

# Technologically-propelled comfort. Some theoretical implications of the contemporary overcoming of fatigue

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## Abstract

This essay uses an anthropological phenomenology to examine the relevance of the notion of comfort. It contains a definition of comfort, an illustration of models of comfort distribution as well as an exploration of the potential contribution of sensuous relaxation in reviving theoretical tools introduced by Michel Foucault (techniques of the self), Philippe Descola (naturalism), Mary Douglas (danger and risk) and Antonio Gramsci (hegemony). I show that these key notions in the history of anthropology can be usefully re-fashioned to analyse contemporary comfortable existences: the epochal shift towards the overcoming of fatigue; the progressive screening of the undomesticated environment from holistic sensuous experiences; the amplification of disgust associated to organic substances and agencies; the transition from an hegemony exercised through cultural institutions to a generalised dependency on global economic and financial agencies, resulting from the spread of comfortable production.

**Keywords:** Comfort, Contemporary Technology, Anthropological Phenomenology, Senses, History of Anthropology

In what follows, I outline the anthropological relevance of the notion of comfort. It is a trivial, vulgar concept, largely implicit in daily interactions and in academic production: the spread of comfort as a social value and widespread practice has often been taken as a dull fact, not worthy of analytic exploration notwithstanding its centrality in the construction of the contemporary self<sup>1</sup>. The desire for sensuous relaxation hasn't attracted the analytical attention that its effective weight in moulding contemporary ontologies and subjectivities, as well as notions of purity and political apathy, suggests.

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst the few exceptions see Guerrand (2010), Maldonado (1990) and Crowley (2001), who however are primarily concerned with urbanisation and lodgings.

An anthropological phenomenology, intended as a focus on collective, recurrent modes of activating senses in specific cultural environments, is crucial to understand several peculiarities of contemporary humanity. Social scientists have mostly opted for a genealogical and historical analysis of technology, seeking the most appropriate conceptual and theoretical framing, often in terms of modernity or capitalism<sup>2</sup>. Here the attention is more narrowly focused on the epochal shift in sensuous experience permitted by the technological innovations of the last two centuries, accelerated in the last fifty years.

I will not produce a phenomenological ethnography of comfort, but rather focus on the implications on anthropological theory of the contemporary experience of comfort<sup>3</sup>. This essay presents a definition and discussion of the notion of comfort as well as an exploration of its potential contribution in reviving theoretical tools introduced by Michel Foucault (techniques of the self), Philippe Descola (naturalism), Mary Douglas (danger and risk) and Antonio Gramsci (hegemony). The attempt to renew the application of notions and analytical paths should not be intended as a critique of the authors, but as an admittedly partial and selective use of certain key notions to show that these can be usefully refashioned to examine current comfortable existences. I will therefore omit an overall discussion of the authors' intellectual proposal and rather focus on specific issues to suggest possible extensions or reformulations of the above mentioned concepts.

### **Definition of comfort, and its social distribution**

Comfort is associated to the subjective perception of ease and contentment, acting as the positive polarity in a spectrum evaluating bodily experience in terms of sensory relaxation. Activities are deemed comfortable when associated to a sustained reduction of muscular effort, trouble or strain and a consequent increase in ease or pleasure. Places are considered comfortable if judged hygienically appropriate and when the parameters of temperature and humidity are ideal or may be regulated effortlessly. A comfortable object is congenial, accessible, functional, does not generate pain and does not require prolonged and complicated maintenance. Comfort differs from pleasure as the latter may imply demanding and tiresome bodily activation and may be distinguished from wellbeing or happiness as comfort is more firmly grounded to a sensuous rather than psychological or healthy state (cfr. Fleuret and Atkinson 2007, Mathews 2012).

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2 A very partial list includes Bausinger (1986); Elias (1939); Ellul (1954); Thomas (1983); Leroi-Gourhan (1965); Maldonado (1990); Howes (2003).

3 For a broader methodological and ethnographic discussion see Boni (2014; cfr. Le Breton 1990, 2006).

The cross-culturally convergent positive evaluation of the comfortable existence should not surprise us: a body in a state of relaxation receives positive perceptive, neuronal, emotional stimuli, a sense of wellbeing marked by the absence of lactic acid. There may of course be significant cultural divergences on what may be considered bodily pleasant but the specific declinations of comfort tend to converge on the containment of physical toil; absence of impurity (as socially defined); capacity to regulate the environment according to one's desire; availability of efficacious instruments to transform the surroundings. Even though I admit cultural discontinuities, generated by specific historically determined experiences in the understanding of comfort, my primary focus here is on the above-mentioned recurrent features: this does not imply a universalistic approach, just pronounced cross-cultural convergence with regards to desired bodily postures, movements, environments and tools, satisfied by the progressive strengthening of global capitalism. Being rooted in individual sensations, comfort may be viewed as a private issue; the regime of ease is, nonetheless, a collective project, defining models, canons and values of what is bodily attractive, shaping material culture, establishing social distinctions (Maldonado 1990).

