis) which derives from the previous point. The role of education, the importance of action and communication are other areas which we can find in both authors. But of course, nuances and differences – in some cases even stark ones – can also be traced if we look further into their thinking in more details.

Dewey and Castoriadis for instance have a very different understanding of creativity in the first place. From Dewey's perspective, this seems to be functional to the process of democratic societies as they try to respond and adjust to new challenges ahead. Through the process of problem solving of those new issues that emerge a new public is formed, who tries to gain access to the platforms of recognition. It is consequently through this process of achieving (or not) access that dynamics of inclusion or exclusion of certain publics from society are put in place. Gaining access to platforms of recognition, therefore, requires that the new interests are understood directly by those affected first, and then articulated in order to become visible outside of the small circle where these interests have initially formed. Whilst one might find at a first look this process to be quite exhaustive, a deeper analysis would let emerge where the shortcomings are, and namely: the lack of an explicit and fully articulated theory of power and structures, which consequently results in the under-theorising of the question of the political subject.

These points, in contrast, are for Cornelius Castoriadis quite central, since creativity is for the author intimately and profoundly political to the point that the creative subject could be considered as the equivalent of the political subject. Therefore, when I have articulated in this chapter my critique to current modes of

creativity in design, I have been drawing on Castoriadis to propose that a deficiency of creativity should not to be understood simply as a failure of the creative personality – or as for Dewey as a failure of the processes for problem solution and public formation - but as a political deficit instead.

I also drew on Castoriadis to affirm the importance of articulating the relationship between imagination and the subject, as I have reflected on the impossibility of any creative act which focuses exclusively on the object and does not engage with the quintessentially political question of the subject instead, her perception of herself and how this perception is in line – or it is not - with the image that society has produced of her. I have articulated this subject / object dyad - not as a binary choice but as in a dialogue – by suggesting that design events could in fact be political events, if they posit the political subject as both the origin and the aim of design action.

But the area where maybe more than others the difference between Castoriadis and Dewey becomes visible is their understanding and framing of the role of the institutions. We should not overlook, in fact, how in Dewey the definition of the public emerges from the need to explain the existence of the State, as the public is articulated through the role of social and public *agencies* that could ensure representation and give to the publics access to platforms of relevance. For Castoriadis instead the opposite is true, as social institutions exist as the creative and collective subject exists that institute them. At the same time, they should be reformed or even dismantled, if and when a new social imaginary comes to exist that challenges them to be too fixed from a democratic perspective. This is what Castoriadis meant when it framed the crisis of democracy as a crisis of those participatory modes to correct and improve the democratic life. This was the thesis I intended to put forward when I presented the main difference between the two thinkers on social creativity and democracy as being about the fact that whilst Dewey attempted to '*socialising the political*' Castoriadis was rather trying to '*politicising the social*' (Browne, 2014 p. 197).

Before I move to the next and final part of this manuscript, I think I should summarise some key points that I have made through this and the previous Chapters which illustrate my anthropology *of* creativity and *by means* of design, as

these could be of interest for the design practitioner. I believe in fact the following points could inform practice-led work:

- The unpacking and the reflections on the practical modes in which creativity operates in design, which clarify the relationship between the physical object and the image or the thinking about the object (before this is realized). These articulations between image, object and meaning (in the way I have presented I them in Section 4.1 through the work of Folkmann) can in fact illuminate how designer - perhaps sometimes inadvertently - go through the process of possibilising and what makes design, more than any other practice and research tool crucial to work between the known and the unknown
- I also hope design practitioners will find familiar and inspiring for their practice the reflections shared by the designers I interviewed who were sharing their thoughts on how the identity of the designer is changing, the importance to maintain a moral agency and the challenges the designer might encounter, and on the role of possible collaborations the designer can (or should) establish with other disciplines and how these can be developed
- All my learnings from Chapter 5 also have important practical implications (and I will try to better articulate them in the next chapter and through my contribution to knowledge) and namely,
  - The expanding of the temporality of design, which should see itself increasingly as a practice that deals with the present and the past as well (and not only the future).
  - The importance of the contextual and intersubjective elements of creativity which highlight how different persons are influenced by the object of design in different ways, and how novelty is perceived different by different subjects.
  - Finally, I have proposed a role for design as a political event that can mobilise people collectively and politically, if it makes explicit its theory and understanding of agency (or in other words what are the internal processes and the external opportunities that support people mobilising and or explain why they de-mobilise).

## Chapter 6 – My Contribution to Knowledge: Starting the ‘creative class’ struggle

*“The apparent plain truths are turned upside-down: what could have been seen ‘at the start’ as an ensemble of institutions in the service of society becomes a society in the service of institutions.”*

(Castoriadis in ‘The Reader’, 1997 p. 85)

In the previous chapter I have presented my critique to the mantra of creativity as this is articulated within certain mainstream accounts and practices of design – the reasons for it and where do I see it coming from. I have identified and articulated in addition to this more overarching criticism, three further levels of critique: firstly on the dimension of the temporality (to ask for design to consider the past and the present as creative as well); secondly at the level of the subject articulating my argument for why I believe design has role to play in the process of subject formation; finally, at the level of the structures by unveiling the role of social imaginaries in influencing how and whether creativity happens, beyond the myth of the individual creative subject.

I move here to build on what I have said so far in order to present my main contribution to knowledge through the articulation of a *praxis* of design which I am going to name *Design for the Radical Imagination*. I propose to consider this praxis – which aims at re-appropriating creativity as a political act as a metaphor of the initiation of a *creative class* struggle. If, as Castoriadis told us, creative democracy is about creating and nurturing that collective subject that can interpret and change the world politically, and if - as this work is exploring - design has a role to play in this process of subject formation for creative politics, then we need to move



from the critiques I have here exposed in order to start articulating what a *political* understanding of creativity in design might look like, which is elaborated alternatively from the neo-liberal mode. For this purpose, I would like to build the following line of argument. First, I will develop a definition of political creativity, as a renovated form of creativity that infuses a practice of Design for the Radical Imagination. Second, I will touch on the key elements that make this praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination different from other modes of design as we know them. Finally, I would clarify how, by dealing with a new *object* of design, this practice can also support the formation of a new political creative subject.

### *6.1) From Individual to Political Creativity*

Some scholars, like Matthew Noah Smith (2018, pp. 378-85), argue that applying a model of creativity to the political is not even possible, as the model of creativity is usually individualistic, embodied and based on the principle of intentionality, which at the collective level is not an easy thing to achieve or even to judge, as in his own words: "*Treating political creativity as just a kind of gigantic, collective form of Beethoven's creativity ought not to be taken seriously.*" (Smith, 2018 p. 384). The main argument that Smith builds against the idea of political creativity is that the '*standard model of creativity*' would not be applicable to political creativity. This model, originally elaborated by Margaret Boden, draws on western philosophical understandings of creativity as "*a capacity possessed by an individual agent who, through intentional action, produce some sort of novel, valuable output.*" (Smith, 2018 p. 371). Although some elements of this definition have also been challenged, the accepted alternatives are not for Smith significantly different in order to build a definition of political creativity. But here I depart from Smith, because, as I have argued before (*cfr. Chapter 4.4*), I believe that different models of creativity can be in fact identified, if we only broaden our views beyond individualistic and western models, and by applying an anthropological lens. But Smith's argument still presents an interesting reflection on the question of agency and structure that I want to use here, as it can help me articulate the dynamic relationship between individual and collective (or better *political*) creativity.

First crucial point is that whilst accounts of individual creativity can ignore (or

assume as unproblematic) the cultural and social environment in which creativity happens, a political account of creativity has to be concerned with the structural and the systemic (*cfr. Section 5.3.2*). Political creativity, in fact, means considering that creativity can only be creativity of the *situated action*, which is at once influenced by existing social conditions of inequalities and asymmetries of power and yet not confined to those conditions. Smith, for instance, introduces the useful distinction between triggering and structuring causes (which he takes from the American philosopher Fred Dretske): “*the triggering cause of a creative output is (something internal to) the individual agent, whereas the culture and so on are structuring causes.*” (Smith, 2018 p. 371). The political is not concerned with the individual intentions and capacities, but is precisely concerned with this structuring causes, which are historically situated, based on social norms and ideology.

Smith makes another interesting point for me to borrow, when he states that political creativity should be located at the level of the political practice (Smith, 2018 p. 378). Changing the political concept without shaping its practical application, in fact, would not count as an act of political creativity. Similarly, changing the individual understanding of the political concept (if this does not shape the practice as a result) is not going to be a political act but an individual act of creativity. It is not enough, for Smith as well as for Castoriadis, to imagine how a different society could be, this imagination (or creativity) only makes sense when it produces an impact on the actual political practice, or at least this is what it should aim at, for that creative act to be political.

This is where Smith’s theory of the political creativity hits the wall and cannot find a way forward, as he cannot move away from the individualistic definition of creativity and cannot solve the question of the existence of non-individual agency. This is where we can turn to Cornelius Castoriadis again and his main intuition of a theory of creativity – as we have seen in Chapter 1 - that does not see the individual and the collective as polarities (Straume, 2013 p. 213) with on one hand the creative individuals and on the other the traditional collective that aims at bringing stability. Collectives and institutions are in fact for Castoriadis deeply creative as well.

