

Defamiliarizing experiences in a center for degrowth as one way to promote change

A way to change?

Keywords: norms, normality, practical defamiliarization, cross-normality experience, change

Abstract

This paper deals with norms and the perception of possibilities. I discuss how norms, individuals and society are connected. From this, based on the case of Can Decreix (CaD), a center for degrowth, I explore how a different normality can be established. The way that norms both enable and restrict is discussed and used to explain CaD's internal dynamics as well as those with the surrounding growth society. The study focuses on experiences made by individuals who spent time within the different normality of CaD. Methods used are participant observation, semi-structured interviews and the analysis of my own experiences. Based on these materials I discuss how the individual's subjectivities are influenced by experiences in CaD. One consequence of these cross-normality experiences is a defamiliarization of the subjects. Having identified norms as powerful, partly because of naturalization, I discuss what practical defamiliarization can mean for the promotion of change towards a degrowth future.

1. *Introduction*

Humans get used to a lot of things and live their daily life through a set of what can be called habits. What they meet every day is not much worth a thought as long as it is like always. This can be driving the car to town, only to get stuck in the usual traffic jam or a simple thing like flushing the toilet or using knife and fork to eat a grilled piece of dead cow. All these habits and things constitute a human's normality. It is just the normal and therefore nothing to wonder or reflect about.

There are voices who ask for more wondering and wish to change the current normality. I am referring to for example deep ecologists, humans concerned with environmental and social justice and the degrowth movement. They are calling for decolonization (e.g. Latouche 2009), defamiliarization (e.g. Hornborg 2001), reimagination (e.g. Graeber 2013) or ideological change (e.g. Naess 2002)), meaning that a change towards social and environmental justice, a downscaling of production and consumption, an abandonment of the growth paradigm/religion needs a change both in structures and mentality. The call for change is clear, but how to actually create change?

In this paper I present a study made in the degrowth center Can Decreix (following CaD), where degrowth ideas are discussed, developed and tried out. CaD serves as an example of a place with a changed normality, inside the current dominant normality. The research focuses on what I call a cross-normality experience and the influences such an experience can have on a persons subjectivity. In relation to this main aspect I shed light on the question what role norms play in

society, taking the model of society/person connections developed by Roy Bhaskar in “The Possibilities of Naturalism” ([1979] 2005). And further what the discussed aspects mean in the discussion on how to promote change towards a degrowth future, supporting my arguments with theories of Hornborg (2001), Eric Wolf ([1982] 2010), David Graeber (2013, 2005) and again Roy Bhaskar ([1979] 2005).

2. *Case*

CaD is a center for degrowth, where degrowth is understood as a social movement towards environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being. It is a movement away from the hegemony of growth. It “calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialized countries” (Demaria et al. 2013, 209). CaD, same as the degrowth movement, is build on multi-dimensional sources and proposals (e.g. Demaria et al. 2013, Sekulova et al. 2013). Degrowth should be brought forward through a diverse range of strategies, which can be summarized under the umbrellas oppositional activism, alternative building, reformism and research (Demaria et al. 2013). Important is, that neither sources, nor strategies should be seen in isolation. One needs the other to make a democratically led, smooth and non-catastrophic degrowing possible (e.g. Demaria et al. 2013). In CaD the focus lies on activism, alternative building and research.

CaD is located in the south of France and was founded in 2012 around members of the French and Spanish Organization Research and Degrowth¹. The place is in an ongoing process of transformation after degrowth principles. The transformation and dealing with daily tasks ranges from e.g. composting human manure, over renovating the existing houses with nontoxic, degradable materials, working with human-powered tools, being car free, eating vegan, reusing, recycling, repurposing etc. to the starting of longterm projects like the creation of a forestgarden. Everything aims to create higher self sufficiency, to decrease the energy input and waste output. Or in different words to stay inside planetary boundaries, as understood in the degrowth movement. CaD is located at the border of the village Cerbère. It stays in contact with the surrounding society, not hiding somewhere far a way, but integrating respectively opposing itself and creating a sharp contrast to the surrounding summerhouse urbanization and the immense cargo trainstation² in the valley below. CaD is inhabited by a little community and regularly visited by volunteers, who exchange their time, energy and knowledge for food and accommodation. CaD further accommodates researches and activists who work with and for degrowth.

¹ See <http://degrowth.eu/>

² At the border between France and Spain the rail gauge changes. For that reason all axles have to be changed, either by lifting the cargo on other carriages or, as done in Cerbère, by lifting up the carriage to exchange each axle.

3. *Methods*

The study on hand developed from a six month internship I did in CaD. Staying in CaD brought me to experiences which I wished to understand, discuss and explain. To do this I became a participant observer in CaD, conducted six semi-structured interviews with CaD volunteers, took through my diary my own experiences into account and explored additional material (blog entries and an undergraduate essay) created by two interviewees.