Adopting a broad (and bold) anthropological comparison, one can sketch three principal configurations of comfort's social distribution. In the first, characteristic of herdsmen, gatherers and hunters, artisan fishermen, extensive agriculturalists, comfort has been scarce but equally distributed. Notwithstanding conspicuous time dedicated to rest, recreation and rituals, the fatiguing interaction with organic surroundings is required from every individual as the environment is domesticated symbolically more than technologically. In the second configuration, characteristic of intensive agriculture and rudimentary industrial production, comfort is overall limited and selectively distributed. Prominent hierarchical figures are granted ease, at times idleness, at the expenses of those who carry the burden of bodily-demanding tasks. Rank (in terms of political or religious prominence, economic wealth, domestic leadership) is a key variable in determining an individual's capacity to recoil from fatigue.

In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, spreading from North America and Western Europe, the pursuit of generalized comfort, principal focus of this article, expands to increasingly numerous social contexts. If recourse to technology may be seen as the externalisation of human capacity to tools (Leroi-Gourhan 1965, Ingold 2000), industrial revolutions mark a decisive increase in what is externalised, triggering the progressive rise of devices able to mediate more exhaustively and comfortably the relationship between humanity and the surrounding environment. The ample recourse to non-renewable energy sources; the progressive labour force shift to the tertiary sector; the rapid spread of public services; the commercialisation of an incredible array of innovative technological instruments, materials and

commodities (cars and aeroplanes, washing machines and vacuum cleaners, plastic and steel just to mention a few) granted more comfortable existence to significant sectors of the human population across the globe (cfr. Ellul 1954, Anders 1956, Barthes 1957, pp.97-99). Even though comfort clearly intensifies in certain continents, in urban settings and for higher incomes, it transcends gender and ethnic differences, ages and political affiliations, national and (to a certain extent) class identities. Today, technologically-propelled comfort is, at least partially, available to the majority of mankind in the form of industrial goods, fuel-propelled mobility, electricity (85% in 2012)<sup>4</sup>, drinking water from “safer, improved sources” (87% in 2010), “improved sanitation” (61% in 2010)<sup>5</sup>. It is, however, not ubiquitous, nor is it distributed evenly: in post-industrial settings while several tasks implying toil and a sensory holistic involvement are simply wiped away by “progress”, migrant labour is often compelled to accept the remaining demanding and contaminating jobs.

### **Comfort as a contemporary technology of the self**

Technologies of the self, as defined by Foucault (1987, p.18), are acts that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”. In the first two centuries A.D., technologies of the self inserted in Greco-Roman philosophy required, according to Foucault, an ethical care of the subject and included, amongst others, the culture of silence and the art of listening; contact with nature; homosexual love; examination of conscience; spiritual retreat into oneself; permanent medical care. In the Christian world, techniques of the self, were intended as aimed at soul salvation, obtained through confession; renunciation of the self and of reality; public recognition of faith; fasting; adherence to clothing and sexual prohibitions; obedience; contemplation; self-punishment; martyrdom.

Foucault rarely addresses technologies of the self beyond the eighteenth century. When he does, he fails to examine the subtleties enquired for previous historical periods: his argument becomes admittedly hypothetical.

Throughout Christianity there is a correlation between disclosure of the self, dramatic or verbalized, and the renunciation of self. My hypothesis from looking at these two techniques is that it's the second one, verbalization,

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4 [data.worldbank.org](http://data.worldbank.org)

5 [who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/monitoring/fast\\_facts/en/](http://who.int/water_sanitation_health/monitoring/fast_facts/en/)

which becomes more important. From the eighteenth century to the present, the techniques of verbalization have been reinserted in a different context by the so called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self. To use these techniques without renouncing oneself constitutes a decisive break (Foucault 1988, p.49; cfr. Kelly 2013, p.520).

According to Foucault, technologies of the self have been separated from religion and relocated in theoretical philosophy and scientific thought: the “new self” is told: “know thyself”. In Foucault’s inquiry, techniques of the self, in all ages examined, are activated by a philosophical or religious intellectual elite with reference to an explicit and complex *episteme*. I argue that the notion may be usefully revived when associated to comfort, revealing a shift from elitist practice to mass accessibility, from culturally-specific procedures to world-wide convergences, from moral and intellectual preoccupations to worldly consumerism with a largely implicit and banal *episteme*. Over the last decades a major and generalised care of the self can be summarised, rephrasing Foucault, as “let thyself be comfortable”.

