Meeting Your Neighbor For Another First Time: The Work of Second- order Reflexivity in Communication During the COVID-19 Emergency in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This piece acknowledges the role that a capacity for second-order reflexivity plays in communication—specifically after the latter has been disturbed by the need to adopt hygienic measures in social contact to face the COVID-19 medical emergency. After the Italian government issued recommendations for halting contagion, gestures (hugging, kissing, leaning in) that would customarily enter the fold of communication no longer remained available, generating interruptions. Interruptions challenge the continuation of the social milieus in which we participate most intensely—friendships, family relations, civil society—and engender a risk of loss of agency. Autoethnographic vignettes of micro-interactions in which participants negotiate interruptions due to the hygienic measures point to a crucial role played by the capacity for second-order reflexivity. This capacity sustains the work of orienting oneself and others to the difficulties that interrupt joint action, and of re-inviting cooperation in the co-construction of a shared world. In so doing, reflexivity constitutes an important frontier

of capacity building, for increasing the resilience of our social worlds in the face of disruptive events. [Keywords: Reflexivity, social construction, agency, capacity building, COVID-19]

I am sitting in my living room, in the city of Turin, Italy. The previous ten days have been accompanied by mounting fears around the spread of COVID-19 in the north of the country, and were punctuated by regular bulletins of new contagions, deaths, and healed patients (Wu Ming 2020). In the attempt to stymie the wave of contagion, the Italian government issued Law-Decree of March 8, 2020, n. 11, which established a “quarantine” regime, including restricted freedom of movement in the initial out-break areas—later extended to the whole territory of Italy the following day, through Law-Decree 9 March 2020, n. 14.

The initial piece of legislation (Law-Decree of March 8, 2020, n. 11) carried an attachment, detailing a number of “hygienic measures” that citizens were encouraged to adopt, in order to help reduce the risk of contagion. Below is my own translation from Italian:

- a) Washing hands often. It is advisable to make available in all public buildings, gyms, supermarkets, pharmacies, and other spaces where gatherings occur, alcohol-based solutions for hand-washing;
- b) Avoiding close contact with people suffering from acute respiratory infections;
- c) Avoiding hugs and handshakes;
- d) Keeping, in social contact, a distance between people of at least one meter;
- e) Practicing respiratory hygiene (sneezing and/or coughing in a handkerchief in order to avoid hand contact with respiratory secretions);
- f) Avoiding the promiscuous use of bottles and glasses, especially during physical activity;
- g) Refraining from touching eyes, nose, and mouth with one’s hands;
- h) Covering the nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing.

The above measures—especially b, c, and d—constitute a last-ditch attempt, driven by an emergency situation, to regulate the micro-gestures that spontaneously occur in the tumultuous flow of interpersonal communication (gesturing, touching, leaning in).

This piece reflects on the work of sustaining one's social world—an easily overlooked avenue of activism at trying times—when hygienic measures concerning proximity and distance forcefully enter the fold of human communication. It reveals the centrality of the second-order ability to draw others' attention to new circumstances affecting participants—but for which words may still be lacking.

Noticing the Rising and Falling of Organization

I draw on vignettes of conversations to which I have been a participant in the early days after the new hygienic measures were disseminated, as people tried awkwardly to adjust. This method bears vicinity to auto-ethnography (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011), where the researcher's personal experience becomes an opening into the work of world-making that is always, perforce, undertaken alongside others.

Use of small scenes from personal experience was not especially mandated by the emergency situation. Instead, it embodies a precise methodological option. "Vignettes" featuring the researcher's own experience are useful for approaching the phenomenon of human organization—not as a pre-existing structure to be uncovered¹—but as an *event* that bubbles up temporarily, before falling away again. In this respect, my contribution rejoins other voices in the phenomenological tradition in anthropology (Ingold 2012, 2017) and communication studies (Shotter 2011).

"Vignettes" are best approached as a tuning fork (Shotter 2017). They are not to be seen as re-presentations of already worked out patterns or structures that exist in the world apart from language. Rather, they act like prompts to *cultivate attunement* to the transitions that our social worlds undergo: they train the ear, rather than categorize the music.