In the final pages of his paper, and despite his scepticism on the idea of collective political creativity, Smith provides us with an interesting way of framing the possible alternatives forward and namely: *“(i) posit without justification the existence of agency, intentionality, and imaginativeness at the political level; (ii) radically alter our understanding of creativity so that it can be applied to the political; (iii) reserve judgment about whether the concept of political creativity successfully refers to or is even coherent.”* (Smith, 2018 p. 378). Whilst Smith vaguely suggests that option (iii) remains the safest to take, I chose to explore option (i) and (ii) instead. As I believe I have already provided in Chapter 4 (*cfr. Section 4.4*) The new, the old and the habitual: an anthropological outlook of design) an analysis of how and which radically different visions of creativity can be possible (Smiths point *(ii)*), and also elaborated my own vision in Chapter 5, which puts creativity in a web of responsibility towards the others, the environment and future generations as well. I am going to focus in the next pages on the question of agency (point *(i)*) again, but this time focusing on the possibility of collective agency instead.

In order to do so we need to start by asking ourselves the following question: what makes two people performing the same action, be part of a collective endeavour rather than simply being two isolated and independent individuals? The answer would be the existence of the shared intention, that makes the two individual intentions more than their sum, and something of a very different nature. In Deborah Tollefsen own words:

*“On a simple summative account, A and B share an intention to x, just in case A has the intention to x and B has the intention to x. It has been well established that joint action requires that individuals share intentions in a more robust sense than present in summative accounts. If anyone remains skeptical as to the need to posit more robust shared intentions, I direct them to the vast literature on shared intention.”*

(Tollefsen, 2014 p. 14)

As the *“vast literature on shared intention”* is not the focus of this study, I also direct the interested reader to expand on this topic through the work of the “Big

Four” of collective intentionality and namely John Searle, Michael Bratman, Margaret Gilbert and Raimo Tuomela (Smith, 2018; Chant, Hindriks and Preyer, 2014). What I want to focus on is the building of the argument that political creativity exists *sui generis*, rather than being simply the summation of multiple creative individuals, and to identify the elements which define political creativity and make it possible, and namely, according to my own definition: the loss of individual control; the disembodiment of creativity, and finally the de-naturalisation of social institutions.

The main difference between individual and collective action, as Tollefsen identifies (2014, p. 25) is in the locus of control. Whilst in an individual act of agency, in fact, I have the full control on the planning and the execution of my intention, the control gets distributed in the event of a collective action. Let me refer to the author’s own words as she illustrates this shift through the simple example of the execution of the planned action of moving the coffee table from the room downstairs to the first floor:

*“When I carry the table by myself, I can control the distribution of weight. If it feels as if it is falling forward, I can adjust my arms and my body to reconcile the situation. When I carry the table with another, the distribution of the weight of the table is not entirely in my control (nor is it entirely out of my control). We jointly control the way in which the table is positioned, and when I feel that you are slacking, for instance, I have to not only adjust my own body but also get you to adjust yours. I might feel a loss of control in precisely the same way the object hitting the banister made me feel a loss of control. But when we compensate and adjust our bodies so that we are coordinated in a way that distributes the weight of the table evenly or at least evenly enough for us to function, I do not have the sense that I alone am in control of the movement of the table; rather I feel as though we have gained control of the situation.”*

(Tollefsen, 2014 p. 25)

Achieving joint control, therefore, means losing to a certain extent the individual control, and this is the first characteristic of political creativity. This is very much in line with the ideal of self-management as we find it in Castoriadis, which should not be confused with an anarchic view of sharing control which ends up in no control. It does rather intend to advance the vision that no one person is directing and no one person is simply executing, or in other words that whilst it might be

likely for people to be directed, it should not be possible for anyone to be *purely* an executant (Castoriadis in Escobar *et al*, 2010 p. 123). We lose the individual control, but we never lose it completely to the point of being simply executing. This instance would not be in fact an instance of collective action.

But Smith would immediately argue to this point that this joint control would not be possible when, for instance, more than two persons are involved, and their action is dispersed in several temporal and spatial dimensions, that do not allow for the close monitoring of the movement of the bodies of the others. Smith, in fact, situates creativity in the individual body (2018, p. 379) and from this he derives the impossibility of a collective body (beyond its use as just a metaphor), and therefore the impossibility of political creativity. But here I can draw again on Tollesfsen, together with the vast literature on social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2015), to affirm instead that for these types of collective actions to happen, what is needed is not the physical body, but rather the shared idea of a joint future-directed intention (Tollesfsen, 2014 p. 27), the creation of *connectedness* (Diani and Bison, 2004 p. 284), a '*relationships of trust*' (Della Porta and Diani, 2006 p. 94). These things together create what in social movement theory is defined as *collective identity*, which bears a strong connection with the formation and enactment of *collective agency*. By performing this act of disembodiment of creativity, we finally move away from the individual genius and start appreciating the value of the collective genius instead. Let me clarify here, that the *disembodiment* of which I am talking about does not have anything to do with my previous considerations about the lived experience of creativity and the way different bodies (and subject) understand and perform creativity based on what I have defined their *horizons of possibilities*. These ways of embodying creativity in fact remain true. What disembodiment refers to here is the *dematerialisation* of the body - in the sense of the individual body - into the wider collective body. Political creativity is therefore interested in the articulation between individual inner-worlds and the external-worlds, which are both the realm of the imagining and which come to term with each other (collectively) at the level of the *social imaginaries*. As we saw before in fact the individual imagination of different social and political institutions risks remaining only a dream - or an hallucination - until

our own images and aspirations are reflected by others (through aligned social imaginaries) to the point that this can motivate individuals to mobilise collectively.

The third and final element of political creativity is the de-naturalisation of the social institutions. This happens through two main theoretical steps which are central to the thinking of Castoriadis. The first is the affirmation that social constraints and norms are not part of the natural order, but that are *made* (we have explored this concept already quite extensively and I will come back to this in the following section in more details). The second step might instead require some further explanation. This is based on the acknowledgment that political creativity is not only the inauguration of new institutions, but that the reconfiguration of old ones also involves political creativity of a certain type. Continuity and stability of social norms in fact are not the evidence of a lack of creativity, as institutions also requires creativity to maintain themselves (we have seen this in Section 5.2). Gerald Berk and Dennis C. Galvan call this process *creative syncretism* (2013, p. 29) to describe how both, institutional structures and institutional change, are the result of human creativity. Moreover, Berk and Galvan reflect on how creativity is not something that only the “*weak*” (in the authors’ words) do - for instance in order to find creative ways to survive despite the lack of resource – since those in power and institutions also need to perform creativity in order to ensure stability is kept. Political creativity, Castoriadis tells us, is needed by social institutions as well, for instance when problems appear that might be completely anew and to which existing social norms and institutions could not find a solution. This third and final character that defines political creativity reminds us in fact that imagination (or creativity) is always already in power and that it is in power on both sides, since it is the power through which individuals and collective can reinvent institutions from the outside, but also the inner power that institutions use to maintain themselves. As we saw before we should not forget that this ground power – as Castoriadis calls it - is the most powerful but also the most dangerous of all forms of power, as it operates invisibly. Making this visible is what the Design for the Radical Imagination – which I put forward as my contribution to knowledge – should be equipped to do.

## 6.2) *Design for the Radical Imagination*

As it should be clear by now, the main contribution to knowledge that my doctoral research intends to offer starts with the introduction of the work of the Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis in order to provide a new lens to look at the question of creativity in design for the purpose of fostering new ways of democratic engagement. Through my work in the field and through my extensive reading across different disciplines, I have therefore elaborated a critique of mainstream modes of creativity as they are currently predicated and practiced in design, and consequently I have elaborated a definition and a praxis of *political* creativity, which has the question of the formation of the political subject, at its centre.

This new praxis of design – which I propose to call Design for the Radical Imagination - stems from Castoriadis' thinking – as I have presented this in Chapter 1, and namely:

1. The idea that societies are made and imagined and could therefore be made in different ways;
2. The understanding that how societies are made depends on the social imaginaries underpinning the social systems, which in turns allow for that system to be created and maintained, but also allows for its porosity to change – once that the social imaginary is understood as an artefact that could be made *otherwise*;
3. Creative democracy could therefore be defined as that *praxis* of making and re-making of the social institutions which can only be kept alive by the continuous creative activity of the individuals who are part of it;
4. Finally, the idea that for the radical social imagination to work a creative political autonomous subject is needed who is - as we have seen – a profoundly democratic, collective and solidaristic subject.