The interviews were conducted to gain further inside on CaD's possible influence on temporary inhabitants. The interviews took place after the volunteers had left CaD, to allow a physical and temporal distance from CaD. The focus of the interviews lay on how CaD was experienced in general and in comparison to the normal life of the interviewees. After a loose introducing question about experiences from CaD, the interviews developed as discussions: an exchange of memories and perspectives, where I did not always hold back with describing my own view. Seeing the interviews "as a process in which interviewer and interviewee are both involved in developing understanding, [which] is in constructing their knowledge of the social world" (Davies [1998] 2008., 109), a non-sharing of the own knowledge would be non-desirable, both ethical and for the efficiency of the interview (ibid. 113). The interviews were conducted in person or with help of the program Skype. Interview language was either English or German. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Arriving in CaD, I fully identified myself with CaD and its inhabitants. I got to know about possible experiences through making them myself and then went from there to understand these experiences. This full identification with CaD made this study possible and an inclusion of myself in the study interesting. Taking in my own experience allows me an understanding which I can never have of anybody else's experiences. Still objectifying ones own experiences also brings risks like discussed in Davies ([1998] 2008, 216-228). One risk is that through being an observer one is to a certain degree disattached from the situation one studies (ibid, 221). In my case I see this problem as minor since I arrived at CaD without the intention to do this study and found myself fully attached to the situation. Only later I decided to start with the study at hand.

Basing the research in a critical realist tradition I perceive myself as part of a constantly changing society and take therefore a reflexive approach (compare Davies [1998] 2008). I take in various possible influences and take on different angles to not isolate what I observe. The study is a qualitative anthropological study from the field of human ecology.

4. *Theoretical framework*

Observing a change in normality brings up the question of what normality is, respectively how it develops, changes and maintains. Normality in this paper is understood as what is perceived as normal in a certain society, what that means I develop in the following. To do this, I first explain the concept of society, followed in this paper.

For this purpose I focus on the chapter “on the Society/Person Connection” in “The Possibility of Naturalism” by Roy Bhaskar ([1979] 2005, 34-41). Bhaskar describes society as a process. Society is here not some superstructure, which acts upon reality. Bhaskar ([1979] 2005) also disagrees with the idea, that humans would create society³. He formulates his point in the following way:

But it is no longer true to say that agents *create* it [society]. Rather one must say: they *reproduce* or *transform* it. [. . .] It is not the product of their activity (any more, I shall argue, than human action is completely determined by it). Society stands to individuals, then, as something they never make, but that exists only in virtue of their activity. (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 36-37; emphasis in original)

This means that any human is born into the ongoing process which is society and that through acting, the human reproduces or transforms this pattern of activities which is society. Human activities taken collectively *are* society. Moreover there is regularity to the process which can be understood “as an ensemble of structure, practice and conventions” (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 39). In this description, structure is not the state or some kind of institution, but as Porpora (1998, 344) describes: “social structure is a nexus of connections among” human actors.

What does the existence of society mean for a person? Since an individual is born in an already existing society it is not only, that it cannot be created by the individual, but “it is equally clear that society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all” (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 37). What Bhaskar says here highlights the importance society has for a human action to become meaningful.

To get this more tangible: a human born today finds itself in a growth society⁴, where “structures, practices and conventions” (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 39) developed and are developing in a growth paradigm. Certain actions are for a human in this society meaningful, like reaching status through consumption, while others come along as rather absurd. Take for example the idea of wearing clothes which are out of fashion. What does that mean? To explain this further I discuss a concept of *society as a frame of possibilities*.

3 Here Bhaskar refers to what he calls “Weberian stereotype ‘Voluntarism’” (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, e.g. 34)

4 I use the term ‘growth society’ throughout this paper. When I write ‘growth society’ I refer to a society where economic growth is the guiding premise. A detailed description would be beyond the scope of this paper. What I call growth society, has also been characterized as being the means of economy, rather than having economy at its means. (compare Latouche 2009, 8; Graeber 2005, 429).

4.1 *Society as a frame of possibilities*

Taking the example of language it is clear that it exists prior to a human born today and that it develops over time through human activity, while language would not be like it is without human activity. Language is made possible through rules and conventions, only by following some norm, understanding becomes possible (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 43). Making other sounds with ones vocal cords would be theoretical possible, but would not lead to understanding. One would rather be called insane.

Food serves as another example. Marshall Sahlins (1976, 170-176) writes about an edibility/inedibility code in American society. Certain animals (pig, cow) are considered to be edible and others (dog) not, and further certain parts of animals are more valuable (steak), while others are less (intestines). It is obvious, that the edible/inedible distinction is not based on a theoretical impossibility for a human to eat certain meat, but on norms dominant in the society discussed. This example shows several levels of the issue at hand. It shows the theoretical possibility for a human to eat a dog, while it is practical impossible. Impossible due to the risk of being excluded from society, impossible also due to a lack of structure, like the availability of dog-meat in the supermarket. Another level is the impact such a norm has. Once it is the norm, this code has great influence on the world. Marcus and Fischer (1986, 143), discussing Sahlins' example, formulate: "Our production of feed grains and cattle would change, and so too our international trade, if we primarily ate dogs" (ibid.). This example highlights that norms are not something merely existing in people's heads, but something taking shape in and shaping life and earth. Society, which is humans actions, frames through norms what is practically possible. To step out of this frame is difficult due to structures and the risk of being socially excluded, one could even say due to the risk of being socially dead.