There is a crucial shift from technologies aimed at working on the soul through the body, to those intended to produce bodily appeasement *per se*. Foucault’s interpretation of Socrates’ technologies of the self, is assertive:

When you take care of the body, you don’t take care of the self. The self is not clothing, tools, or possessions. It is to be found in the principle which uses these tools, a principle not of the body but of the soul (Foucault 1988, p.25).

This is no longer true: taking care of the self today is largely conceived as a mundane project, the commercial attainment of products and technological services enabling relaxation. The improvement of the self can be seen as shifting, in areas which were progressively secularised, from a moral, religious, intellectual advance to the achievement of comfort; in areas in which a religious transcendence is still relevant, the search for comfort acts as a secular project, alongside more explicit and complex technologies of the self. In both instances, however, the material care of the self is achieved through the possession of technological devices that permit relaxation; when physical exercise is involved (in gyms, sports, dances, yoga, trekking, snorkelling) it is often conducted in comfortable environments and conditions, aimed at a body forever young, pure, perfect and immortal. The self is no longer striving to know itself but rather seeks a purchasable bodily pleasure.

The etymological trajectory of the word helps us trace the technologies of the self’s semantic transformation. Comfort is not a notion examined by Foucault, but it could well have been, as giving and receiving it was part of the Christian moral constitution. The word derives from Latin, formed by the intensive prefix *cum-*, and *fortis*, strong, and indicates a process of rein-

forcement, linked to the relief of pain and strain. Its principal use, up to the nineteenth century, referred to spiritual consolation, reassurance, support; a word of comfort was used to address the sick, sinners, afflicted. The understanding was embedded in Christian theology: the *comforter* was one of the designations of the Holy Spirit. Mass production generates an epochal shift in semantics, revealing changes in the social and moral perception of the self: comfort is increasingly understood as a, privately experienced, sensory contentment rather than being grounded on social or spiritual interaction <sup>6</sup>.

Contemporary technologies of the self exemplify a general trend towards comfortable disengagement compatible with the notions of happiness, purity, perfection and immortality evoked by Foucault. The meaning of these terms has shifted towards an immanent and sensuous appeasement, not achieved through interior toil but through the recourse to the appropriate technological devices. The past decades, since Foucault's belief that "we are more inclined to see taking care of ourselves as an immorality" (1988, p.20), have proved that comfort has simply escaped an ethical connotation. Individual hedonism is considered a sensuous necessity, beyond moral evaluations.

### **Beyond naturalism: comfortable screens**

Contemporary comfort is the result of a technologically-propelled screening of humanity from the toil and impurity associated with direct contact with the organic world: apparatuses and devices allow to intervene, alter, transform the surroundings through minimum bodily stress. The increased technological delegation of the environment's manipulation exonerates a consistent part of humanity from difficult, stressful, laborious, tiresome interactions with organic surroundings. Undesired environments, tasks and materials are increasingly screened from human experience as the technological mediation obtains the desired effect requiring very little dexterous sensuous activation.

One can identify screens in artificial shields separating humans from their surroundings. Climate control allows to screen thoroughly most lived environments (houses, cars, offices, shops) from meteorological variations. Plastic gloves and cellophane inhibit direct tactile interaction with food in supermarkets. Vaccines prevent the experience of an increasing number of diseases. Protective creams neutralise the effects of the sun. Feeding bottles replace the organic dimension of breastfeeding. Drugs prevent the perception of pain. Screens generate comfort by disentangling the body from undesired sensuous interactions, mostly with the untamed organic.

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<sup>6</sup> etymonline.com; dictionary.reference.com; Maldonato (1990, p.96).

An extended meaning of screening processes identifies them in technologies that suppress arduous and demanding activities, even when no material barriers are present. Let us compare, for example, the phenomenological experiences implied in cooking with a wood-generated fire and a gas stove. The former requires the fatigue of cutting, transporting and storing the wood. It needs a bodily incorporated skill in lighting, monitoring and regulating the fire; through these tiring processes the wood's and fire's characteristics are learnt (cfr. Ingold 1997, 2000). The gas stove often does not require any effort to search and move the combustible; the bodily knowledge required is basic: turn a switch and push a button. Advanced technological devices act as cognitive screens as they inhibit direct, sensuous apprehension of organic surroundings. Similar dynamics interest several technical processes, amongst which, heating and lighting systems, the movement of weights, techniques of child delivery, travelling, agricultural and rearing practices. The comfortable solution offers an apparent enhancement in comparison to more demanding, dirty, tiresome organic alternatives. What is at first an "improved" option soon replaces practices requiring direct interaction with organic substances and processes (Ellul 1954, Anders 1956). The social, economic, technical, legal framework in which organic interaction was framed tends to disappear, leaving the monopoly of procedures to the comfortable solution.

