Editorial

Postnormal Governance

Governments act as if nothing has changed and its business as usual. But as events in the Ukraine, Egypt and Spain demonstrated we are entering the uncharted territory of Postnormal times, which require a new approach to governance and international relations

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In their classic paper, ‘Science for the postnormal age’, Silvio Funtowicz and Jerome Ravetz formulated the principles of postnormal science as a new type of science ‘where facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decision urgent’ (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). Later on, Ziauddin Sardar elaborated on the concept and coined the notion of ‘postnormal times’ where chaos, complexity and contradictions were becoming the norm and uncertainty was the dominant theme (Sardar, 2010). Even a casual glance at recent world events reveals how politics and governance is rapidly going postnormal.

Before we examine recent developments, a few words about the category itself. The selection of the label is quite relevant here. ‘Postnormal’ connects two pertinent notions: it indicates that what we are experiencing is not normal or, at least, what we could expect as normal. The conventions by which we have lived over the past decades are increasing becoming irrelevant. But the term also signifies that what we are experiencing is not exactly abnormal. Rather, what is happening is that we are transcending the usual meaning of normalcy and entering an uncharted territory, the domain of the ‘postnormal’. But in what sense are we surpassing normality? The short answer would be in the modern-industrial sense. Modernity appeared as the answer for a new kind of power that needed a new legitimate source that would break up with medieval traditions and structures. Hence it witnessed the emergence of a new leader, Machiavelli’s The Prince, who ruled over a new concept, the state or more specifically, ‘the nation-state’. Science served as a useful tool to cut the remaining allegiances to the old feudal system and to provide new foundations for the new structure. Science and (colonial) politics combined to produce the Industrial Revolution with an accent on modernity that became the main criterion for regulating our life. Modernity, the industrial worldview and science had a symbiotic relationship as all three advocated standardization, imposing some sort of statistical average as the reference for normalcy. There were standard rules that applied to everyone and served all; and solved all our problems. These standards were conventionally seen as ‘universal’; and western
civilisation, with its hallmark features of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’, was projected as the future of all cultures and societies.

But these assumptions of an assumed monolithic world, with a single source of power – western culture, led by the United States and Europe – are no longer valid in a multipolar, multicultural world. Even the science it is based on turns out to be not as objective and neutral as we liked to think. What Funtowicz and Ravetz postulated in their seminal work is that we need to go beyond the normal emphasis of science that focuses on results or products to include procedures, purposes and persons in our analysis. That is, the value of scientific research cannot rely solely in its conclusions but also in the choice of the method, the objective pursued, and the politics and worldview of the people in charge. In other words, science ceases to be an absolute and becomes contextual – just like most human endeavours.

What applies to science also applies to governance and society. The conventional modes of governance are becoming dangerously obsolete; society is in a state of total confusion. As Sardar puts it, we are going through a period ‘when little out there can be trusted or gives us confidence’; ‘we live in an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense’ (Sardar, 2010: 435). The zeitgeist of the moment is a mix between uncertainty and anxiety provoked by our inability to understand what is happening. Reality seems to be more complex than ever (or maybe it is just that we are forced to acknowledge this complexity for the first time), while political developments emerge and proliferate at such a pace that we barely cope with them. We constantly find ourselves in a state of baffling chaos and contradictions.

Consider, for example, the situation in Ukraine where threat of war is growing. It all began with demonstrations against the government in Kiev. President Viktor Yanukovych’s government was indeed corrupt but it was democratically elected. His main crime, however, was not that he was corrupt but that he wished to align Ukraine with Russia. From the western perspective, it was good for him to join NATO but bad to go into alliance with Russia. Soon armed protestors in Kiev took over government buildings and demanded a change of government and constitution. Politicians from the US and Europe stood side by side with the demonstrators, including the leaders of the far-right Svoboda party, to declare their support. When the parliament voted to oust the President, the political order in Ukraine was turned upside down in a single day. President Yanukovych fled to Russia; and the equally corrupt former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, was wheeled out from jail to address the demonstrators.

A decade or so ago, that probably would have been the end of the affair. Western powers would have established a government of their choosing in Ukraine, just as they had done during the twentieth century in numerous other places, from Iran, where the US overthrew democracy to install the Shah in 1963 to Chile where the democratically
elected Marxist government was ousted in 1973. But in a multipolar post-normal world, things are not as straight forward as they use to be: the generalized acceptance of the conventional distribution of power and the hierarchy of interests are not valid. A re-emergent Russia flexed its muscles and moved swiftly by taking over Crimea. The speed with which Crimea was seized was as astonishing as the speed with which the government in Kiev was brought down. Apart from issuing threats of sanctions, and actually imposing a few, western powers seem impotent. Not because, as it is widely assumed, the will is not there; but because the means has evaporated. The reality that power has genuinely shifted is hard to comprehend let alone face.