I am going to go through these elements in more details in order to spell out what a Design for the Radical Imagination is and what it can do. Here I would like to just give my definition for it:

*“Design for the Radical Imagination is first and foremost a praxis of design for and from autonomy that is available to designer as well as non-designers. It uses routines to transform the social institutions in the everyday. life. It is based on a series of assumptions inspired by the work of the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis and namely the idea of unveiling societies and institutions as artefacts of the radical imagination, which are made and preserved through imagination and can be in turn changed through imagination. It is an attitude and a theoretical stance for designers to take rather than a method to follow.”*

### **6.2.1) Designing for ‘Disentrenchment’**

As we have seen in Chapter 1, in-action (or alienation in his words) is for Castoriadis the result of the friction between the individual imagination and the image of ourselves that we find in society. When social norms do not resonate with the individual imagination this is what drives us towards alienation. Interestingly, Castoriadis takes into account that in given historical periods we might have to confront ourselves with a society that does not provide the conditions and the space for the subject to affirm herself autonomously. If we come to understand - following from Castoriadis - society as something made and imagined, then we can also understand that the conditions in which any given historical society is made could also be made in other ways. I propose that a praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination has a role to play in this process of *making* social institutions and social norms.

Roberto Mungabeira Unger – whom we have encountered before - is the scholar that similarly to Castoriadis pushed the intuition that society is made to the extreme, by defining a political order as ‘*a human artefact*’ (Unger, 2014 p. 1). Although these authors are both new to design, their thinking has been already brought in conversation in political philosophy (Rorty, 1990) for two reasons: first, their common anti-naturalism – the breaking with the idea that social and political systems are the results of underlying natural orders – second, as an attempt to use the work of Mungabeira Unger to *operationalise* the thinking of Castoriadis. I propose to do the same.



Unger developed a theory of what he called the *false-necessity* (or anti-necessitarian theory), that aims to extirpate the mistaken belief that the social constructions have to be the way they are and could not be any different. This is the core of Unger's intellectual journey, aiming at unveiling the fatalism that makes us believe on the necessity of the social order – what he calls the *institutional fetishism* (Unger, 2004 p. 201). To challenge the *institutional fetishism* – I propose – is the first task for a praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination.

In order to perform this task, this renovated praxis of design needs to address the issue of *disentrenchment*. Let me start by saying that 'disentrenchment' is not a word that one can find in the dictionary, and is a neologism that Unger introduces, which we can understand in contraposition to the word '*entrenched*'. Entrenched, as Unger articulates, is a social context that has developed ways to protect itself from possible challenges coming from the outside: "*The more entrenched a (...) context, the greater the number of intermediate steps that must be traversed before context preserving routines become context-transforming struggles.*" (Unger, 2004 p. 154). Disentrenchment is the shortening of this distance to traverse. In other words, Disentrenchment is, as defined in opposition to entrenchment, the weakening of the structures and of the rules that preserve these structures, or – even more precisely – the building of more revisable and hierarchy-subverting structures. A praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination would be interested in designing these *disentrenched* structures into the very activities on which the reproduction of the structures depends (Unger, 2001 pp. 278-9).

Design in this modality would therefore be interested with the performing of those tactics that can make visible, through practice of disentrenchment, the fact that social constraints and norms are not part of the natural order, but that are *made*. I propose, in fact, to carve a role for design in making accessible the internal qualities that mark an *object* as a man-made object (for instance by unveiling the process of making or by demonstrating how something different could also be made). This mode of design could be of particular interest to those designers who work in public services and for policy making and could take the form for instance of designing clear and simple modes of revisions for every new services or policies that they make; or it could mean to think purposively in each service and policy

about how to flatten hierarchies within the institutions and among all the actors involved. Other ways might include sharing, every time a new service or policy is designed, all the other options that were not designed as a consequence. These simple exercises would aim to unveil the simple truth that every policy, service or institution can always be designed otherwise.

As Yaron Ezrahi reminds us when the political creative process of social institutions and norms is “*hidden from the public eye, its efficacy in presenting the imagined as real may significantly increase.*” (2012, p. 51). This is what the ground power of which Castoriadis talks about means in practice: allowing that social institutions and norms appear as completely self-evident to the point that any other option is obfuscated from our view. As this *heteronomous* power – in order to function - needs to stay invisible, I propose the role for a praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination to be about making this power visible instead.

In other words, the design tactics for disentanglement would be about making the process of political creativity visible in the institutions, in order to illustrate how both institutional stability and institutional change are the result of human imagination.

In order to articulate *how* this mode of design I am advancing here could perform this task, I need to move to the second concept I borrow from Castoriadis: the idea of creative democracy as *praxis*, which frames the everyday as a site of transformation.

### **6.2.2) The Routine of Everyday Revolutions**

We learn from the reading of Cornelius Castoriadis that change of the social conditions happens not as a rupture but in a continuation, through our everyday *praxis*. But how does this idea of continuation chime with the revolutionary project of which Castoriadis seems to be so fond? We should remember – in order to see his coherence - that for Castoriadis “(...) *one must break with the imperialist conception that revolutionary activity is the doing of revolutionary militants alone. One cannot speak of a (italic in the original) revolutionary activity, of one type (italic in the original) of revolutionary activity*” (Castoriadis, 1974 p. 29). Revolution therefore extends to all sphere of social action and the everyday life, because when people’s creative faculties are not allowed to work on *behalf* of a social system that

rejects them, these will be sooner or later used *against* that system in some ways (Castoriadis, 1974 p. 53).

Everyday praxis, as we have learnt, should therefore be considered a revolutionary project, where this project is not something that happens in one moment in time – as this is not a plan neither a programme - but is an everyday project (a *praxis*) that although repeating itself continuously, it never stands still.

Drawing on Unger again I propose to talk of this revolutionary praxis as a *routine*. Routine in Unger, differently from the everyday vernacular use of the term, means not only something that repeats but also something that might interrupt what has been repeated. If we look up at the etymology of the word, we learn that routine comes from the French word *route* (which is road in English) and means the act of following a well-known and habitual path, a mechanic way of operating, but also the '*Faculté de faire ou de connaître acquise par l'usage plus que par l'étude et les règles.*'<sup>26</sup>. This could be roughly translated in my words, as "*the capacity to know, acquired through use – or practice – rather than the studying of the theory and the rules.*" And it is in fact on the level of practice (or better *praxis*) that Unger's theory elaborates a way to reframe routine as involved with change.

We should start by understanding how these routines are established within a particular social context, since once they are established people come to believe that these are obvious, necessary and part of the natural order. However - as we now know – once we see this natural order as the result of an arbitrary choice and as human-made, we could start seeing these routines as "*routine(s) without reason*" (Sunstein, 1986 p. 871). To be more specific, these routines actually do have a reason as they play the key role to ensure that the mechanism of iteration works – whilst also ensuring that change can happen. Iteration, in fact, as we have seen before (*cfr Section 5.2.1*), is according to Emirbayer and Mische (1998) the mechanism that ensures the sense of identity of the social actors. Quoting the authors again these patterns of iteration – these routines – “give stability and continuity to action, the sense that “*I can do it again*”, as well as “*trust*” that others will also act in predictable ways.” (1998, p. 980). This, as we have seen, is a fundamental pattern to build the sense of the subject both individually and

<sup>26</sup> Retrieved from the online dictionary Littré on June 2019 <https://www.littre.org/definition/routine>

collectively. But routines can also help us explaining change, which in Unger, similarly to Castoriadis, is understood as being not just possible but something that will happen; although Unger says – again like Castoriadis - that this will not happen through a sudden revolution but instead cumulatively and through the routinely replacement of one social arrangement with another.

A praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination could perform the task of disentanglement – as we have just defined this before – by transforming ‘*context-preserving routines*’, into ‘*context-transforming routines*’. Let me be more clear. Context-*preserving* routines are routines – like specific modes of economic exchange, societal rituals – that aim at reinforcing the imaginative assumptions of certain modes of social life, so that these can be believed to be the only one that are possible and taken for granted: “*Each formative context not only reproduces certain routines but also makes certain trajectories of context change more accessible than others. Much happens just because of what happened before (...).*” (Unger, 2001 p. 36). The second mode, the context-*transforming* routines, describes ways in which transformation might arise, not by addressing the big struggles of society, but by leveraging the everyday small conflicts that we can find in any social arrangements.

Interestingly I found the relationship between routines and design – especially in its more social and activist forms - to be perhaps under-theorised, since little is known about how to employ artefacts or design tactics to intentionally influence routine dynamics (Glaser, 2017). The sparse literature I could find was coming from other fields of design like organisational design (Steinberger and Jung, 2019, Glaser, 2017) and industrial design (Wegener *et al*, 2019). We learn from this literature that “*Artifacts play three central roles in routine dynamics: they create affordances and constraints for organizational actors, they “encode the intentions of managers or designers,” and they “participate as actors that take actions”* (Glaser, 2017). We also learn that scholars have now come to develop a more sophisticated understanding of routines as not “*static, mindless and rigid repetitions of activities*” (Wegener *et al*, 2019 p. 1256) – like in the design of checklists and procedures to be followed – but to consider how ‘alive’ routines can be (Cohen, 2007). Most of the studies on design and routines have focused either on how to enforce routines,

and more recently on how routines change. What I am proposing, is for design to learn about routines of a very different nature, routines that can make change happen.

Unger argues that one of the fundamental problems which derives from the routinized character of political life is that processes of "fighting" and "conflict" tend to be excluded, downplayed or simply overlooked, since these generate friction in the oiled machine of the routines. These conflicts might not be about putting into question the system overall, but they might escalate over time, and therefore they carry in them an incredible potential for transformation. I suggest therefore that possible design tactics for designing these routines that promote change should be developed, which look into how routines can make conflicts visible rather than hidden. Answers to this question might come from a new reading of the well-known tactics and theories of critical and activist design (Di Salvo, 2012, Fuad-Luke, 2009 and others), developed within agonistic theories of democracy (Mouffe, 2013), through the lens of *routines*<sup>27</sup>.