A possible reading of the vignettes to follow might also be as examples of the "second-order" (meta-pragmatic) task of re-negotiating social expectations in communication (Silverstein 1993), in the wake of an interruptive, pandemic event. However, this reading calls for a *caveat*. I rely on a performative/expressive—and not merely representational—view of language, of which the below passage by Merleau-Ponty provides a flavor:

Expressive speech does not simply choose a sign for an already defined signification...It gropes around for a significative intention which is not guided by any text, and which is precisely in the process of writing the text. (1964:46)

On this view, social worlds are not autonomous from the communicative work that brings them into existence.² If social worlds are communicatively sustained, then reflexivity cannot be solely a rhetorical technique, but constitutes a veritable capacity for world-making (Spinoza, Flores, and Dreyfus 1995).

Renegotiating Proximity and Distance

The hygienic measures recommended by the Italian government are a reminder of an uncomfortable new presence amidst us: SARS-CoV-2 and the disease it causes, COVID-19. SARS-CoV-2 is a virus whose strongest asset is its relative novelty to the scientific community (MacGregor 2020), so that uncertainty enduringly reigns around, for example, the exact conditions in social contact that facilitate its spread from person to person. In a polemic piece, Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben (2020) laments the confusing recommendations that made the rounds in the news: “it is necessary to keep a distance that according to some ought to be one meter, but which the latest suggestions from so-called experts place at 4.5 meters (interesting to note those 50 centimeters!).” COVID-19 introduces an uncomfortable unknown in human communication.

The negotiation of personal proximity and distance under the shadow of COVID-19 is thorny business indeed. A babel of differing assessments of what behavior is “cautious enough” reverberate in confused inward monologues that do not always issue in explicit conversations between people. Moreover, hygienic demands placed on gestures that commonly accompany communication with those closest to us unsettle the ability to move within our social worlds, as we habitually would. Misunderstandings re-surface, because of the need to refrain from familiar gestures (hugging, kissing), or to keep a distance when it isn’t something one would usually do in a convivial situation.

It is easy to feel under-resourced before the task of renegotiating boundaries in the presence of fear and an unknown pathogen. A possible response is therefore to choose avoidance. To isolate oneself from

those situations in which differing assessments might surface around what “cautious” means to different people. Shying away from meeting a changing reality, one also inhabited by COVID-19, is like falling into some sort of catatonic silence (Ercolani 2010). The work of revisiting proximity and distance in the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic is in all likelihood unavoidable—at least in the near future. Still, the moment this manner of difficulty is first encountered one easily feels dis-abled—unable to respond. Perullo has a poignant way of capturing the appearance of one such challenging passage in communication:

[A] violent and unforeseen act might immobilize one who doesn’t have the capacity and creativity to correspond immediately to the situation, routing it along a different path. (2017:44)

The difficulty of conjuring anew our communicatively sustained worlds, in the wake of interruption, stems from the arduousness of the “second-order” task of advancing communication in uncertain territory (beyond the “first-order” task of moving within the boundaries of our linguistic reach)—for instance, when the use of commonplace gestures in human communication are “quarantined” by an overlapping medical codification.

In response to the hygienic measures, Agamben (2020) proclaims “our neighbor has been abolished.” A “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) can well feel, in its suddenness, as an unmitigated discontinuity. At the same time, I side with Arendt (1958) in wanting to explore ways in which openings for agency might be found, even in the face of such discontinuities. The renegotiation of proximity and distance forced by the COVID-19 hygienic measures does spell an end to many situations occurring in communication, as we know them. However, work remains possible to renegotiate proximity and distance for another first time.

This work relies on the capacity to point to features of a jointly experienced situation that are unusual or unexpected, to try naming them, to convey them to another—in such a way that they too might notice these puzzling aspects in the jointly experienced scene. And, ultimately, to advance an invitation to take action together, in response to those problematic features. In the absence of such work, interruptions in communication only produce its collapse—threatening the capacity to act collaboratively in unexpected situations.

Greeting: Acknowledging an Other

Greetings are the first form of communication disrupted by the new hygienic measures. These familiar gestures help negotiate the awkward beginnings of encounter—when they're unavailable, the awkwardness quickly surfaces again in its unmitigated ambiguity:

Renate goes over her first COVID-19 impasse with me: she comes face to face with a friend, without being able to hug or shake hands, and ends up staying still. Together, they experience the intensity of looking into each other's eyes. She reports that gestures to lessen the edge did not seem available to them both, in the moment.