What has not yet been discussed in this paper is the potential for change of this frame of possibilities. Bhaskar makes an essential point about society, in saying that society is,

an articulated ensemble of tendencies and power which, unlike natural ones, exist only as long as they (or at least some of them) are being exercised; are exercised in the last instance via the intentional activity of human beings; (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 42).

It boils down to the idea that norms are in the end how they are due to humans living according to them and only stay like they are as long as they are exercised. About living or human praxis Bhaskar says, that it

. . . is both work, that is, conscious *production*⁵, and (normally unconscious) *reproduction* of the conditions of production, that is society. (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 37-38; emphasis in original)

5 Bhaskar does not refer to production only in a material sense.

This conscious production, can be a conscious act like a couple that decides to marry. Through this marriage the couple reproduces unconscious and probably unintended the concept of the nuclear family (ibid.). Next to being maintained, social forms can also change unconscious, one could think for example of the increasing importance of smart phones and the ongoing change of communication. But still Bhaskar sees an unusual option of an *intentional change* through human agency (ibid.), seeing that the frame of possibilities is in the last instance exercised through intentional human activity.

4.2 *Experiences and Subjectivity*

Before discussing change further, I need to bring in experience and subjectivity. Subjectivity I understand as the guiding framework of meaning a person has for his/her actions, while this framework is not to be seen as an object of consciousness or like a guideline, but as an unconscious reference of meaning, of right and wrong, of normal and abnormal, of practical possible and impossible.

How do subjectivities develop? Arun Agrawal (2005) developed a theory which is in parts dealing with this issue. In his case study, he shows how practices or experiences can influence people's beliefs (ibid.: 164-200). He focuses on practices political introduced from above and draws conclusions from his results, arguing for the potential for change through top-down governmental methods. What is of concern for this study is his observation, that people's actions might not always follow their beliefs, but that beliefs sometimes might follow action (Agrawal 2005, 166). The context of this observation is that sometimes people find themselves in situations, where they do things which they have not done before, discovering something new. Such unexpected experience achieved by engagement in practices can cause a reconsideration of "existing preferences and subjectivities" (Agrawal 2005, 166) and further an incorporation into people's mentality of "new propensities to act and think about the world" (ibid., 167). Agrawal observes:

Even if only a very small proportion of one's daily experiences undermine existing understandings, over a relatively short period there may be ample opportunities to arrive at subject positions quite different from those held earlier. (Agrawal 2005, 167)

To summarize the made argument: people's experiences influences their attitude and behavior towards what they encounter. A certain subjectivity is therefore not only the framework through which a subject gives meaning to actions, but also actions influences the subjectivity.

Another conclusion from this discussion is that what subjects emerge is connected to what experiences are made. Taking now into account the discussion of *society as a frame of possibilities*, it becomes clear that what is crucial for what subjectivities develop is what experiences are practical

possible to be made in a society.

4.3 *Defamiliarization*

Now I come back to what was touched upon in the introduction. The call for decolonization (e.g. Latouche 2009), defamiliarization (e.g. Hornborg 2001), reimagination (e.g. Graeber 2013) or ideological change (e.g. Naess 2002)), which is basically the call for a paradigm shift. To discuss this further I focus on Alf Hornborg's book "The power of the Machine" (2001) where the call for defamiliarization is very present. Here I just pick one quote dealing with this issue:

[. . .] we cannot understand or hope to solve global problems of solidarity and survival unless we are prepared to experience a radical "defamiliarization" (Marcus and Fischer 1986) vis-à-vis conventional categories of economics and technology. What is required is a major epistemological or paradigmatic shift. (Hornborg 2001, 89)

Throughout his book Hornborg stays inside the academic frame when he discusses defamiliarization. The concepts and categories he focuses on with his call are theoretical conceptions of society which are penetrated by growth religion. Of course these conceptions are present not just in academia but in media, politics and everyday life and are as Hornborg says to most of us "as natural as water to fish" (ibid., 87). He calls for different *theoretical* understandings and does not go further into *how* to reach this different understanding. He only describes a way of defamiliarization in academia. More precisely he focuses on Anthropology and on one of its "central ambitions" which is to "'defamiliarize' aspects of Western civilization by means of 'cross-cultural juxtaposition'" (ibid., 40). The word 'defamiliarize' and the idea of 'cross-cultural juxtaposition' Hornborg takes from Marcus and Fischer (1986, 138), to whom I proceed after following Hornborg's 'fish' for a moment.

To be able to defamiliarize, Hornborg says, one has to be like a flying fish, jumping out of the water to be able to see what is normally invisible just as the water is for the fish (Hornborg 2011).