Even though technological mediation has characterised all human contexts, in the last decades the capacity to screen the organic world has increased drastically (Leroi-Gourhan 1965). One of the obvious phenomenological and cognitive consequences of the spread of comfort is the inhibition of direct, holistic, sensuous involvement with organic materials, environments, processes that have been the principal sensuous stimuli, and thus the source of symbolic and cosmological creativity. The spread of comfort is thus a key ingredient to understand current ideas and practices concerning human place in nature.

Descola (2005, p.112, 116) has provided, in a work justly acclaimed as one of the most precious theoretical contributions to recent anthropology, one of the most ambitious overviews of the possible "ways of structuring individual and collective experiences", to apprehend surrounding human and nonhuman agents. Descola distinguishes between "interiority", comprehensive of the mind, soul, consciousness, and "physicality" concerned with "external form, substance, the physiological, perceptive and sensorimotor processes, even a being's constitution and a way of acting in the world...". Out of the four possible ontological schemas resulting from the similarity or dissimilarity in the identification of the interiority and physicality of existing beings, modern and contemporary Europe falls in "naturalism", characterised by the perception of dissimilar interiorities, intended as dis-homogeneous morality and intellect of the various beings, and similar phys-



icalities, due to the scientific belief in the continuity of matter. A discussion of the divergences with Descola's characterisation of "naturalism" allows me to further clarify the relevance of comfortable screens in the moulding of contemporary experience of nature.

Descola's holistic anthropology, if seen from the focus of this article, rests on two questionable methodological assumptions. First, even though Descola (2005 p.243, pp. 256-258; cfr. 2011) makes several references to phenomenology, the culture/nature dualism characteristic of naturalism is examined primarily in its symbolic and cosmological dimension, through the intellectual production of prominent authors, science laboratories and museums' botanic classifications. I believe that a phenomenology of comfortable life shows that the "dissociation... between human subjects and nonhuman objects" (Descola 2005, p.396) has progressively and dramatically widened beyond a perception of dissimilar interiorities. Today, the divide is grounded in comfortable screens that inhibit an holistic sensuous experience of undomesticated plants, animals, landscapes.

Second, Descola (2005, pp.321-335) tends to minimise the salient transformations of the last decades. Analysis of production does not go beyond the demiurgic craftsman: seventeenth century farms and present day offices, shops, industrial complexes are inserted in a common ontology, with very little attention for contemporary material culture. Descola's documentation is focused primarily on animist, totemic and analogic ontologies (identified as "ideal types" but described in a puzzling ethnographic present); these however have very little relevance for large parts of contemporary humanity as their internalisation requires a direct, daily experience of the organic environment which has been severely mutilated. The epochal shift which largely wiped out the ontologies that are central in *Beyond Nature and Culture* is associated to a strategic interweaving of capitalist power concentration, technological expansion and popular consent during the last two centuries, dramatically intensified after WWII, which can not be fully appreciated if change is seen as generated by the "vagaries of history" or the "onslaught of contingency" (Descola 2005, p.389, 390).

To illustrate comfort's relevance on contemporary technical practices let us examine Descola's (2005, pp.393-394, cfr. 192) description of modern production in "naturalism": "the producing agent... comes to the fore when he is declared to impose a specific form and function upon matter". An acknowledgement of the dramatic impact of the capacity to screen production from sensuous experience allows us to distinguish between craftsmanship and industrial work. While artisans' moulding of artefacts necessitated a direct sensuous relations with the organic environment and an attentive bodily activation, today the form and functions of products are decided by engineers and marketing strategies: "producing agents" do not come "to the fore" in most widespread technical activity (for example wood working,



driving, dish-washing, baking, slaughtering, etc.). Nonhuman beings have been increasingly dominated, shaped, exploited, removed comfortably: a vigilant relationship with the properties of matter is irrelevant, as productive processes are managed by pre-determined machines (cfr. Ellul 1954, Ingold 1997). Comfort is associated to technological processes that require standard bodily activation and limited sensuous complexity.

Incidentally, the fact that task performance is less dependent on a time-consuming and tiresome processes of bodily training towards skilled experience explains the contemporary tendency to rapidly relocate labour in various tasks: training may be minimised because workers need to run machines on routine programs rather than “impose a specific form and function upon matter”. The dynamics of Danish bakeries, illustrated by Nielsen (2006), can be extended to several contemporary productive processes:

The journeyman describes how the technology of making white bread makes many skills superfluous. Furthermore, a lot of the cakes are prefabricated in a factory, and all that the apprentices and journeymen need to do is to take them out of the refrigerators, place them on trays and put them in ovens. These are activities which disqualify the apprentices (Nielsen 2006, pp.219-220).

