

Normality under uncertainty.

Praxeological approach in research on the (re)production of 'normal' urban life.

“I just want things to be back to normal again” – these are the words spoken by people at the beginning of 2021. “Build back better” is the message from the experts and global leaders, who emphasise that the pandemic Covid-19 is a chance to boost recovery processes toward sustainable transition in the face of climate crisis. But, according to the World Economic Forum-Ipsos survey from the beginning of 2021, on average 54% of people across the globe expect something like pre-COVID 'normal' will return within the next 12 months, 6% that this is just something what has already happened and 8% don't think it'll happen at all. In Poland, 10% of people think 'normal' pre-COVID life has already returned, 46% of respondents expect it will happen within 12 months, whilst for 10% pre-Covid 'normal' life will be never back.

The sites of the most acute disruptions by the pandemic and, in the era of planetary urbanization, particularly important for sustainable transition, are big cities. The lockdown prevented or limited routine activities, and questioned the default rules, rhythms, and geographies of urban life. We could just see the *cities without urban life*, with limited mobility, urban spaces emptied of social activities, closed or online social institutions and organizations. After modifying practices and adapting to urban life the next stage opens with the claim of “returning to normality”. But what does 'normality' mean for cities? Is it a claim to go back to previous ways of living? If not, how urban future will be done? How are the horizons of local change (what urban normalcy could/should/has to be) being produced and implemented in everyday practice? Based on ontologies of social (potential) agency we assume that any social change towards any social future is resulting through interacting everyday routines and their cultural and political frameworks. There is tacitly assumed obviousness of our everyday actions (how we move around the city, what we do in our neighbourhood, where we let to go our kids unaccompanied, how we spend time when we do not work etc.). However, this obviousness is being arranged on a basis of material and symbolic resources we can use and supplemented by ready-to-use scripts of past, present, and future realities, (re)produced through cultural representations (literature, arts and public art, mass media products, films etc.) and sciences. All of them co-shape people's desires, motivations, understandings of possibilities or limitations. Political programs specify the goals and values using the representations of the past, present and future, and they define legal and infrastructural frames to reach the goals. However, people up to do what they really want to do, governed by habituation or desires and motivations. If they cannot, they try to rearrange the way to reach the goals – the lockdowns evidenced both the importance of everyday routines (when practices of 'normal' life had been collapsed) and human's creativity to perform some practice anyway.

In our project we aim to answer: 1) how urban communities, experienced by the pandemic and facing with possible next disrupters, are imagining, and enacting 'normal' urban life towards the future? 2) how are political and cultural representations of the past, present and future shaping possible scenarios of urban life, 3) and, conversely, how are scenarios for the future being implemented through everyday urban practices.

To reach the aims, we will bridge disciplinary divides and combine theories and concepts from social sciences (sociology, economics, human geography) and from cultural studies (anthropology, performativity studies, languages and literatures), applying them into comparative case study research in three cities, representing three different pre-Covid types (demographic and economic paths and their current situation, the images of the city reproduced by the media etc.). We will explore selected urban practices and how (if) they change, such as practice of leisure in a city, neighbourhood care, civic engagement or mobility. We will carry systematic analysis of scientific papers and books on urban everyday life after the Covid-19 pandemic, ethnographic field research, analysis of usable past and visions of the future in local political programmes, local art, cultural institutions and media (including social media locally oriented). Speculative design interventions in each city will be employed to explore not-predefined scenarios emerging in the process of questioning 'normal' urban practices.

The results of our project will be: 1) documentary analysis and interpretation of post-pandemic changes in Polish cities carried out through the lens of everyday urban practices and their political and cultural frameworks, 2) conclusions on the ethical aspects of “back to normal” urban life identified during the study 3) transversal theoretical and methodological toolbox for practice-centred research on urban transformations. We will share the findings both through scientific papers and series of webinars and podcasts to the general audience.