We must, in other words, both immerse ourselves in our life-worlds *and* see them from the outside. [. . .] [F]or it is *at a distance* that human meanings assume the appearance of 'constructions' (Hornborg 2001, 52-53; emphasis in original)

This means to not become alienated, but also to not forget about the bigger setting we as humans belong to. One should permit oneself "the naïveté of a first encounter" (ibid.: 43). What he says is that it is possible to see the 'water', the norms, concepts and understandings which influence pretty much everything and that this seeing or defamiliarization is needed to change concepts and norms. All this happens for Hornborg on a theoretical level, one thinks and defamiliarizes oneself through thinking. One further produces texts to show other people that we all should defamiliarize our

conceptions of the world. Hornborg also demands, as a first step towards a different thinking, a reformulation of vocabulary (e.g. *ibid.*, 109). But still, he stays inside theory and academia and therefore leaves me with the question of how to change vocabulary or how to change conceptions and understandings in practice on an everyday level?

George Marcus and Michael Fischer describe in more detail how defamiliarization works for anthropologists and how anthropology uses “portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways, [to disrupt] common sense and [to make] us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions” (1986, 1). They describe two different ways of defamiliarizing: first “epistemological critique” which is based on raising “havoc with our settled ways of thinking and conceptualization” (*ibid.*, 138) and often ends up close to satire; second “cross-cultural juxtaposing” which is a more empirical “matching of ethnography abroad with ethnography at home” (*ibid.*). To defamiliarize, the anthropologist has then to contrast common ‘modern’⁶ or growth understandings with different understandings which are working in a different setting. One goal achievable with this technique would be to show that the ‘modern’ growth reality is “as constructed and non-‘natural’” (*ibid.*) as any other reality.

Again, this might work inside University and convinces scholars who want to be convinced, but as David Graeber writes in a similar context, those who do not want to be convinced will say that these examples of working alternatives are so different from the situation in the ‘modern’ world that nobody can really compare them, nor that it is possible to learn anything from them (Graeber 2004, 41). Hornborg also points on this paradox with saying that “plausible, alternatives images” (Hornborg 2001, 128) are needed to successfully show the arbitrariness of the familiar, while those taken from e.g. the “Bemba and Bisa” (*ibid.*) will not be considered as plausible (*ibid.*).

What this defamiliarization is about, is to see current growth normality as one possible normality, which is the way it is due to human activity and to realize that there are ample other possible ways, which are theoretically not impossible to take. Thinking back along the here made arguments the question remains how to step outside that frame, to be able to see it. It seems obvious that it does not happen to easily, since the humans seen collectively are the frame. Before taking a look what the study made in CaD can add to this theoretical ideas, I wish to take the issue at hand on a more general level.

4.4 *Power of Normality*

6 I use the term ‘modern’ because it takes together everything which is seen as the appropriate way of dealing with things in today’s western, capitalistic, growth society. I put it in exclamation marks because I disagree with the idea that this model of society is somehow located at the end of a ladder of modernity, where we go from primitive to modern. For further discussion on this topic see e.g. Quijano (2000). Another opposition provides Graeber (2004, 46- 53). He argues that ‘modern’ people are not so different from all the others who are or have been.

Besides writing that we need to “reimagine the very nature of what [for example] work is” (Graeber 2013) and that we “have to change our accustomed ways of thinking” (ibid.), David Graeber writes how important it is for the maintenance of (power) structures, that nobody reimagines anything (ibid.).

We know that a rethinking of normality is needed to create change, while the very nature of norms is that they are not rethought. Norms are usually hidden, in the sense that what they constitute is just the ‘normal’, ‘normal environment’, ‘normal behaviour’, ‘normal way of life’ and not seen as constructed norms. The normal is seen as something outside the thought potential agency of humans. Eric Wolf puts the same issue in another way:

Ideologies codify these distinctions [distinctions between people, categorization] not merely as instrumental aspects of social relations, but grounded in the essence of the universe – in the nature of nature, in the nature of human nature, and the nature of society ([1982] 2010, 389).

The normal, in this quote socially constructed differences between people, is not perceived as something which is actually based on an ideology, but as belonging to the universe. Wolf further states, that

[t]he development of an overall hegemonic pattern or “design for living” is not so much the victory of a collective cognitive logic or aesthetic impulse as the development of redundancy – the continuous repetition, in diverse instrumental domains, of the same basic proposition regarding the nature of constructed reality. (Wolf [1982] 2010, 388)

The constant repetition or just the living of ones everyday life, the continuity, the familiar, the practical possibility becomes all that is and hides all else that is theoretical possible to be. In this structure, “alternative categories”, are assigned “to the realm of disorder and chaos, to render them socially and symbolically invisible” (Wolf [1982] 2010, 388).