Greetings respond to this ambiguity, by distinguishing proximities and distances between participants. In my experience, hugging suggests close friendship; greeting by kissing on the cheek implies a tad more distance. Handshakes create an atmosphere of formality. Waving without touching—when one is within a step or two of another—leaves a gap between participants: such as when being introduced for the first time to a friend's boyfriend or girlfriend, whom one hasn't met previously.

Shortly after the enactment of new COVID-19 hygienic measures, an ambiguous sense of anticipation surges as I meet friends on a sidewalk. It's a Saturday morning. The sidewalk isn't wide enough to keep a "minimum distance" between us. Also, neither of us seems to notice how we simply step towards one another to "mingle." At this point, bodies have already come "too" close. I imaginatively picture myself waving "coldly" to each friend. In the moment, I am unable to call up a less extreme alternative. Waving would be like taking a sudden step back, once we're already so close. I am not sure how else to negotiate this, and neither are my friends. We "automatically" hug, yet we nervously acknowledge our discomfort through monosyllabic sounds—such as "oh" and "eh." Distance lingers as an afterthought.

Some days later, I am visited by Angelo, a friend. On that occasion, something different occurs.

Angelo comes through the entrance door I left ajar for him when he buzzed. I wait for him at the opposite end of the living room, and

name the awkwardness of greeting without touching, and of eating together at opposite ends of a rectangular kitchen table (usually we sit together around the same corner). “Joga bonito!”—I say—as I propose a greeting, playfully. Little finger and thumb outstretched, three middle fingers folded towards the palm, fist in shaking motion—a memory from my teens, of footballer Ronaldinho waving like this in a YouTube video. I accompany the hand motion with a nervous, inquiring smile. I have a sense that Angelo picks up on my tentative proposal for greeting familiarly, otherwise than hugging—he smiles back.

In this second vignette, unlike the one before it, I noticed myself moving beyond simply “going through the motions” of greeting as usual. Our brief exchange made it possible to acknowledge that a different form of proximity (friendly, but no-touch) was being *proposed*, and made possible through a different gesture. It drew attention to the lack of availability of customary gestures like hugging and, in so doing, obliquely acknowledged—with a “nervous, inquiring smile”—the uncomfortable presence that made such changes necessary. In this sense, the “joga bonito” greeting was an attempted response to the reality of hygienic measures, bringing an acknowledgement of changed circumstances alongside a proposal for going on together.

Hanging Out: Dwelling in Proximity

The requirement to keep a minimum distance between people underpins this second set of vignettes, concerned with personal distance and proximity.

A friend asks on the phone to eat something together. I am unsure how to respond. Eating out means being close. Doesn’t the recommendation to keep a distance in social contact apply to precisely one such situation? Yet saying “no” skirts dangerously close to denying proximity to a friend at a time of need. So, I say “yes”—on the phone. In the days following, I refrain from pursuing our appointment further. I end up not calling this friend again. My silence gets reciprocated.

Different friend, similar occasion and impasse:

Rada tells me she's been invited out by a friend of hers. She feels torn between the alternative of behaving as if the risk of contagion wasn't present—and who knows, it might—and not being recognized were she to bring up her concern. She feels her only way out is to make an excuse, by saying she's not feeling so well.

In the first scene, I was unable—in the moment—to make an alternative suggestion to “hanging out” as usual, in ways that would not result in disregarding the hygienic measures. This inability manifests as a sense of unease and discomfort, it does not progress further into speech. The second scene provides a sense that this difficulty besets social contact by confronting people with apparent all-or-nothing alternatives that block the possibility of further exploration between them.

This ambivalent predicament isn't just mine, or Rada's. The government has coined a slogan—*#iostoacasa* (“I stay at home”)—as an invitation for people to stay at home and *not* “hang out” together. *#iostoacasa* is one way of dealing with the admittedly thorny task of negotiating personal proximity and distance for another first time. The way it does so is by removing the very occasions in which excessive proximity might become a topic of shared exploration. This does make some sense in an emergency: at times of urgency, it takes work (and time) to acknowledge and engage people's personal and social capacities to reflect in the moment, against the grain of rapidly changing circumstances. Still, this strategy comes at the cost of an increased loss of agency. The cost of not meeting the work of engaging a problem so pervasive as COVID-19—by teasing out its minute interpersonal reverberations with those immediately around us—is slowly to relinquish one's ability to respond. This is the risk that the journalist collective, Wu Ming, points to in the excerpt below:

All regulations—closure of educational and worship facilities, then of workplaces, then of entire provinces and finally, in a *crescendo* of panic, of the entire nation—were radical and generic, and poisoned social life, by spreading fear of one's neighbor, suspicion towards human relations, the desire for further security measures. (Wu Ming 2020)

The suspicion lamented by the Wu Ming collective also resonates—less towards others, and more towards the government—in the defiant mood lurking in other conversations with friends, where the “hygienic measures” are treated half-jokingly as nearly arbitrary governmental impositions, therefore almost deserving of trespass. I would personally agree that the depth of the crisis in Italy might be the outcome of a stealth underfunding of public healthcare and a move towards the privatization of essential services (Wu Ming 2020). Still, I am reluctant to erase the contagiousness of COVID-19 completely from view in making sense of the quarantine and the “hygienic measures” accompanying it.

I wonder whether “insubordination” becomes appealing at such times, because it affords a grip on a sense of agency—agency against “authorities”—upon casting the COVID-19 emergency through the binary lens of submission and domination (Benjamin 1988). Might there not be a different form of agency that unfolds through the uncertain and painstaking work of trying to parse with others—in *the moment*—the changing contours of a jointly experienced world? The following scene is an attempt to sketch that possibility.

A few days later, another friend makes a similar suggestion to meet. This time, I am able to voice my concern that, perhaps, not “hanging out” for a period is a way of showing care at the height of an epidemic—by isolating a close acquaintance from the risk of contagion. In the same conversation, I find myself suggesting that we call each other more often instead. Frequency of telephone contact begins to emerge as a possible response to the unease around “hanging out” in usual ways. In that conversation, my friend also voices a suggestion to go outside “while keeping a distance.” However, I mention I feel inwardly reluctant, as I have begun to notice how difficult I find it not to lean closer as I listen to another, or as I speak with them.

Conversations occur with the whole body, and shifting one’s position relative to another is a way of accompanying movement in the conversation (e.g., leaning back when one is not understanding or feeling capable to engage). There is an informal spontaneity—what Shotter (2004) called “spontaneous responsiveness”—in communication, which it is impossible conclusively to regulate. In the words of legal scholar Shawn Bayern: “Efforts to formalize the informal ordinarily fail—or, as the computer scientist Alan

Perlis once said, ‘One can’t proceed from the informal to the formal by formal means’” (2009:174, quoting Perlis 1982). Hence, something is invariably hindered in having to restrain movement for the sake of compliance with hygienic measures.

Still, being able to draw attention also to *these* challenging features of the post-COVID-19 landscape of social contact—the sense of interruption and distance, the availability of other enabling moves, the awkward atmosphere of ambiguity that spawns such negotiations—affords a possibility of conjuring again a communicatively sustained world, after certain customarily expected gestures become less accessible.

Reflexivity: The Ability to Point, to Orient, to Invite

The conversations I have related above do not, in my view, describe the reaching of an *agreement* on compliance with hygienic measures. My suggestion is instead to approach them as openings in which *invitations* are made to those with whom we experience a scene, in order to pursue the scene further with them—in *the moment*.

A specific type of work is involved in pointing to another that a move is being undertaken (e.g., the “joga bonito” gesture) *as a response* to a difficulty experienced in the scene (such as not being able to hug because of the new hygienic measures)—in a way that gestures to something in it that calls for attention (COVID-19 and the unknowns of contagion).

Equally, phoning instead of “hanging out” is also not a “norm” to which participants agree to comply. Rather, it is an exploratory move that acknowledges that participants are treading in ambiguous territory. It does so by advancing a suggestion for how to go on together, upon naming an interruption that collapses the flow of communication.

Without confronting this work, which is made possible by second-order reflexivity, interruptions might lead—with a sense of inevitability—to the collapse of the communicatively sustained milieus in which one experiences oneself as a participant. The silence amidst friends and family in the face of a stream of unsettling news in the early days of the crisis was disturbing, precisely because of the inability to name the relational impasse besetting us—and imagine possible courses of action that might be jointly undertaken to further the milieus that suddenly came to a halt.

Reflexivity and Interruptions

Reflexivity is what makes possible this nearly invisible form of activism, which proposes possible ways to further joint action in everyday scenes, in the face of impasses and interruptions. It allows us to orient ourselves and others to features of our surroundings that stop us in our tracks, and to advance suggestions to re-initiate cooperation with others—for another first time (Shotter 2016).