In addition to these tactics, I would like here to propose a novel approach and suggest the methodology I used in this research as an original mode for developing context *transforming* routines. The whole methodological device, which I have described in Chapter 2, of allowing non-designers to appropriate and perform the design work could in fact be helpful in at least two ways: through the structure and the rigorous method (one could say the *routine*) of the design process itself and through its inherent mode of reflexivity. This is a proposal that I can here only briefly sketch and that would need further exploration.

This idea of considering the design process as a *routine* (a context transforming one), came to me from what became one of the most common comments I received many times, when I was introducing design into third-sector organisations: they loved its structure and its process<sup>28</sup>. Although I initially found this comment to be perhaps counterintuitive (for a creative practice) and slightly frustrating, it occurred to me after some time that this was perhaps a hidden value of the

<sup>27</sup> Di Salvo for instance talks in his book (2012) about the three tactics of: revealing hegemony, reconfiguring the remainder or articulating collectives. I argue here that it might be productive to read and re-elaborate these tactics through the lens of routines.

<sup>28</sup> I found this theme also in K.'s interview - which I have shared before - where she also made a similar point: "I always say, service design I absolutely love it, I am quite process driven and this gives me a pretty nice process to follow while also allowing me to explore all the different options."

practice, something that could be further explored in light of this idea of ‘context transforming routines’. If I look back at my field-work - and also at previous experiences of introducing design to non-designers – what participants found especially valuable were in fact the rigorous process of design, the modularity of it (which still allowed for experimentation) and the reflexivity. Considering design as a routine for transformation would therefore highlight the value of the *process* – which emerged strongly as a reassuring and effective element of the practice – together with its capacity to maintain an experimental trait. In the words from K. again “*this gives me a pretty nice process to follow while also allowing me to explore all the different options.*”. Moreover – I would like to argue - the modularity of design allows for it to be easily routinized, as once one performs it this becomes easier to perform again. This is particularly important – and also true, as I had the opportunity to observe – for non-designers, as the routinized element is what makes design accessible and what makes it transformative at the same time. Once one becomes used to the practice and grows in her confidence of using it (as my field-work demonstrates), one can in fact appropriate it and change it as well: staff for instance appropriated and changed the training I did with other members of staff and for new projects: residents got engaged in new community initiatives, using the skills they learnt from design, to do further local enquiry; also managers and staff appropriated the reflective part of design introducing it in both projects and for all participants (also external partners were sometimes invited to join the reflective sessions).

I therefore suggest that a praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination should be focused to explore the role of design to shape routines that *make* change (starting by analysing its own process first, as a model of context transforming routine). Maybe an example here could help to clarify.

As we saw before (*cfr p. 205*) even small episodes of people taking action (e.g. whether to complain about the delay of a service, whether to organise a fundraising event, or simply to set up a mums’ circle for peer-support) can be significant for future mobilisation, when those who mobilise reflect on the impact of them taking action, whether this was successful or not. The role of reflection to be able to change a routine has been already emphasised (Wegener *et al*, 2019), as

those involved in local actions would need to be able to step-back from their everyday actions, in order to look at these from a distance. Reflection, both *on-* and *in* action (Schön, 1983) would allow for the performative aspect of routines to become more visible. With this intention, in project 1 we explored the use of a simple tool for mapping residents' routines, which was used by the co-researchers during the research phase (see Annex 8). The tool was used to visually map on a timeline residents' personal routines and the routines of the community. We used these maps and tables to engage in conversations on repeated actions, probing questions around which repeated actions were important, which ones were positive and to be continued, which ones might be negative and why we engage in them anyway.

The act of making visible these - usually invisible - routines was the first step to get the participants to stop and think about something that normally they might do without questioning and without full consciousness of their own actions. As they started engaging with concrete and everyday examples of their own routines as they currently were - rather than abstractly talking about them - participants began reflecting on their repeated actions and the underlying implicit assumptions for doing them. Some of the co-researchers also noted how the tool sparked interesting discussions and got them to reflect more consciously about their own routines as well.

By making explicit the pattern of these routines, why they happen, what they represent, how could they happen differently (some interviewee even tried to draw them), we were able to bring them to life. The aim of the exercise - which we repeated in two community events as a group exercise for the whole neighbourhood - was twofold: to make these routines visible first (and the object of reflection); and to try - through reflection - to make them appear as *routine without reason* (Sunstein, 1986 p. 871), which could therefore be repeated but also changed. Putting these *routines* -that both repeat themselves and change - at the centre of this praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination also allows us to appreciate the value of different temporalities in the process of change (as we saw in *Section 5.2.1*)

I am very aware that this new praxis of design that I am proposing would require

the development of new tools and modes of practicing. I also appreciate that the tactics and tools that I have briefly illustrated before are only drafts and sketches, which will need to be sharpened and much improved, before these could be put into use successfully. This mode of Design for the Radical Imagination – in the way in which I have developed it - is first and foremost an attitude and a theoretical stance, rather than a fully-fledged design method. In fact, I am also mindful – and the reader might agree – that the scope of this work and my background (my skills and knowledge) would not be best placed to develop these tools and tactics in great details. I hope what I have suggested could be enough to inspire others to carry out further research, in order to address many of the questions I have left unsolved. I will come back to these questions in the Conclusions.

As I have articulated so far, I am suggesting this Design for the Radical Imagination to have as its *object* the design of these ‘*routines for disentanglement*’. I intend this to be a novel object for design, as in the sense of a novel *kind* of object. I also intend these routines for disentanglement to be a *peculiar* kind of object for design, one that points back directly to the subject. This is not in the sense of Folkmann (2013), as we have encountered before (*cfr p. 150*), of looking at the object in order to get access to the meaning that this acquires in the subject; but more in the understanding of James Leach (*cfr p. 173*) who intends the distribution of creativity to be linked to the distribution of agency (Leach 2004, p. 165), as to create is to make the creative subject existing. Within current economies of creativity this has been turned into the creation and re-creation of the self, where the only achievement of the creative endeavour is the self-fulfilment of the individual. But as Leach (together with Reckwitz) tells us, what comes out of this self-creative process is a specific *kind* of individual – politically apathetic, competitive, self-entrepreneurial – which could not be more distant from the collective creative subject of Castoriadis. When I talk about a praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination that produces an object, which points back at the subject, I intend the object to be the critique of the institutional fetishism, and the subject to be the critical subject that, by becoming aware of the fetishism of social norms and institutions first, can develop an understanding of them as heteronomously



affirmed later, in order to start perceiving herself as the critic and the designer of new and more equal ones.

This is the intuition from the Greek-French philosopher that more than others has inspired this work, as I embarked in my research endeavour to explore the role of creativity and imagination *for* the formation of the autonomous and democratic subject. Saying that design should focus on designing routines for disentanglement simply equates to say that design should be about designing the political subject.

### 6.3) *Against Heteronomous Design*

In a recently re-published article on “*Design and Democracy*” (originally published in a Design Issues of 2006), Guy Bonsiepe argued for democracy to ultimately be about the state of reduction of heteronomy (Bonsiepe, 2019 p. 61) and for design - depending on its intentions - to be able to pursue both, the project of autonomy or that of heteronomy. In order to illustrate the necessity to reduce heteronomy, Bonsiepe makes the case for what he calls *design humanism* (2019, p. 62), which is a practice of design that aims at developing viable emancipatory proposals for specific social groups. Why and in what way *emancipatory*? In the author’s words: “*Because humanism implies the reduction of domination. In the field of design it means to focus also on the excluded, the discriminated, and economically less favoured groups as they are called in economist jargon, which amounts to the majority of the population of this planet.*” (2019, p. 62). Although I would agree in general terms with Bonsiepe’s position on design and democracy, I do not believe that for design to operate in emancipatory way it would be enough to “*focus on the excluded*”. As I have demonstrated in this monograph, I would argue that this vision of design humanism – which does things *to* people - would simply substitute one heteronomous will with another. Despite its inherent benevolence, therefore, this mode of design might end up achieving precisely the opposite of what it aims to achieve. I believe this ambivalence to be very much part of the essence of design which could be understood as a ‘*double-headed monster*’ - as we have encountered before – one side powerful and progressive and the other side dangerous and potentially conservative (*cfr p. 12*), one side operating for and from autonomy, the

other side profoundly heteronomous in itself.

It might be helpful here to give an example of how I see this power of design *for* and *from* autonomy through an illustration from my field-work, by sharing an episode that happened during one of the workshops I organised for project 1.