Now one could ask who is constructing that reality? And who is calling anybody who beliefs in something else insane? One could start thinking of economic and political power. Certainly there are people/institutions who are benefiting from norms and from norms not being changed. But rather than thinking about a group of people who might have some power over norms, I suggest thinking about what power norms have over people. Following Bhaskar’s theory, ‘tendencies and power’ have to be exercised to exist and this exercise is lastly depended on the ‘*intentional* activity of human beings’. So it is people who give power to norms, through following them. Following them as if they are unchangeable. People believing in norms and forgetting that they are human made.

Graeber writes in a very recent text (2013) that financial capitalism failed according to its own measures, but still it is able to persist, very much through the persistent idea that there is no other

way to go. He writes:

We are talking about the murdering of dreams, the imposition of an apparatus of hopelessness, designed to squelch any sense of an alternative future (Graeber 2013).

Seeing this constructed hopelessness described by Graeber, and the big arbitrariness described by Hornborg and the idea that people forgetting that norms are human made as an overreaching problem, it is reasonable to call for something that would solve this problem. Graeber explicitly calls it a “revolution in common sense” and says that there are endless “pieces of conventional wisdom” that are to be challenged (ibid.). Graeber talks about renegotiating definitions. While I again wonder how one actually does this in practice. Which finally brings me to findings from the practice.

5. *Findings*

Before going into detail, I point out some aspects which are important for the process of this study and for the understanding of it. My findings are taken from people's experiences. The experiences my interviewees shared with me I see as lines of experiences. A line as a life-path of a human being. The interviewees and I came from different backgrounds and spend some time in a place, in CaD, together and then went on on our life-paths. Important is that we all experienced CaD as a different place, with our individual subjectivities, developing from our personal experiences. What I know about the experiences of my interviewees is only a glimpse reduced into language and through understanding, while I know even less about what people experienced before and about what they have experienced since. Implicit in this picture is that it is impossible to take the experiences of one person apart. Experiences are relational to each other. One describing something is constantly comparing it to something else s/he knows/has experienced and therefore experiences his/her unique way. The following is a discussion of the main findings out of these experiences, considering all used sources (interviews, observations, diary notes and additional material) with the theory introduced above. Due to the limited space at this point I do without many quotes from the material. The aim of this discussion is to draw a picture of what is possible to experience in CaD and how these experiences can possibly impact people's subjectivities. And further how CaD can be seen in a larger context.

5.1 *Different normality*

All the interviewees describe CaD as a place, which is radically different to their usual everyday environment. All the interviewees have an academic background and have spend either most of their lifetime, or most of their recent lifetime living in cities, studying or working. Their personal

search for some different way of life brought them to CaD. In CaD they see, how different one can live and that there are places, where an alternative way of life is possible. Another important issue in our discussions was, that my interviewees experienced it as very positive, to meet other people who have similar ideas to their own. This feeling of not being alone gives them comfort for their ideas. Ideas which they normally do not find understood by their surrounding. All the interviewees came to CaD, because they were somehow disappointed by or could not identify with values lived in growth society. On their search for alternatives they ended up in CaD, where they experienced some feelings of belonging and discovered a different normality.

I argue that, taken the theories introduced before, CaD can be seen as a place where a different normality is established. Practices which would be called impossible in an average setting in growth society are made possible in CaD. What kind of practices are these? What is this different normality? Let me take the example of the compost toilet which impressed most of the interviewees. In CaD, located on dry and degraded land, it seems self-evident that human manure is composted and not flushed away with drinking water⁷. Certainly it would also be theoretically possible for most of us to build a compost toilet in the own garden or even on the balcony. But still let me ask you: could you, not just theoretically, but really, build a compost toilet in your own backyard? And for those of you, who live more or less far out in the countryside, imagine living in city or village, could you build a compost toilet in your backyard? The answer is very likely: no. I wonder, why it is possible, and not just possible, but normal for you to flush a toilet with drinking water, while it is, even if you would want to, impossible to transform human excrements to valuable compost? This is only one example. Experiencing the transport of food for about twenty people with two bikes and train one wonders: Why is it normal to have an individual car and why are bicycles rarely used for transportation? Or why is it normal, to build houses from materials which are undegradable, in some cases toxic and produced with enormous use of energy, when materials to build houses are locally available, which are nontoxic, degradable, and useable with only human power? There are many more examples. All of them are of course connected to the special situation of this case. It is about what is normal in a growth society and what is normal in the situations my interviewees and I are usually exposed to, in contrast to the specific practices in CaD. What is important to remember now, when thinking about normality and why things are like they are, is what was said earlier about society, that tendencies and powers are reproduced by the activity of human beings. As long as certain tendencies are exercised other tendencies, other practices and other theoretical possibilities will stay practically impossible such as compost toilets in backyards.

⁷ In the Mediterranean water is a scarcity. In the area where Can Decreix is located it normally does not rain at all in the summer while it reaches high temperatures. Therefore the water recycling has high importance in Can Decreix.