A phenomenological analysis of contemporary technological mediation, in line with Descola's (2005, pp.305-306, 2011) proposal “to detect salient discontinuities both in things and in the mechanisms of their apprehension”, may invalidate his belief that “the world offers to all and sundry the same kinds of ways of coming to grips with it”. The experienced world has shifted from ecological niches formed by living agents and only partly domesticated materials, to machines and standardized industrial goods: this has an inevitable impact on the contemporary construction of ontologies. The pervasive screening through advanced technological devices generates a transformation in the notion of “nature” that Descola does not fully acknowledge. The opposition between “natural” and “artificial” substances, dynamics and organisms is not a primordial fissure, it acquires social and ideological relevance in comfortable settings as the material environment surrounding mankind is colonised by materials and devices that, even when they originate from nature, are fabricated and programmed by mankind.

If Descola's (2005, p.103) schemas are “psychic, sensorimotor and emotional dispositions that are internalized thanks to experience acquired in a given social environment”, one has to acknowledge that the direct connection to the principal agents (undomesticated animals, unplanned vegetable life, meteorology, water sources) and materials (wood, stone, earth) of human phylogenetic history has dwindled with the delegation of fatigue. A focus on the activation of our senses reveals that a large part of contemporary

humanity, whose cultural and genetic ancestors were inserted in the four schemas identified by Descola, have made a further, decisive break. Plastic, auto-mobiles, cement, smog, supermarket commodities, air-conditioning are not perceived according to a dissimilarity in interiority and a continuity in physical matter, but as artificial products incompatible with any identification. A revision of Descola's schema, acknowledging both the increased interaction with advanced technological products and the growing ignorance of organic materiality, is in order, even though it may upset the binary elegance of *Beyond Nature and Culture*.

### **Comfort and hygienic purity**

Latour (1991) terms "purification", the process through which "moderns" generate an official, but hypocritical, division of the world in apparently dichotomous domains, a crucial one being that between "nature" and "culture". If one assumes a phenomenological perspective, what Latour terms "hybrids" are not mixtures of "pre-modern" or "natural" and "modern" experiences, but inserted fully in the latter: artificial processes through which nature is evoked, and technologically controlled and managed, rather than holistically experienced. A purification has indeed occurred, not just as cosmological representations denying hybridisation (Latour's concern), but in ordinarily lived experience: holistic sensuous interaction occurs principally in comfortable environments in which organic matters, agencies, dynamics have been thoroughly subdued and sterilised.

Comfort rests on a pervasive and efficient control of the surroundings: sensuous relaxation is associated with purity, cleanliness, absence of unwanted substances. Amongst the organic materials which are screened from everyday experience to generate comfortable conditions are sources of contamination, classified as dirt. Contact with polluting agents, normally conceived in terms of disgust, is incompatible with sensory ease. The analysis of what needs to be removed from experience to achieve the desired hygienic upgrading and thus guarantee a protected environment, enables to further specify the characteristics of contemporary comfort.

I briefly examine the anthropological literature on collective fears, condensed in the notion of taboo, from the admittedly narrow perspective of the characteristics of the avoided substances. In contexts characterised by an overall limited and selectively distributed comfort (second configuration), pollution is not attributed to intrinsic qualities of the polluting substance but rather to its anomalous positioning within the ritual and symbolic construction of the social and cosmological order (Douglas 1966, pp.85-86). The need to stand clear of a certain matter can thus be temporary, being applied only on specific week days or festivities (Boni 2008); may be ritu-

ally neutralised or concern specific social categories (notoriously men and menstrual blood, or caste prohibitions, see for example Dumont 1966; cfr. Douglas 1966, 1985, 1992). Substances that in certain contexts are seen as contaminating are handled by consistent parts of the social body on a daily base with no sense of disgust. It is not the substance in itself that is polluting but the religious and symbolic implications of its use.

What is avoided, with a sense of disgust and fear, in contexts of generalised comfort (third configuration)? Identifying the principal perceived sources of danger in the US, Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) discuss, amongst other topics, nuclear energy and ecological pollution:

The passionate moral principles of the 1960s were turned in the 1970s to attack monstrous technological developments which endangered us. We became afraid of contamination of the air, water, oceans and food (Douglas 2002, p.XIX).

Adopting this view, nature is seen as a benign and threatened symbolic construct, to be safeguard from technological threats (cfr. Douglas 1992, pp.255-270).

What are Americans afraid of? Nothing much, really, except the food they eat, the water they drink, the air they breathe, the land they live on, and the energy they use. In the amazingly short space of fifteen to twenty years, confidence about the physical world has turned into doubt. Once the sources of safety, science and technology have become the sources of risk (Douglas Wildavsky 1983, p.10).