We were half-way through our design work as we organised a workshop with some of the co-researchers and the staff, together with the lead of a local community centre and a local commissioner for mental health services. The aim of the workshop was to present the findings from our research and World Café events and to start gathering ideas about possible actions for a more resilient community. It was towards the end of the workshop, during which we had been sharing thoughts about the importance of belonging to a 'community', what this meant for each of us, what made us feeling safe and what made us wanting to get involved in a group, when one of the co-researcher pronounced the following words: *'I've grown up in a deprived area. I have A grade. I don't have a degree... but that doesn't make me less able than anyone here to understand what we are talking about.'*, while she indicated with an ample gesture of her arm all the people in the room and around the table. This happened in a moment that I do not recall being particularly tense, and in a context in which, on the contrary, a lot of personal stories were shared by all the participants around the table, conditions were made to accommodate different points of view, and a space was built where perhaps it simply felt safe to voice more conflictual opinions. What this participant was doing, and I had the impression this was understood in the same vein by the others around the table as well, was not meant to be simply challenging other positions of power or privilege, but - I would say even more powerfully - to affirm one's own confidence in one's own voice and identity. Arguably this episode illustrates the journey of how the co-researcher – who had been much more silent in some of our first meetings – had come to the point of voicing loudly a quite strong, possibly controversial opinion in front of some external participants as well (one of them being a mental health commissioner, whose presence had made the rest of the staff quite silent and a little anxious).

As I have illustrated elsewhere (Pierri, 2018 p. 33) this attitude, although could never be designed, could be encouraged through a certain mode of design, which I

argue should be embraced by a Design for the Radical Imagination. This mode of design takes the shape of long-term and first hand engagement with participants, which in my field-work materialises into the appropriation of the research tools, the carrying out of the research, and through the participation to a series of dedicated workshops to which only the residents and internal staff were invited. This mode of working – as I have emphasised multiple times already – is a way to create a *safe space*<sup>29</sup> that can nurture people’s confidence of the design process itself, so that people can perform its rituals with increased familiarity, and – even more importantly - nurturing their confidence in themselves as *subjects*. During the time spent together in project 1, and through the listening and telling of the common stories across the neighbourhood, the residents in fact started developing an awareness that some of the issues that they individually encountered were actually not just another single story of the challenges of being a single mother or of having lost one’s job, but a common experience due to lack of services, cut of funding or punitive employment policies, which could have been otherwise. This process, I would argue, can be crucial to move the level of issue-formation from a personal perspective to a political one, by developing a sense of the collective “we” and the appreciation that certain social problems are also designed in the first place and could be designed differently (e.g. through more investment for supporting single mothers or more inclusive employment policies). But let me clarify this point even further with another example.

At least for project 1, the re-appropriated practice of inquiry (or as I should probably call this by now a *praxis* of inquiry) proved to be quite powerful in supporting the building of this intersubjective relationships and the sense of solidarity, since individuals could build discourses (or better imaginaries) about themselves, by listening and coming to terms with discourses about and from the *others*. Castoriadis says it clearly when he talks about how ‘*Athens cannot exist without Athenians (...), but Athenians are created only in and by Athens.*’ (Castoriadis, 1994c p. 149). Similarly, I would argue, project 1 made visible how the praxis of

<sup>29</sup> I borrow this term from the feminist movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s (Kenney 2001) as I believe this to be still a useful concept as a way to describe a space which aims at nurturing and growing people’s confidence: “*a site for negotiating difference and challenging oppression.*” (The Roestone Collective, 2014 p.1348).

inquiry was made by the residents, and made the residents at the same time, as participants felt at the same time connected and *connecting* through the act of researching their own community. Immediately at the end of the research phase, I had the opportunity to interview two of the co-researchers and I asked them to reflect on this experience. I wanted to understand from their own words how they felt about going out doing the interviews with people from their own neighbourhood. The ‘talking’, as they called the interviews, came out as a simple and very powerful act:

*‘Just actually meeting people I would have not normally come into contact with. Actually, finding out about their previous life. They have done so much in their previous life, that just wouldn’t come out in conversations. Stuff like that never does. And I think they liked being able to tell someone about it. And that that was not irrelevant, it was how they came to be themselves. And how their life could have taken a complete different path, if something different had happened, they had a different relationship or something like that, you know. It was good to meet people.’*

(Extract from an interview with one of the co-researchers)

In many other points from the interviews, the participants (who were at the same time residents and co-researchers) shared the surprise of noticing how people felt at ease talking about themselves:

*‘I just asked a few open-ended questions and it surprised me how much came out and how moved I felt by it. A lot of it was about hardship and struggling to make a living, making ends meet, coping with health issues and so on. I wasn’t expecting that I was going to have such a moving experience. (...) There must be things going on in people’s lives that you don’t know about until it’s too late.’*

(Extract from an interview with one of the co-researchers)

This experience of talking and (mainly) listening through the process of the interview was therefore not something that could have come up ‘*in a Café*’ as it was something of a different quality. Doing the research in one’s own community was perceived at the same time as based on the already existing proximity and common ground (the fact of being neighbours) and as building this proximity and common ground even more (as people get deeper into the sharing of their personal stories). Being from the same area was clearly perceived as a strength:

*“I think it did influence the dynamics, because they (the two people she interviewed) were both newish about the area and they knew I have been*

*here for longer, so I could tell them things about here. I think if you interview people you need to be from the area itself, I think. I do think you need to know the area, so when they say “down that road...” you can say “ah, I know...” and things like that. I think it’s important to relate to them. I’ve seen one of them again out and about and stuff like that, and I think about them whenever I get to drive and pass their houses. ‘Ah, we’ve talked’ and stuff like that...”*

(Extract from an interview with one of the co-researchers)

What this extract describes, is the importance of being able to genuinely *relate* to the people they interviewed based on their shared knowledge and common experience (‘when they say “down that road...” you can say “ah, I know...”’), but also shared interests and concerns:

*‘It’s great they made the time in the end, as they wanted to contribute to the wellbeing of the community, you know, they did want to get involved, like I can tell they did. They were not just not bothered. They had things to say about how we could change the area, what they’d like to see and things like that. That was encouraging. It made me think in what ways would I want to become involved in the community, what opportunities would I look for?’*

Another extract very well summarises what I am trying to get to:

*‘(...) I was just walking into their life, their everyday life, as they were like washing up, do the laundry and walk the dogs, like normal everyday life, which was quite good to see what that was like suddenly. That is a good sign that people are happy to welcome you into their home like that, in that situation and I think because I was a resident as well that’s why they found they were happy. If it was somebody coming from a corporate thing, coming in, like an independent interviewer, then it would be a different vibe but because I was from the area they liked it more, I think. I definitely feel they liked that. They definitely thought that I was personally interested, and in fact I actually was interested in their lives, whereas somebody that doesn’t come from here is just a company person, isn’t as interested as I am interested. But I am interested because I’ll be seeing them out and about and I’ll be participating in the activities they do as well, and they were saying you know ‘we would like to see this and this and this’, where I can be proactive and making it happen, and they will like that. Yeah, it was good.’*

(Extract from an interview with one of the co-researchers)

The listening, the caring, the trusting and above all, possibly, the *sharing* of a common space, common issues and common desires is what made the local research experience feeling overwhelmingly positive for our co-researchers. This practice of inquiring and researching one’s own community felt for the residents involved as both *connected*, with what they had in common, but at the same time

*connecting*, as the practice of ‘talking’ (and listening) reinforced the researchers’ own understanding of the value of the community, but also made them feel stronger in what they could do to make things happening in the community. This was possibly related to the fact that, as I have illustrated in Chapter 2, we built the research as a way to find out about activation, motivation and strengths in the neighbourhoods, about people’s dreams and desires, rather than researching the space of a problem, or a need (which is how traditionally design research would be built). So, when one of the participant was invited to reflect on this idea of strength and assets and what this meant for herself and the people she interviewed, she said:

*“Making me the person that was asking questions was quite good as well. And just feeling that I was a bit higher up than usual, you know that kind of thing. It was good.”*

And then later she added:

*“Because I know that I’ve got plenty to give. I am not stupid, I’ve got skills and things. I’d rather (prefer) they are recognised than just left by the way aside, as they usually are.”*

I also observed, during the long-time engagement with the participants during project 1, that arguably this activity had an impact beyond the time of the research itself. It was in fact like the timeframe of the research part (and its benefits) was possibly expanding and prolonging beyond the period of the actual interviews. People were in fact seeing each other ‘*out and about*’ again after the interview, they were participating in activities together, they were getting “*to drive and pass - each other’s - houses* and feel a sense of connection because they’ve *talked*, as one of the previous extracts highlighted.

Making the research part owned by the residents – I would therefore argue - not only allowed us to elicit meaningful stories of people’s struggles, desires and concerns, which we would have not been able perhaps to capture as external agents, but also reinforced the role of the co-researcher in their own communities, their confidence in themselves and ultimately their autonomy - in the sense that Castoriadis intended and which has to do with the capacity of asking *questions*, and of putting society into *question* (1994, p 152). For instance, I came to know only much later the end of the project that one of the co-researcher, a retired general practitioner that had recently, at the time of the project, moved with his wife in the

area we investigated, had accepted to take part in another research experiment to explore the neighbourhood, which ended up with a theatrical *mise en scène* of the stories emerged from the interviews (an idea which frankly I wish I had myself).