In CaD social limits are questioned. The possibility frame of growth society is questioned. Other norms are lived. One interviewee (Eliane) reports e.g.:

. . .when I wanted to throw away a piece of plastic somebody came and said: Nooooooo, why do you throw this away?⁸ That was so self-evident for me before. I never questioned that in this way. Through the radicalism you actually see that there are so many more possibilities than you had thought before.

This quote shows the appearance of a different norm and also what it makes with a person coming from another normality.

What is changed and how did this change happen? Structures are changed in CaD. Physical structures, like having a compost-toilet and no water toilet or the human-powered washing machine and also mental structures are changed: one takes time for e.g. foraging, working by hand and there is the omnipresent approach to reuse, repurpose or recycle any item at hand. The change developed from the wish of the initiators of CaD to make a change, a change in concrete actions, because they perceive growth society and many actions performed in it as flawed. People in CaD do change practices consciously and parallel also the framework of meaning in CaD. The concrete way the change happens might be unconscious, in the sense that nobody gets up in the morning saying “today I build a compost toilet, to change the norms”. But the motivation for changing practices lies in the aim to promote a change in the dominant way of live. Change in society is in the case of CaD intended, it can therefore be seen as a possible exception to the usual unconscious processes (see part 4.1), since the changes of normality in CaD “lie in the desires of agents to change them that way” (Bhaskar [1979] 2005, 37-38). CaD creates, through living it, a different frame of possibilities.

The change is radical, but limited in a spacial sense. CaD is an island of different normality. To make the life lived in CaD possible, CaD had to be established on a private property⁹. If one would perform practices which are performed in CaD outside of CaD one would very soon cross social limits. Further, since CaD is part of its surrounding society it is also influenced by it. As just mentioned it is a non-public, a private space: ‘the land had to be bought’. While one can wonder how land can be owned, it is normal in ‘modern’ society and therefore being located on private land is the only legal possibility for CaD to exist the way it does. Another example is the need for money in CaD, for example to buy food. Ideal would be greater self sufficiency and trade with other local producers, which is practically impossible, since there are not many local producers to trade with. This is certainly a theoretical possibility, but to be practically possible would require collective

8 The person saying “Nooooooo” was probably thinking about how to reuse this piece of plastic.

9 Private only in the sense of legality; Can Decreix is in its policy open to the public and nobody would defend Can Decreix as “private property”

change at a much larger scale. Possibilities are made, maintained and changed by society. One single actor very fast reaches limits of practical impossibilities, which are framed by physical and mental structures. Here CaD's position is analogous to the one of an individual in society as described in the theoretical part.

5.2 *Being(s) in this different normality*

Now it is time to turn to individuals. The example of CaD shows that it is possible for individuals to create a spatial limited alternative normality. Now the question is what experiencing such a different normality can mean for an individual who spends time in such a place. As described above experiences do influence a person's subjectivity and experiences which "undermine existing understandings" (Agrawal 2005, 167) might lead to a change in a subject's beliefs. Transferred to the case at hand none of those taking part in this study really knew what concrete practices we would get engaged in and how to do what we did. The individuals who are part of this study, came to CaD because they were looking for working alternatives to growth society. So one could argue that all of us were acting according to our beliefs and understandings, so where is the change? I say, that for all of us the act of coming to CaD was an act according to each's beliefs, while to the actual concrete practices in CaD we came about in a different way. Not in a forced, top-down way like in the case researched by Agrawal, but rather through having the opportunity to do practices different or to do different practices. The interviews and the notes in my diary show, that these practices and the experience of this different normality had a big influence on our imagination, on our subjectivities. Having an idea, that some things might be flawed in growth society and that there should be other ways to live, is different to actually experiencing a different normality.

Due to the short time period which this study covers it is not possible to speak about long term impacts these experiences might have and how they shape the way of life of each of us, but the short time shows some influence which is likely to not be just forgotten. Here I am thinking of for example of one interviewee (Lina) who started to engage in a giveshop¹⁰, because in CaD she realized, that change is possible if you start doing it. Another (Luke) reports about changes in daily life, like dumpsterdiving instead of shopping as well as the objective to start own little projects for degrowth. One interviewee (Liisa) reports that she developed a low tolerance towards the wasting of water after staying in CaD. She feels uncomfortable when somebody around her wastes recourses. Another example are Eliane's experiences regarding people she met after being in CaD. She had increasing troubles to relate to other people's interests and values, like the interest in the newest smart phone. Lina describes that she experienced practices in CaD in the beginning as being

¹⁰ The shop works through giving not through exchanging.

restricting, but later and after as something that made it possible for her to give importance to “the small things”. These examples are of changed practices, changes in perception and changes in beliefs, while acting according to some changed beliefs also becomes, due to the above discussed social impossibilities outside CaD, impossible. Eliane explains:

In the beginning you don't want to consume, but then suddenly it is normal again, that you consume, and then even if I am not a person who buys lots of stuff, but you start again anyway, *and then you have needs again.*

A feeling of need, emerging through the wish to “fit in your surroundings”. She further explains that CaD was like a bubble for her, where false needs could not reach her, back home she meets these needs again and follows them. She feels too many barriers to keep on living like she now knows she could. Values lived in CaD become practical impossible for her to follow, even if she wishes to follow them. This example shows how the different values lived in CaD are experienced by the interviewee, how they impact needs and habits and it also shows the existence of norms which create barriers and a feeling of impossibility.