Notice the complexity of, and the resulting contradictions, in the Ukraine affair. It is not just the interests of two competing powers that are at stake Ukraine has 120 different minorities, each with its own reasonable and unreasonable demands. There are the democratic aspirations of large communities such as the Ukrainians, Ukrainians Russians, the Russians of Eastern Ukraine, and the Muslim Tartars in Crimea who have historic reasons to hate Russia. The undemocratic goals of nationalists and far-rights groups of both Ukrainian and Russian colours. The helplessness of the western back regime in Kiev. The militancy of the nostalgic pro-Russian communities in the industrial east. The threat of a civil war; and the peril of a global conflict that should concern us all. The contradictions are glaring. Western interests are paramount but Russian interests are irrelevant. The democratically elected President of Ukraine was replaced by an entirely unconstitutional and undemocratic takeover. The democratic demands of the mob in Kiev are legitimate; but the democratic demands of the mob in Crimea, where a referendum was held, are ‘illegal’. Our fascists, who are an integral part of the new government in Kiev and where they control a number of ministries, are benign; there fascists are racist brutes. This sort of rhetoric, and the policies based on them, are now dangerously obsolete.

If you light a touch paper in the postnormal world, you are as likely to burn yourself as much as your intended target. This is well illustrated in the case of Egypt, where another democratically elected government was overthrown by military-backed demonstrations. The government of President Muhammad Morsi was not corrupt; but he was an autocrat and exclusivist. The Egyptian Constitution he introduced made the Sharia (conventional Islamic Law) supreme and declared Egypt to be a Sunni state to the exclusion of Shia, Sufis, Ismailis and other variety of Muslims, not to say Christians, secularists, atheists and others. As Sardar notes, once you bring the Sharia into play, a diverse society like Egypt can hardly remain united. ‘Given that Sharia means different things to different people, even amongst Muslims let alone non-Muslims, this is a recipe for inviting dissent, inevitable disaster, and a clear attempt at suppressing diversity and plurality (Sardar 2013). So the demonstrations against the Morsi government were based on genuine grievances. Many secularists involved in anti-Morsi demonstrations wanted a genuinely pluralistic democracy, an acknowledgement of diversity, and
genuine freedom of thought and action. But what they actually got was something altogether different. As the Arab Spring itself demonstrates, positive feedback rapidly turns initially peaceful demonstrations into a chaotic phenomenon, which can either lead to collapse or total transformation. The anti-Morsi demonstrations led to collapse. The omnipotent Egyptian military took advantage of the chaos, and the gullible secularists played into their hands. The end product: a legitimate, democratically elected government, albeit an autocratic one, was replaced by military rule. A ‘coup’ was not a coup. An entire segment of the population – supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood – were declared ‘terrorists’. Mass death sentences were handed out. Far from nudging Egypt towards more democracy, the secularists succeeded in turning into a nightmarish police state, ever on the verge of civil war.

Lest you think that the postnormal condition applies only to far off places like Egypt and Ukraine, let me give another example from my own country, Spain. After a golden period in real estate business, which turned Spain into some sort of ‘economic miracle’, the subsequent burst of the housing bubble come as a chaotic implosion. Although Spain was not formally rescued like Greece, Portugal or Ireland, it had to ask for European Union funding to sanitize its banking system. And, as expected, in return the EU was granted a high degree of control over Spain’s economy. To comply with European directives, Spain has had to endure severe budget cuts and some structural reforms that, basically, have resulted in a drastic reduction of the Spanish welfare system. All in all, unemployment rate in Spain has escalated over 25% since 2012 (it peaked a 27.2 in the first quarter of 2013) producing no less than 5 million unemployed people during this period. Moreover, the Spanish sovereign debt has reached 99.5% of the country's GDP and the payment of the debt interest rates now constitutes a major segment of its national budget, bigger than the one devoted to unemployment.

But if economic landscape is dire, political situation is grim. The current conservative government is as mired in corruption scandals as the old and new ones in the Ukraine. In the eyes of most the population it is as self-interested and interested only in making profit at the expense of the society – not unlike the autocratic rulers elsewhere! It won the last elections with the promise that it would overcome the crisis and get the country back on the track to growth. But after the two years in government, the truth has dawned: managing a national economy in postnormal times is a complex affair. In fact, the conservative government has ended up doing just the opposite of what it said it would do: far from reducing they had to increase taxes, far from decreasing unemployment they have seen it rise sharply. But the economy is not its main challenge. That comes from Catalonia. For various reasons, ranging from economic to cultural and identity issues, Catalonia wants to secede from Spain and become an independent state. As polls have consistently shown, the independent movement has mass support from the Catalan society. Truly it is not the best of times to govern Spain.
So what has the Spanish Conservative government done to tackle these issues? It has chosen to turn its back from the future and hark back to history. First, it granted the Catholic Church an authoritative position, not unlike the Constitution of ex-President Morsi, on several social issues. The abortion law was reformed to accommodate the position of the Church (something that should come as a surprise as the Justice Minister is a member of the Opus Dei). The Catholic religion was reinstalled as a compulsory subject in school curricula. In return, the Catholic hierarchy has positioned itself against the secessionist Catalan movement labelling it as ‘immoral’. Thus seeking sovereignty becomes both a religious and a moral issue! But the most bizarre action was the bestowing of the golden medal of police merit to the Virgin Mary by the Interior Minister. To be more precise, it has been given to the Virgin Mary of the Very Sacred Love (Virgen María del Santísimo Amor) because ‘she shares the values of dedication, wakefulness, solidarity and sacrifice that Spanish police uphold’ – clearly the Virgin goes regularly on patrol with policemen. The government has also claimed that Saint Teresa would help Spain in these times of hardship. Given that the economic and political situation in Spain is too complex and full of contradictions, where viable policies are difficult to perceive let alone formulate, the government has turned to Saints and religious dogma for help!