Douglas explores “the physical world” principally in its semantic dimension, as an evocative cultural construct; a phenomenological evaluation of actual interactions with agents and materials not technologically subjugated, shows that these are not perceived as intimate and benign. It rather indicates a surprising twist in systems of avoidance: holistic sensuous interaction with an increasing number of organic substances and dynamics is increasingly seen as a source of fear and disgust (Boni 2014).

Elias (1939) illustrated the subtleties of a multi-secular “process of civilisation” began in late medieval Europe, characterised by the spread of sensory refinement, socially expressed through increasingly rigid thresholds of repugnance and more severe canons of avoidance of “dirt”. This notion was extended to include crumbs, vegetable and alimentary remains. Babies are often stopped when they attempt an oral examination of mud or vegetable substance, such as leaves and sticks. There is a growing intolerance for excrements, even when dry and not odorous. Today, in advanced technological contexts, human secretions (mucus, urine, saliva, sweat, blood, catarrh, menstrual blood) are increasingly deemed impure and provoke disgust. Or-

ganic transformations, such as putrefaction, are viewed with growing suspicion both because they are little known and because they engage unprepared senses. The entrance and exit from life, birth and death, are increasingly dealt in hygienically controlled environments and the transformative, organic dimension is often hidden from the senses: birth has largely become a surgical operation while at death interaction is brief and with corpses that emit no smell.

Perceptions of pollution and danger are increasingly associated to natural substances and dynamics. Thomas (1983) described a long-term process of subjugation of fauna and flora, began in Britain in the seventeenth century: nature is either thoroughly subdued and domesticated or progressively separated from human existence. Such dynamics were amplified in the last century when the tiresome management of organic substances gave way to the pervasively comfortable experience. A feeling of fear or disgust often arises when, due to unusual circumstances, humanity enters in direct sensory interaction with agencies and substances that are not technologically governed and are no longer familiar. The presence of most undomesticated animals in human environments is considered potentially dangerous, even when these are harmless, such as spiders, grasshoppers, crickets, mice, lizards; contact with the above is often deemed disgusting<sup>7</sup>. Consumption of meat has increased drastically but not those who are ready to slaughter animals: serial killing and industrial processing has substituted house-managed transformation of animals into comestibles. For many, today, animal interiors are considered a sight and smell beyond tolerance. Commercialised meat and fish thoroughly transcend their organic status through meticulous screening and by offering products that require minimal consumers' interaction.

The shift from the second to the third configuration of comfort has implications in the perceptions of fear and disgust. First, while the anthropological literature indicates that substances were collectively prohibited on cosmological grounds, contemporary avoidances, in coherence with transformations in the technologies of the self, result from the lack of sensuous familiarity which, in several instances, generates repugnance and panic. Second, contemporary avoidance is centred on organic matters and organisms, perceived as dangerous and polluting invaders. Third, the inhibition is not contextual but generalised: it is the substance itself that is disgusting or

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7 I have found very little studies and statistical data on contemporary sensory intolerances, "schifo" in Italian; "gross" or "disgusting" in English. An enquiry on 168 students in rural central Italy conducted in 2010, could not provide diachronic insights on the strengthening of these sensations, but illustrates the organic substances which students declare to generate "schifo" or "I dodge it if I can" (other options were "pleasing", "natural"). The following numbers refer to the number in bracket: animals' interiors 68 (18), spiders 57 (27), grasshoppers 51 (23), crickets 47 (24), mice 40 (30), lizards 32 (30), mud 20 (45), menstrual blood 67 (13), dung 56 (24), sweat 53 (28), mucus 70 (22) (Chioato 2011).

dangerous rather than its specific social and symbolic activation. Fourth, the sense of fear or disgust is accentuated when there is an holistic sensuous experience, comprehensive of smell, taste and touch. “Nature”, if experienced when technologically untamed, is not perceived as pure, beautiful and welcoming.

Douglas (1966, p.XIII, 90) points out that notions of pollution and purity are both generators and products of systems of producing cosmic and social lines of distinction; this precious insight, may be applied to current perceptions of large parts of the organic environment as disgusting. How is the “nature” / “humanity” divide symbolically constructed and, even more crucially, practised in comfortable contexts? A crucial line of distinction, an “external boundary”, using Douglas’ lexicon, today is drawn between human spaces and activities thoroughly purified from organic presence through profound sterilisation, on one hand, and independent organic dynamics, lives, environments, on the other. The divide between the former and the latter has gained a relevance that finds no precedence in our specie both in terms of the rigidity of the distinction, upheld through severe social and legal sanctions, as well as the extent and characteristic of what is perceived as repellent or threatening.