There are more examples which I could take from the interview material or my notes. Examples that show how the daily experience of living without a fridge, of using bikes for transportation, of reusing dishwashwater for the garden and of using a soap which is an organic fertiliser undermines existing understandings and influence subject positions. To move further the focus of the next part lies on the experience of contrast, contrast between these new possibilities and the old frame of possibilities.

5.3 *Cross-normality experience*

One important part of the interviews was to discuss how it was to leave CaD and to come back to a city and to everyday life. Eliane describes a feeling of being an alien and being surrounded by aliens. Another (Arnau) describes his feeling of going to a “past way of living”, in a sense of going back to a world, where economic growth is the guiding principle and “where people don't realize all this”. He explains how he realizes “of many things, which usually you get used to – like flushing the toilet.” And further he talks about habits:

They are not good for the planet and probably not good for you either, but just end up doing them, you get used to them and then you forget about them. They are actually not necessary, and I don't know, that's like many other accessory things, that I don't think we really need.

Luke highlights the “slower pace of life” in CaD and how he now sees people rushing around “so busy, that they cannot even look in each other's faces”. Liisa further reports about her friends who are unemployed, but do not see any alternatives to what they are doing, which is sitting at home and

waiting for a job. “They don’t even imagine to do something else and to not live like we are told to live, to just try what other possibilities there are.” About herself she says, she is more conscious about her impact after living, how she says, “closer to nature”. Another example is how Luke says that experiencing different approaches “really helped me to understand how things worked and to see how it can be done differently”, while his friends say that they would not be able “to go so far to be sustainable”. The interviewees talk about experiences of how they, coming from CaD, realized how restricted our “normal” sense of possibilities is and how we accept the normal, without considering that there might be other theoretical possibilities. Seeing and experiencing two ways of living, so close to each other is awakening. One becomes aware that there are possibilities outside the normal, which are well hidden as long as one does not start question.

Also inside CaD contrast were experienceable. One which makes a good example is the construction work, which was mainly done by hand. A note from my diary, from the first weeks of my stay:

Working by hand, a very tiresome hard work, many of us [the volunteers] thought about machines. What could we invent, which technique, to make it easier and faster? The percussion drill makes the work much easier and makes it possible to go to the beach. We can use it because we have energy produced somewhere/sometime else [fossil fuels/uranium], we don’t have to produce the energy from calories we eat.

The mentioned percussion drill was an exception to remove old concrete from a wall. The little use of machines made any machine which did appear something special and something to think and talk about. The effect of a machine, for us, who were working with it or without it, became visible. You cannot know how it is without a specific machine if you have never been without this machine. Machines become, through their absence, present in CaD. One starts wondering about all the energy which is used everyday, without really considering how much energy it is. Like for example, while taking a hot shower, driving a car or washing cloth. This we took out of CaD, the awareness about things which are usually habits, the way-to-do-it or just the norm.

Does all that not sound like defamiliarization? I argue that being in CaD, a place with a different normality, one makes a cross-normality experience, similar to the cross-cultural experience described above with Marcus and Fischer. This cross-normality experience, a matching of experiences in CaD and experiences at home, leads to a defamiliarization of the former familiar. It decolonizes, creates changes in subjectivity and leads to reinagination. A problem mentioned before about cross-cultural references as a way to defamiliarize, is that the other culture, which anthropologists often refer to, is mostly abroad, in a faraway place. It kind of belongs to our picture of the ‘modern’ normal that there are other places which are different; cross-cultural referencing it is

not so shocking and sometimes gets more the face of a spectacle than of a cultural critique. Everything is different in these faraway places: the way people grow up, the way they interact, their values, their history and their experiential backgrounds. In contrast, CaD is an island in the (former) familiar¹¹ and is a transformation of the former familiar. For some people coming to CaD the climate and the local language are the same, people met in this place have, taken a global perspective, similar experiential backgrounds and grew up in the same growth society. The surrounding is familiar, there is the big train station, the summerhouses, etc.. Also in CaD the “old” familiar is still visible, the old water toilets are standing around, the degraded land and the house is only partly transformed. To make it short: many things are somehow familiar and still it is so strikingly different.

The defamiliarization in CaD is happening on an everyday level. What is defamiliarized are everyday practices and values rather than theoretical conceptions of ‘labor’, ‘money’ or ‘technology’. As discussed above Hornborg defamiliarizes through writing about all the arbitrariness connected to such concepts, while in CaD we talked about these topics, despite nobody was reading or had read Hornborg’s book at that point. While experiencing the contrast of not having machines it became obvious what they do in our former everyday settings. Also the energy used by machines becomes experienceable when one has to bring it up by oneself. Is not this the needed jump out of the water Hornborg mentions? And the water is still present, it is very close. It is the concrete which is being unbuilt, deconstructed and transformed into waste and reusable sand, the asphalt, the train station and so on. Through the closeness of CaD to the “past way of living” – also called ‘modernity’ – a strong contrast emerges for those people engaging in CaD and in any sense of the word contrast makes things visible.