My understanding of this reflexive capacity is drawn from social constructionist literature, particularly the work of Shotter (2017) and Melser (2004). Shotter (2017)—following Vico—traces the beginnings of communication back to moments of inarticulate unease that are slowly and *poetically* brought to articulation. Melser (2004) elaborates further on this communicative work of “making a way out of no way.” He locates the act of thinking precisely in “inner dialogue” by which the thinker instructs him-/herself to attempt a new “move.” According to Melser, this involves solo use of forms of guidance (e.g., pointing in gesture, using verbal prompts) the thinker would have previously experienced, in earlier educative settings, when he/she was being instructed by an actually present other:

[T]he thinker is imaginatively re-convening an educative scenario like those in which he has learned similar actions in the past. The scenario will involve demonstration and imitation of the action, and verbal and other marking of important phases and junctures in it. In order to ready himself for X-ing, the thinker is imagining giving and/or receiving a lesson in X-ing. Or he is imagining participating in a discussion about X-ing. And so on. (2004:137–138)

For Melser, this is a second-order ability. It does not involve simply “going through the motions” of a learned routine. Instead, it entails an ability to demonstrate and invite a course of action that’s different than usual, in response to novel circumstances. Furthermore, for Melser, this ability is not “innate,” but it is *learned* through occasions in which the same work of demonstrating and inviting a different course of action takes place with actually present others. It makes it possible to further movement whenever it has been interrupted and a new way forward needs to be found (Russi 2016). And it is inextricably personal and social.

In this sense, these small scenes gesture towards a capacity that is essential for the preservation of possibilities for joint action, participation, and shared deliberation—all of which are sorely needed in the face of a medical emergency. It is this capacity that enables a move back to participation in the co-construction of a shared world, by making it possible to find coordination with others again.

At the same time, to embrace the task of reflexivity is a choice, and one that comes at a cost. The cost appeared to me in this scene:

“Can one bear a little bit of fear?” Angelo asks. “Neither going overboard, nor denying the problem. Can we hold just enough to do something about this?” Angelo accompanies this plea during an unusual Zoom call among friends (while we’re all in the same city), with a gesture. His thumb and index finger come close without touching. “This much” they seem to say. Just “this much.” Responding in the face of fear entails being suspended in the gap between the index and the thumb—just enough of a void to be held in the tension of trembling fingers.

Legal theorist Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2020) recognizes the sense of precariousness evoked by the work that becomes necessary when a new way needs to be found against the uncertainty of not knowing exactly how to move about in a new situation. He calls this “an ethics of withdrawal”:

Covid asks of us to assume an ethics of withdrawal... It is a withdrawal from standard preconceptions of how the capitalist world should look like, what progress is, where our responsibilities lie. It’s a question of finding other ways to do it—whatever that is, whether supporting the self-employed who cannot afford not to work, allowing social life to continue in the face of the virus, connecting differently with the world.

COVID-19 is unsettling. Therefore, to respond to it means, first of all, to accept to be unsettled, to meet the fear of nomadism evoked by newly deserted urban landscapes. Upon taking that step, a possibility resurfaces to explore new openings for dwelling alongside others, for meeting one’s neighbors for another first time.

Reflexive conversations in which participants acknowledge difficult-to-name changes in their jointly experienced circumstances engage them otherwise than as mere recipients of orders (Benjamin 2006). Submission to orders removes the possibility of active participation in our jointly experienced social worlds, and can contribute to their collapse.

Instead, the tentative findings from the scenes described here point to a sorely needed frontier of capacity building work (Kaplan 2000) around the cultivation of reflexive abilities in interpersonal communication. This work does not aim at drawing lists of instructions to become the source of new “set routines and received methodologies” (2000:525). Rather, the work ahead is one of nurturing and engaging an ability to bring unease to articulation by remaining “awake, full of interest and wonder and awe, open and vulnerable” (2000:525) to the minute shifts we sense in our surroundings, as we move around them alongside others. This capacity, at once personal and social, will become crucial for increasing the resilience of our social worlds. Particularly so, against the prospect of emergencies, requiring a swift change in customary ways of doing things, that may leave us temporarily “lost for words.” ■

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Endnotes

¹This would be the structuralist position, which I consider coherent—in anthropology—with the work of Clifford Geertz (1973).

²Communication might be said to drive social differentiation by crafting *apparatuses* (Barad 2003), through which differences might then be noticed and acted upon.

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Foreign Language Translations:

COPY TO COME