This is a very simple example of what I meant in the first pages of this monograph (*cfr p. 17*) where I framed my field-work as addressing not simply the questions of *affectedness* or of *relevance* of the public - although both issues were also present - but the political question of *Autonomy* instead. This question of *Autonomy* - I would argue - aims at building solidarity *within* the public and with others who have not experienced the same issues (so outside or maybe among publics), and is interested with the questions of action and justice as well. In other words, the question of *Autonomy* affirms that things do not always have to go the same way. Whereas Unger left us with the impression that “*Much happens just because of what happened before (...)*.” (Unger, 2001 p. 36), Castoriadis strongly rejects this determinism, and elaborates his theory of the role of creativity for the democratic life on an almost opposite belief: all happens because it has not happened before. What I found particularly interesting of Castoriadis theory of creative democracy is that in its formulation the value of creativity goes two-ways: citizens need creativity to imagine themselves and the democratic society they want to live in, but democracy needs creativity too, as the only way it can be kept alive is by the continuous renovation done by the individuals that are part of it, which takes the shape of both - as we have seen - an endless critique of the conditions of the social life, and a praxis of autonomy that aims at transforming those conditions.

My work and research - I believe - speaks to those designers who wants to seriously take part in the reduction of heteronomy to support local and so called ‘marginalised groups’ - the *excluded* of which Bonsiepe talks about. It intends to function as a reminder for designers of the risk of becoming yet another expert, who knows how to help people to solve their problems. To these socially engaged designers I would suggest that perhaps even better than doing things to - or *with* - these ‘marginalised groups’, might be for them to work from *within* social institutions- in the ways I have illustrated before - where services and policies are made which could be made otherwise.

I want to address here – again - the design practitioner reader. I am very aware in fact that the material conditions in which she will find herself to perform the design role might not always be conducive to her own autonomy, as external conditions and constraints will get in the way of her practice. But I believe, even in these conditions when a Design for the Radical Imagination could not be fully performed, key practical steps could be taken, in order to shape one's own practice to be politically relevant and to be *for* and *from* autonomy. I have been thinking a lot about this myself, trying to imagine the new ways in which I would address my field-work now, if everything could start afresh again and I could bring with me the new knowledge. Here are some recommendations that I would first give to my-self and therefore I feel like sharing with others:

- First, I would always try make the design practice accessible to the people themselves, by allowing them to perform the design work through the re-distribution of the material – or at least of the social - means of research production. I would intend this practice of design *for* and *from* autonomy as designing the change from within - “*changing the way we change*” (Escobar, 2018 p. 172) - which could imply the defence of some traditional practices, the transformation of others and the re-invention of totally new ones. I would in fact appreciate that the maintenance and reproduction of what is already there is another mode of creativity, which uses creativity to re-assemble the given social conditions or creatively exploit them.
- Secondly, as I have learnt from my team of co-researchers and community workers, a renovated practice of design should not mirror the needs-based culture which is rooted in certain social services that seem to be justified by the existence of needs. I would be very aware of the power of representation that design exercise: when one develops explicit portraits of the people one works with, based on this language of needs, one is responsible of the damaging implications of reproducing certain images and self-perception. I would rather pay attention to build on what is already there and strong in the groups and communities where design is used (like we did through ABCD in project 1).
- Finally – as I should have made this fully clear by now – although I would think about my tools and the object of my design work, I would recognise the need to focus on the subject first, since if the subject is not there no object of design



could perform any tasks (like in project 2). I would therefore not ask myself *what* I would do, or *what* I would make, but *who* is there with me (and possibly where I am, in *my journey* to be the autonomous subject myself).

## Chapter 7 - *Done and to be done*: an attempt to conclude

*Modern constitutions begin with the declarations of rights, the first phrase of which is either theological or something similar: "Nature commands that..." or "God commands that..." or "We believe that all men were created equal." The last claim is false, in fact: equality is a creation of people, acting politically."*

(Castoriadis in Escobar *et al*, 2010 p. 125)

Conclusions should be a joy to write. They should be joyful to write – at least this is what I thought – as they represent the neat and complete summary of all the work done. Therefore, they should bring delight to the author, who managed to go through all the previous steps, in order to get to this ambitious and desired end. For me – as many others before me, I am sure - it has proven to be the most difficult and painful chapter to address, as I felt the uncomfortable task of stating that my work was closed, my questions answered, my objectives achieved – which I believe are not, or better they could have not been.

I have decided therefore to use this chapter instead to do three things as an attempt to conclude: 1) to remind myself and the reader of why this work was needed and why even more work is needed, as a result; 2) to attempt to summarise my findings which I intend to bring forward as my unique contribution to knowledge; 3) to present what I have done and what is still to be done<sup>30</sup>.

But before I dwell into this task, I would like to share some thoughts on my use of theory (or better I should say theories). My research interests are multiple and

<sup>30</sup> *'Done and to be done'* is the English translation of the conclusion chapter of the book *'Autonomie e l' auto-transformation de la société'* from Cornelius Castoriadis where he responds to some of the critiques that were raised to him by other authors and collaborators.

during the years of my doctoral work (and before) I have enjoyed reading extensively about the topics I was interested in. I read from design theory, political theory, anthropology, political philosophy, trespassing sometimes in psychology or even psychoanalysis (where, I have to admit, I did not feel very comfortable). This brought me to a quite eclectic way of writing and producing theory, which – alas – as a backdrop might lack at points a full internal coherence, as I have drawn on different authors and scholars, mobilised different disciplines and concepts. What keeps all this together is the central idea of *creative democracy* which I have elaborated from Cornelius Castoriadis (but also through the work, among others, of John Dewey and largely Roberto Mungabeira Unger). Whilst on one hand I am aware of the possible shortcomings of such an eclectic approach to theory, on the other I still believe that this was a toll to pay in order to work in a generative way, as I wanted to do. It is from the use of this *theoretical prism* – which I have built for myself – that I have been able to complement, expand and also critique, at points, the work of Castoriadis, which represents the central inspiration and guidance for my research.

In the attempt to mitigate the risk of a theory mash-up and to make the reading and understanding of my theory accessible, I have paid attention to always make clear the connections among the scholars and the concepts that I have used – when these connections could be easily drawn, or had perhaps been already drawn by others. I also hope that when these connections could not be made, as the thinking of two authors could be considered perhaps even contradictory, these frictions can be seen as productive, as I intended them.

### *7.1) Design and Democracy*

My doctoral work started from a personal concern about the conditions of our democracies in Western countries and specifically in Europe. What I saw when I started reflecting on this topic was, on one hand, a harsh critique of this mode of government suggesting it was perhaps outdated, and that it was time to move on to possible alternatives; on the other, a faith that our democratic habits were strong enough to protect us, so that we did not have to worry because the system had developed the antidotes to adapt and respond to the current challenges. I was not convinced by neither of these positions.

To respond to these ‘crises of democracy’ by turning to Cornelius Castoriadis – and for this matter to John Dewey as well, as the two scholars have on this issue a very similar approach – means to take a very clear political stance. First, this starts from the affirmation of a profound trust in the value of democracies and a belief in citizenship as a *creative act* and all citizens as creative agents (Cruz, 2014), as they keep pursuing *the imaginative work* of coping with the pessimism and cynicism of everyday big and small struggles. Secondly, this political stance is a call to action which moves from the understanding that democracies do not just perpetrate themselves mechanically, but they need to be practiced, challenged, re-invented again and again in order to be properly functioning democracies. In other words: “*democracy can be axial in resisting fascism, but only when it is being repeatedly re-designed to be resistant to fascism.*” (Tonkinwise, 2019), as we should never forget that fascisms are also the result of democracies and its monstrosity is still an act of creation (Castoriadis in Escobar *et al*, 2010 p. 107). Thirdly, the confidence that there can be no power, nor institutions, strong enough that it cannot be changed, as Castoriadis clearly tells us that “*Their power is nothing but the reverse side of people’s belief in that power*” (Castoriadis in Escobar *et al*, 2010 p. 116). Fourthly, the courage to be audacious (Misik, 2017 p. 117) and to believe that one can make a difference even by acting at the microscale of the events, where democracy is shaped in practice and change can be achieved *routinely*.

This microscale, as I have demonstrated, is the key level to engage with, for everyone who wants to understand, and then address, the crises of democracy first hand. The everyday, where people face their mundane small and big struggles, is in fact the political space *par excellence*, as we have seen with Castoriadis (and for this matter with Unger as well). We have learnt from the Greek-French philosopher that the revolutionary project extends to all sphere of social action, since politics is not the domain of revolutionary militants alone (Castoriadis, 1974 p. 29), and that even everyday routines can be way more radical than what they look like at first glance. Moreover, it is in the micro episodes of the everyday that we could see and understand how the humiliation of which I talked about in the Introduction builds and becomes rage.