What is made visible is that humankind can live in many possible ways. Many practices, which seemed to have to be done necessarily like they are done in ‘modern’ society, can actually easily be done different. Further it becomes visible that norms are norms and not natural laws. What is special about the defamiliarization I describe is that it happens through practice, rather than through argumentation. CaD brought up in a theoretical discussion as an example that things can be done different, would very likely be considered just as far off and therefore as invalid as the example of the “Bemba and Bisa”. But it is not invalid for people experiencing this different normality.

This brings me to the last part of this discussion. Which is what role places like CaD can play for promoting change.

11 For those whose experiences I include in this study. It would be interesting to see how Can Decreix would be for somebody who grew up in a different setting.

5.4 *Empowering defamiliarization*

As discussed in the theoretical part called “power of normality”, Graeber and also Wolf hint on the power behind norms. As long as norms are not reimagined, as long as they are maintained, larger change will not happen. Anything which constantly repeats, which is always the same is experienced as something belonging to the universe and not as norms made by human beings. It is nothing to talk and nothing to think about, nothing to question. Who would, if asked how a room looks like, speak of the white walls? Who would, if asked to describe a city, speak of the roads, cars and houses? One speaks about a green city, when it has more parks, or trees than ‘normal’ cities. Who would say that there are water toilets in the university? Nobody, who is used to them, nobody, for whom this is normal, for whom this is the ‘nature’ and not a ‘the nature of a constructed reality’. Taking evidence from this study I suggest, that by making experiences of contrast in regard to one’s normal experiences, definitions which were held before become challenged. The constant repetition of experiences breaks up, the normal becomes one possible normal and not the only possibility. As Graeber, Hornborg, Arne Naess and Degrowth scholars call for a change in common sense, one way to promote a challenging of norms, would be to construct spaces where life centers around different ideas, where different practices are exercised, which give rise to challenging experiences for those engaging in them.

Where and how exactly alternatives emerge from in the first place somebody else has to answer; I can only say, that the recognition, that the so called normal is a constructed normality might be an important part of it. Just as Graeber says on the question about how humans are able to create new things:

The key factor would appear to be, [. . .] whether one has the capacity to at least occasionally step into some overarching perspective from which the machinery is visible, and one can see that all these apparently fixed objects are really part of an ongoing process of construction. (2005, 431)

Just imagine that a ‘critical mass’¹² of people would reach this overarching perspective. The deepest rooted conventions would lay exposed open for any reimagination. And this is, I argue, not only theoretically possible.

6. *Conclusion*

Struggling with thoughts about the growth persuasion which currently dictates live on earth, the question emerges of how to free oneself from it. This study discusses how persuasion works. How

¹²A term borrowed from nuclear physics, which refers to the smallest amount of material needed for a nuclear chain reaction. It is widely used to indicate a sufficient number needed to make something happen which sustains and grows after.

the normal works, how it is maintained and how it can be changed. To highlight is that this normal is usually not perceived as something which can be changed by humans. Changing what is normal lies outside the thought potential agency of humans. Still one way of becoming aware what norms are, that they are made and maintained by humankind through living after them and that they do not display the only possible mental and physical structure can be defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is the flying fish realizing that water is not all that is.

The study at hand shows that it is possible to create alternatives, where different norms are lived. Such alternative settings like CaD are in ways limited as long as they are alone, experiencing limits to what is practically possible to change. But still the change which can be done inside such a place is significant and people who are in such a place for some time make cross-normality experiences, which can lead to a defamiliarization of the former familiar. Experiences do influence a person's subjectivity. Experiencing always the normal makes one doing the normal and being the normal, not thinking about the possibility of other possible ways to be. Experiencing a different normality like the one lived in CaD, one becomes able to see that there are alternatives, that norms are norms and not natural laws and that it is theoretical and practical possible to change them.

This study underlines the importance of places like CaD. The importance of making alternative experiences possible. It is not a sole recipe for changing the world and not meant to be such. It is rather meant to highlight the potential of working alternatives, as part of the strategies for change towards a degrowth future. People who approach places like CaD are already to some degree defamiliarized, they are looking for alternatives. Still as this study shows such experiences of a working alternative make the defamiliarization stronger, give confidence, motivation and ideas. Practicing change in a small scale is one important step to promote change in mental and physical structure.

Further research dealing with the potential of lived alternatives for transformation could be to create a larger study, with more people and projects and with a larger time frame. Another issue would be to discuss how for example work is actually conceptualized in such a place as CaD, compared to how work is understood in a growth society. And further, as only touched upon before, one could look further into the importance the feeling of not being alone, but one part of a group with shared values, has for humans to step out of normality.

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