Nature is seen as potentially contaminating not because invested of negative semantic associations, but because the search for comfort generates an increasing fear of the organic. New linguistic, emotional and cosmological codes redefining the sense of disgust and danger both express and strengthen a pervasive practical screening of daily existence, acting as deterrent and enforcing detachment. The fact that what is disgusting, just as what is comfortable, is considered a spontaneous bodily perception, and not as an incorporated social construct, further strengthens the idea of “natural” and inevitable reactions, establishing hegemonic consensus.

### **The hegemony of comfort**

Gramsci (1948, p.145) distinguishes, between power based on State’s coercive “domination” and the exercise of “hegemony”, intended as the “ ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group”. Unsurprisingly, for Gramsci, who wrote his *Prison Notebooks* between 1929 and 1935, hegemony is played on the capacity to direct morality, pedagogy and intellectual activities.<sup>8</sup> Gramsci at times uses “hegemony” to indicate an

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<sup>8</sup> The agencies promoting hegemony are identified with intellectuals (pp. 145-147, 154, 203, 269, 285), schools (pp. 284-285, 526, 666-667), libraries (pp. 165-176), associations (pp. 416, 503, 527), newspapers (p. 248), and the Church (pp. 506-507).

historical phase in which a given class acquires a position of cultural leadership over the “subalterns”; the underlying Marxist assumption is that the hegemony of one class is detrimental to the others and inevitably produces political tensions. Gramsci’s framework, applied to the spread of diffuse ease, offers interesting insights.

The closest Gramsci gets to an analysis of comfort is the analysis of “Fordism” and “Americanism”.

... it was relatively easy to rationalise production and labour by a skilful combination of force (destruction of working-class trade unionism on a territorial basis) and persuasion (high wages, various social benefits, extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda) and thus succeed in making the whole life of the nation revolve around production. Hegemony here is born in the factory and requires for its exercise only a minute quantity of professional political and ideological intermediaries (p. 571).

The focus coherently shifts on associations such as the Rotary Clubs, Free Masonry, the YMCA.

In America rationalisation has determined the need to elaborate a new type of man suited to the new type of work and productive process. This elaboration is still only in its initial phase and therefore (apparently) still idyllic. It is still at the stage of psycho-physical adaptation to the new industrial structure, aimed for through high wages. Up to the present (until the 1929 crash) there has not been, except perhaps sporadically, any flowering of the “superstructure”. In other words, the fundamental question of hegemony has not yet been posed. The struggle is conducted with arms taken from the old European arsenal, bastardised and therefore anachronistic compared with the development of “things” (p. 572).

This passage can be read as the awareness that the agencies identified by Gramsci as capable of building hegemony, lost their prominence with the emergence of mass industrial society. “Things”, intended as commodities, were indeed developing, generating new ways of achieving consensus, through their capacity “of seducing the senses of the consumer in the interests of valorizing capital” (Howes 2003, p.212; cfr. Kingfisher 2013). There is a shift from an hegemony founded on explicit processes of socialisation governed by intellectuals, to an implicit one, grounded in comfortable material culture and moulded in serial industrial production.

As could be expected, there was a convergence of all major sources of institutional power in the neoliberal configuration in support of the generalised spread of comfort as it generated both consensus and profit: governments imposed laws and certifications privileging large enterprises over artisans; media presented consumption as the source of individual affirma-

tion and stigmatized those stubbornly content with contained technology; financial institutions sponsored the race for comfort and helped entrepreneurs chase craftsmen off the market. What is more surprising is consumers' enthusiastic assent, with workers focusing on wage increases in order to fuel consumption: "subalterns" were both victims and agents of a process that combined consumerist ideology with sensory pleasure. Gramsci recognised a generic increase in "a particular living standard which can maintain and restore the strength that has been worn down by the new form of toil" and recognises that this relates to the construction of "persuasion and consent" (p. 671).

Marcuse (1968) noticed the compliance of contemporary subjectivities to the modernist project.

Now as to today and our own situation, I think we are faced with a novel situation in history, because today we have to be liberated from a relatively well-functioning, rich, powerful society. I am speaking here about liberation from the affluent society, that is to say, the advanced industrial societies. The problem we are facing is the need for liberation not from a poor society, not from a disintegrating society, not even in most cases from a terroristic society, but from a society which develops to a great extent the material and even cultural needs of man – a society which, to use a slogan, delivers the goods to an ever larger part of the population. And that implies, we are facing liberation from a society where liberation is apparently without a mass basis (1968, p.77).

Not just apparently. The history of comfort can contribute to explain the political passivity, evident in the substantial decrease of direct action against the powerful political and economic institutions, in Europe and the US since the 1930s. With very little significant opposition the spread of comfort became both totalitarian (as it invested most ideological, material and social domains) and compelling (as increased consumption became the obligatory priority). Electoral politics and revolutions varied in their ideological rhetoric but were convergent in their faith in scientific progress, technological escalation and industrial production: this view of growth, still decisive nowadays, has been the consensual political program of liberals and communists, fascist dictatorships and social democrats, international political organisations and post-colonial governments. The substantial, generalised and prolonged, support to the diffusion and multiplication of comforts is a neglected but crucial ingredient to understand mass consensus despite extreme inequalities in wealth and opportunities distribution; social and psychological malaise; dramatic environmental degradation.