*“What is humiliation after all? I would say that the meaning of the word ‘humiliation’ is linked with a form of renunciation, in which people are forced to become aware of their inability to fulfil their self-image. (...) You are*

*humiliated when you realise that your self-image is destroyed, denied by your real (every day – I would add) experience.”*

(Berardi Bifo, 2018 p. 13)

Castoriadis could not agree more with this extract, as he also poses the heteronomous subject as the humiliated and alienated subject. A subject that cannot see a role for herself – hence the renunciation, the in-action - as she cannot see herself anymore represented in society, and – even more importantly - could not see how this could be otherwise. This heteronomous and humiliated subject – I am suggesting - is ‘the people’ which we see nowadays ranting against immigration, while having been an immigrant themselves; shouting against the minorities, being a minority themselves; protesting against taxes, while receiving social services; voting for Brexit and hoping for a better yesterday, while they could have more opportunities and seen their rights better protected within a more just and inclusive Europe. Of course, I am not so naïve to not know that some of these people will vote in certain ways regardless, as they believe in certain ideas; but I also believe that these instances could not justify the decision to simply get rid of democracy anytime we do not like the results of the democratic engagement. I still hold strong in fact on what Castoriadis defines the cornerstone of democracy – as he takes it from ancient Greece – the *doxa*, the opinion of the people. The question becomes therefore – not whether we need less democracy as a result – but what *quality* of democracy we want and which principles and values we want a democratic government to embrace. There is no science – Castoriadis tells us - of what is good or what is bad for democracy but there are what collectives of people believe to be right or wrong in certain historical periods. What determines these – as I called them before - *horizons of possibilities* is the different social imaginaries that different societies make at different points in history. Once these social imaginaries are instituted in social forms and rules, as we have seen, they become reified (like the example of the Apollo of Delphi we encountered at page 36).

Understanding how these social imaginaries are framed and what role design is playing already in these framings (and what role it might play in the future) is therefore a key action for design to undertake, as this study has emphasised.

As Castoriadis puts it: “*We will never be able to save the people against its will; what we can do is give it the institutional means to correct itself if it made a mistake (...)*” (Castoriadis in Escobar *et al*, 2010 p. 126). This project could be considered a first attempt to imagine a different mode of design – a Design for the Radical Imagination – which could materialise those means to correct and improve our democratic life.

## 7.2) *Points of novelty*

I moved my first steps into this research with the intention to articulate what a creative practice of democracy might look like and I turned therefore to design (and its soft power of *creating* imaginaries) in order to explore the following questions:

- 1 How can people together use design autonomously as a tool to explore their local contexts and investigate their social conditions?
- 2 What are the design creative tactics, resources and methods that can best contribute to support people to be imaginative and radically re-think their local context?
- 3 How can these ways of using design autonomously help groups developing a sense of the ‘we’ and generate collective action?

I believe my field-work and research has provided me with the answers I was looking for, and which I have presented in this monograph. These answers are my unique and novel contribution to the existing knowledge in the field of design studies, which I believe might also prove of interest to other disciplines, and namely political theorists interested in articulating in practice the concept of political creativity for creative democracies. These are the following:

- To question 1: I have answered by articulating the process of re-distributing the social and material research resources, through the figure of the *para-designers*. This practice of inquiring and researching one’s own community (as described above in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) reinforced the co-researchers’ own understanding of the value of the *community*, but also

made them feel stronger in what they could do to make things happening in their local context.

- To question 2: I have answered by presenting first, a series of concrete methods I have developed and used in my fieldwork and which were inspired by Godelier' modes of the imagination (these are presented in more details in Annex 8); secondly - and through the challenges I faced during the field-work in the Gypsies and Travellers' site - I have demonstrated how creativity and imagination are not evenly possessed and mobilised, as some people might struggle to articulate their alternative visions, as they easily end up giving for granted the visions made by others about them.
- To question 3: I have responded by articulating a critique of more mainstream ways of understanding and practicing creativity - which are individualistic, focused on the new and the future, and do not facilitate the process of formation of the collective subject (the 'we of the imaginative act'). To this limited understanding of creativity, I have responded with the articulation of the ways in which creativity can be political and generate political acts (see Chapter 6 and *section 6.1*) for a definition of political creativity).

However, in the process of reading and analysing my data, other themes and findings also emerged, which I believe could likewise present elements of novelty, since they can contribute to the existing literature in design studies.

I move in the next paragraphs to briefly illustrate them.

First, I believe I have contributed to the literature on Design for making publics as one of the main design audience of this work, by articulating a vision (taken mainly from the work of Castoriadis) of how the public understands itself as a collective and what is the role for this process of building a shared *imaginary* that can motivate collective action. My thesis has in fact contributed to that literature by bringing a focus on the role of creativity (which was previously missing), and illustrating how this can operate in the formation of the political subject. I have in this monograph provided a new lens - through the work of Cornelius Castoriadis -

to understand how these *publics* build their imaginaries, and how imagination operates as an embodied faculty that is unevenly possessed.

Second, I have developed practice-led contributions that might be of interest to those designers who are involved in community work and social design practices. These contributions are multiples and related to different aspects of my research (e.g. the understanding of the social imagination, the emancipatory methodology of design for and from autonomy, the engagement methods, etc.) and they are illustrated at the end of each Chapter. I also believe my empirical work would be of use to those designers specifically involved in mental-health. To these designers might be of interest the articulation of the ethical concerns - which are so important in this field - as I have illustrated in *Section 2.2.1*, and the practical tools which were produced as a result of the design work I did collaboratively during my field-work (see the '*Keeping well wheel*' and the adapted '*5 Ways of wellbeing*' cards on p. 142 and 143). I believe the ABCD approach – its principles and its tools – as I have presented them above (see *Section 3.2*) could be inform asset-based design practice that aim at supporting good mental health and resilience. To the design practitioners I hope would also be of interest the tasks that I have described as being specific and unique of the Design for the Radical Imagination, and namely:

- The use of those tactics, which I have named for *disentrenchment*, which can be applied in the field of design for policy-making and by those designers (and there are many) employed as civil servants and in public bodies – like for instance the designing of clear and simple modes of revisions for every new services or policies that designers make; or the attempt to flatten hierarchies within the institutions and among all the actors involved in the design process; or by sharing, every time a new service or policy is designed, all the other options that were not designed as a consequence. These simple exercises – as I have articulated above (see p. 225) - would aim to unveil the simple but fundamental truth that every policy, service or institution can always be designed otherwise.
- The shaping of *routines for transformation* – being this a field in which designers have played a role already by creating those affordances and constraints that can build routines and routinized behaviours. The



challenge in this case, as I said before, would be to build routines that change and that can build change through moments of reflection (see the tool to map routines as described on p. 231).

Third, I believe I have contributed and expanded the current literature on creativity in design (building on the work of Folkmann, 2013, Julier and Moor, 2009, Lawson, 2005), and also provided a different understanding of creativity through my anthropology *by means of* design and by advancing new points of reference from anthropological and political literature. Through this work I have also articulated a novel critique to the mantra of creativity, like this is currently predicated in design, and presented my argument for why design should adopt instead what I have defined a *political creativity* approach, in order to have a role in supporting the renovation of our democratic institutions. On this theme, and through the work of Maurice Godelier, I have also provided a simple table that could inform better use of creative tools by designers (building on the ones I have shared in Annex 8).

Fourth, I have been building on the available design literature (from activism and design for politics) on the object-subject dyad (Thorpe, 2014; Keshavarz and Mazé, 2013, Fry, 2012) by foregrounding the importance for design to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of formation of the political subject, especially in its more activist or socially oriented practices. By sharing examples from my field-work, and especially reflecting on the difficulties we encountered in project 2, I have revealed how, in order to engage meaningfully with the participants, design should reflect not simply on the object but on the *subject*, which might not be there politically. I have built therefore the argument for how and why design could play a role in this area, and I have illustrated modes in which design practitioners could do so, mainly through the autonomous practice of design and the *praxis* of Design for the Radical Imagination.

Finally, I believe my practice has contributed a novel perspective and perhaps an additional contribution to existing knowledge on a methodological level as well. As illustrated in Chapter 2 (section 2.2) I started my research work from the assumption that in order to reach the project of autonomy I had to rethink the

ways in which design practice had been traditionally framed and understood. I therefore developed a methodology that allowed the people who were most impacted by the design work to become researchers themselves, as an act of re-appropriating the process of knowledge production. I argued at the opening of this monograph that this practice, inspired by the anthropological concept of the *para-ethnographer*, was also very much coherent with the tradition of emancipatory research practices and inspired by the main tenets of Castoriadis philosophy (his critique of hierarchy and of the role of the experts, the concept of autonomy and the importance of a revolutionary praxis).

More explicitly, I have tried with this work to trace the contours of what an emancipatory practice of Design Anthropology might look like and what challenges it will have to face on at least three levels. First, by reflecting on the ways in which to change the role of the researcher, by introducing the concept of *para-designer*, as I have described above. Secondly, by foregrounding the material conditions of the research endeavour, which include not just issues of control of the research process but also the control of the *resources* (which I understand to be monetary but also methodological). Finally, by addressing possible ways to re-shape the *social conditions* of research production by tackling the questions of accountability, of participants' involvement, and the perennial questions of the final shape and the audience of the research product itself. As I have described in Chapter 2, an emancipatory practice of DA will have to deal with all these issues.