With the unopposed insertion of most productive activities of large areas of the globe in a complex global system, social circuits lost their technological autonomy. Virtually all material culture, recently also seeds and water, as well as crucial services were subtracted from the tiring management



of society and controlled by large firms, distributing them comfortably to consumers. Skilfully-managed independent enterprises were replaced by a mix of consumers' idleness and labour dependent, directly or indirectly, on global capital. Localised social contexts lost their autonomous ability to guarantee, through fatigue, the satisfaction of their needs and, around the world, find that several crucial aspect of their survival depend on economic and financial agencies they are unable to control or even just influence. The enjoyment of comfort proved to rest upon social circuits' loss of their technological sovereignty. If comfortable consumers conceive even marginal decrease in sensory ease as a threatening tragedy, alternative solutions become unthinkable, even when, as today, neoliberal economy's capacity to draw moral and intellectual consent is limited. Hegemony is being substituted by technological dependency, as humanity is increasingly blackmailed in crucial aspects of its material culture and bodily appeasement.

## Conclusions

I revised some of the most relevant social analyses of the last century to illustrate the potential insights provided by examining the effect of comfort on notions of personhood and purity as well as on the construction of ontologies and political consensus. Anthropology could have had a crucial role in describing and examining this peculiar cultural twist but, up to the 1980s, it has shown unwillingness to address contemporary technological transformations. While ethnography was concerned with the description of disappearing techniques, penetrating descriptions and analyses of the impact of advanced industrial technology on human existences and perceptions, as it was unfolding, were conducted by intellectuals at the margins of legitimised science. Jacques Ellul (1954), Günther Anders (1956), Roland Barthes (1957), Lewis Mumford (1970), Ivan Illich (1975) proposed a moral and political critique of "advanced" technology's impact on the senses that was largely ignored as comfort triumphed.

What is striking is that the overall neglect for the sensuous impact of technological transformations continued even when the ethnographic gaze turned to "modernity". When anthropology began to widen its focus to include industrial society, several epistemological and methodological assumptions inhibited a thorough evaluation of the existential impact of comfort. The tendency to take for granted, and thus neglect, one's material culture did not facilitate a meditation on the phenomenological consequences of the spread of industrial goods (Merleau-Ponty 1945, Miller 2005). The critique of grand narratives laid the stress on the interplay of tradition in modernity (see, for example, the pioneering works of Bausinger 1986 and Latour 1991) and thus discouraged the search for epochal discontinuities,

such as the rise of diffused comfort. Holistic critical appraisals of technology have often been rejected with conceit after being labelled ideological and romantic. Moreover, the ethnographic rendering of contemporary technology is often trivial and unrewarding: anthropology's movement, since the 1980s, towards literature and cultural studies hampered the study of dynamics with little semantic appeal; Graeber (2012, p.106, cfr. 108, 111) notes an attraction towards what he terms "areas of symbolic richness or density of meaning, where 'thick description' becomes possible". There is very little ethnographic poetry to be captured in everyday comfortable praxis: turning on a washing machine, switching on the light, activating climate control, using a moving staircase, driving a car and sensing artificial smell or taste are common but not intimate experiences, enhanced daily but not evocative. Contemporary ethnographic standards, often focused on negotiations of meaning, objects' multiple semantics, social dramas, personal adaptations and resistances, are best applied to other domains.

A reflexive and severe analysis of comfort is crucial because sensory ease tends to lead us to be satisfied with the bodily pleasure it grants, accepting a simplistic view of its beneficial effects. "Advanced" technology is associated to an extension and amplification of the senses; improvement in knowledge; progress and well-being generated by the liberation from fatigue. I believe contemporary comfortable existences reveal more complex and ambivalent dynamics: some senses (especially taste, smell and touch) were depressed, in particular their interaction with organic sources; industrialism inhibited the transmission of artisans' incorporated skills and creativity (up to the point of socially loosing key human capacities such as lighting and managing a fire, identifying the location of water sources, the season in which fruits and vegetables ripen, etc.); the drastic reduction of fatigue and increase in hygienic protection strengthened human screening away from natural surroundings and untamed organisms leading to a growing fear of nature; technologically-propelled comfort led to a loss in local social circuits' productive autonomy. Anthropology, with its comparative and holistic approach, can provide a much greater contribution, compared to what it has offered so far, to what appear to be crucial dynamics in understanding and directing our present, and future.

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