I understand what I have done to be an instance of *prefigurative research* - as described by Haiven and Khasnabish (2014, p. 248) - which takes the task of imagining what research would look like in a different future and articulate its methods and tactics in the present. My work in this sense has developed - through a considerable amount of improvisation as well - a mode of design which does not fall in the exclusive domain of designers and design academics any longer, but that could happen outside of academia and/or design agencies in a *less* (arguably) hierarchical and exploitative framework. I have tried to use my power as researcher (a power that I cannot give away as we learnt in Chapter 2) to create new spaces for my participants to understand, reflect, discuss and put things into question.

### 7.3) *Done and to be done*

What I have just presented is the list of what I have done, but equally important is the list of what I have not done and what needs to be done next.

As I have described through my field-work notes (*cfr. Chapter 3*) things did not always go as planned (assuming they ever go). The first unplanned event, was the issues with staff-rotation in project 1 – as I remained towards the end of the activities one of the few in the team (with the exception of K.) who had stayed in the project from the beginning and had memories of what happened, what worked and what did not. This impacted negatively for instance on our capacity to build a long-term engagement with the co-researchers and other participants, and also hindered the possibility to hold knowledge about the project during its different phases, and benefit from a proper exercise of joint reflection. The interviews and meetings I held towards the end of the project or - in some cases - after the project had ended proved to be the most valuable space, at least for me, to make clarity, to check back and to reflect together. But that moment was inevitably undermined in its incredible power by the fact that I did not manage to gather the staff perspective from everyone who was involved in the project to reflect together on the process as a whole, and the majority of those I engaged with (with the exception of K.) were not there from the beginning. This had repercussions also on the level of the co-researchers, since they lost important points of contacts and relationships that they had established with the staff (as these members of staff were the community builder who were hanging out in the neighbourhoods the most); as a result of this, some of the contacts that were made at the beginning with these residents /co-researchers got lost when some members of the staff left. This just reminded me, if it was ever needed, that real people and real relationships are what these design interventions in the social sector are all about, and how fragile these can become when in time of austerity job retention in the sector decreases significantly.

The second thing that I have ‘not done’ is to be able to have a second iteration trying to apply in practice the tactics and theory that I have produced, as a result of my field-work. Most of the final theorising and the elaboration of my contribution

to knowledge, in fact, happened once the projects were already finished, which did not allow me to complete the final part of my learning cycle and go from theory back to practice again (although I did this in small iterations all along the projects). This was definitely the case for project 2, as this was only 12 months long and, for the reasons I have described, a particularly complex project. These two things together inevitably impacted on my capacity to possibly test some of the ideas and tactics in practice.

The third thing that I regret is that I was not able to share my thoughts and insights with the rest of the team as the final theory emerged in isolation and when I was not in the field-work anymore. From the point of view of the organisation and the members of staff, both projects were in fact already closed (project 1 closed in December 2018 and project 2 in August 2018) by the time I was able to develop something of value that could be shared with them. Since the last few months I have made attempts to engage with the staff again after the end of the projects, and a couple of members of staff have been reaching out to me directly (one to get advice on whether or not to apply for a service designer position in another charity; another one to tell me that she had got a new position thanks to her knowledge of design processes; the last to ask me for where to find more information about design in social sector as they were preparing a new Grant application). Despite my offers to discuss my findings with them or for some of them to join me in presenting the work externally, as I have described before (*cfr Section 2.2*), I did not encounter much interest in what I had been doing on my research (and this is probably understandable). The fact that most of the staff involved had also moved on to new jobs and opportunities made the rest.

In the attempt to critically reflect on what I did, my ambitions and failures to move towards more democratic and collaborative knowledge production, I turn again to the work of Julia Janes on Community-based participatory research (2015) to think about what I have not done, as her reflections deeply resonate with mine. Like her, for instance, I was also trying to embed emancipatory and collaborative research approaches in a PhD programme, which in itself cannot do justice to the collaborative ethos. I also felt at times, as she did, that I was '*pimping the poor*'

(2015, p. 4), or that I was also caught in the slippery practice of ‘claiming the authenticity’ of community knowledge and the ‘giving voice’ to marginalised communities (idem, p. 8). Like Janes, I also felt I could not resist ‘*the urge to speak for others*’ (idem, p. 6), by falling in the trap of producing research that was neither emancipatory nor empowering, but perhaps just another PhD work that was born in academia, and gets back to academia, leaving in the field just the crumbs. I do not believe there is an easy answer or solution to these critical questions.

These and more critical questions rest in fact open at the end of this endeavour and further research will be needed to explore among others, the following lines of inquiry for design research:

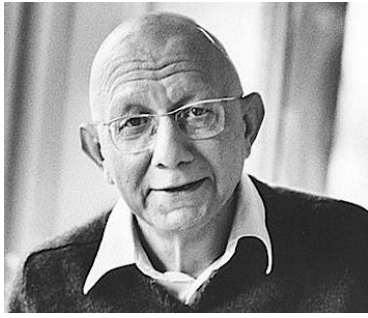
- On the level of the translation into practice: more research will be needed to develop a full repertoire of tactics and tools that could work for a praxis of Design for the Radical Imagination. This research should ensure that these tactics and methods could benefit from fields outside of design as well, by ensuring a true multidisciplinary and diversity of approaches.
- On the level of the versatility and transferability to other areas: further research would have to investigate how other groups (of non-designers and professional designers) could use this approach both in design and non/design contexts to question how institutions and policies are made and imagine possible alternatives. This line of research would prove particularly interesting for those design practice and studies that focus on the field of design for public services and for policy making.
- On the level of design practice and education: new studies will have to explore how could the approach of the Design for the Radical Imagination and its tactics be best introduced to designers, also through revised design education programmes. Through this line of research the implications of these new approach on current design ideologies and beliefs could also be explored.
- Finally, on the level of the emancipatory methodology itself - I believe - many questions remain unanswered which include: how would this methodology impact on the long-term political engagement of those involved? What role could designers play in this new approach and what

values and ideologies should they embed in order to practice a Design for the Radical Imagination?

Mostly, as my work has for the first time introduced the thinking of Cornelius Castoriadis within design, I am interested and excited to see how his powerful ideas and modes of praxis would resonate and be taken on board in design (both in its theoretical and practical implications).

I am very aware that by addressing the ambitious topic of democracy and the political subject, and by bringing all these theories into conversation with one another, I cannot claim this work to be exhaustive of any of the authors I have drawn on. Not even of the one author who should be considered the main contributor to my research, which is the Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. As much as I have enjoyed the close reading of his work, I will not claim in fact to have now become a scholar of his thinking as there is so much more to explore in his writing which I have not even started touching upon. For now, I wanted to put the work of Cornelius Castoriadis on the map of design scholars and if I have somehow managed to do this thing – even if I have just aroused a little curiosity from you as the reader of this work – I feel I have at least achieved something. For myself, I can only say that I will definitely continue in the following years to engage with his vast and complex *oeuvre* and explore his philosophy.

To conclude I would like, if you allow me, to finish this manuscript with a long quote from ‘The Imaginary Institution of Society’, as a final reminder of where I started from, why I felt it was important, and where I wanted to go with this project, which I feel I have only initiated here, of rethinking design for the formation of the autonomous subject:



*"I desire and I feel the need to live in a society other than the one surrounding me. Like most people, I can live in this one and adapt to it - at any rate, I do live in it. However critically I may try to look at myself, neither my capacity for adaptation, nor my assimilation of reality seems to me to be inferior to the sociological average. I am not asking for immortality, ubiquity or omniscience. I am not asking society to 'give me happiness'; I know that this is not a ration that can be handed out by City Hall or my*

*neighbourhood Workers' Council and that, if this thing exists, I have to make it for myself, tailored to my own needs (...).*

*In life, however, as it comes to me and to others, I run up against a lot of unacceptable things; I say that they are not inevitable and that they stem from the organization of society. I desire, and I ask, first of all that my work be meaningful, that I may approve what it is used for and the way in which it is done, that it allow me genuinely to expand myself, to make use of my faculties and at the same time to enrich and develop myself. And I say that this is possible, with a different organization of society, possible for me and for everyone. I say that it would already be a basic change in this direction if I were allowed to decide, together with everyone else, what I had to do and, with my fellow workers, how to do it.*

*I should like, together with everyone else, to know what is going on in society, to control the extent and the quality of the information I receive. I ask to be able to participate directly in all the social decisions that may affect my existence, or the general course of the world in which I live. I do not accept the fact that my lot is decided, day after day, by people whose projects are hostile to me or simply unknown to me, and for whom we, that is I and everyone else, are only numbers in a general plan or pawns on a chess board, and that, ultimately, my life and my death are in the hands of people whom I know to be, necessarily, blind.*

*I know perfectly well that realizing another social organization, and the life it would imply, would by no means be simple, that difficult problems would arise at every step. (...) Even if I and the others should fail along this path, I prefer failure in a meaningful attempt to a state that falls short of either failure or non-failure, and which is merely ridiculous. (...) I want the other to be free, for my freedom begins where the other's freedom begins, and, all alone, I can at best be merely 'virtuous in misfortune'. I do not count on people changing into angels, nor on their souls becoming as pure as mountain lakes - which, moreover, I have always found deeply boring. But I know how much present culture aggravates and exasperates their difficulty to be and to be with others, and I see that it multiplies to infinity the obstacles placed in the way of their freedom."*

Castoriadis (1987, pp. 91-2)

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