Second, it truncated, or simply abolished, many democratic rights. The right to demonstrate, for example, has been curtailed. The strategy is to turn some public actions, like street rallies and demonstration, into administrative misdemeanours. So they are taken out of the jurisdictions of the courts and placed in the hands of bureaucrats and administrators. Thus, some legal guaranties, such as habeas corpus or the compulsory presence of an attorney, are wiped out. All of which makes it easier to charge the promotors or supporters of publics demonstrations.

Third, it aligned itself with free-booting capitalists. The most poignant example is provided by its opposition to reform the mortgage regulation. Currently, Spanish mortgages are not really mortgages; they are personal credits with real (meaning housing) guaranties. Unlike other places where the lack of payment implies the loss of the property and the end of credit, in Spain the loss of the property only entails the end of credit if the selling value covers the total amount of the credit, otherwise the former owner will still owe the remaining part. As the property values have dropped considerably, many people have lost their homes. It is estimated that more than 370,000 people have been evicted since 2008. The real tragedy is that a most of these people are unemployed and still owe a lot of money to the banks. These are the same banks that received €41,000 million from the European rescue package, in addition to enormous public funds, to cover their losses!

These policies, if one can call them as such, are a recipe for disaster in postnormal times when a tiny perturbation in the system – a demonstration against economic injustice, or
a rally in Catalonia for independence, or a boycott of schools where philosophy and music have been removed from the curricula and Catholic dogma has been made compulsory for all – could have big unintended chaotic consequences. As we see on YouTube, just such sparks produced serious perturbations in Turkey and Venezuela, as well as Egypt and Ukraine. And, of course, it is not just Spain but other western countries are facing similar problems. The housing bubble in Britain is bound to lead to a catastrophe; and United Kingdom may not be all that United and not much of a Kingdom if Scotland gains independence. Despite all the checks and balances, or because of them, governance in the US is paralysed. We have already witnessed the shutdown of the US Federal Government in October 2013.

It seems to me that governments still act on the basis of the normal assumption that their actions would cause exactly the effect they intend to achieve. Policies are made on the conventional direct linear cause and affect basis: action on A will trigger the desired result on B. But in postnormal times, there is seldom a direct cause and effect relationship. Nowadays phenomena are the result of complex networks of causality in which many causal factors are intermingled; in such cases, action on just one element is not only futile but often also quite dangerous. Action on A triggers myriads of reactions in B, C, D all the way to Z; and many of these reactions can acquire chaotic proportions at lightning speed. Policy has to take a quantum leap to be meaningful in postnormal times.

To be honest, we do not really know how to shape viable policies for postnormal times. But there three basic principles that can guide us. First, we need to acknowledge that no one is in control, at least not in a democratic society. The bottom line is that those who think that only governments can deliver, cause or achieve whatever needs to be done, are deluding themselves. Indeed, the scope of any government intervention has been progressively eroded so it is always incomplete, much less than most policy makers assume. More and more aspects of governance fall out of the executive competence or capacity; in some cases, it takes the collaboration of several administrations to attain the desired goal, often involving interventions of a host of different social agents. So, by definition, policy making must consider and involve a host of different perspectives and competing, even contradictory, interests. In international relations, ‘our interests’ are not served by focussing on what ‘we desire’; our goals will be contested, just as we would contest ‘their goals’; and only through a process of contested negotiations a positive outcome can be realised.

In postnormal science discourse, the contested negotiations take place within what is called an ‘extended peer community’. Apart from scientists and academics, it includes a variety of other social actors, from environmentalists, critics, sceptics, writers, to housewives and shift workers. Infect, everyone who is affected by the products of science joins in and participates in the discussion and assessment of any given work.
The notion of extended peer community must now apply to all issues of governance as well as to social issues at large. Elsewhere I have shown how this idea could be used in intelligence communities (Serra, 2012). It is equally valid and important for political, administrative, cultural and corporate institutions. Of course, it requires that we enlarge our conception of participation. Most executives are wary of participation, and feel that participation processes are too much of an annoyance and there is little to be gained from them apart from a certain degree of legitimation. Therefore, the impulse of most administrations is to tame and restrict participations within a limited number of channels. For the purposes of postnormal governance participation should be enriched and diversified, not only granting access to the widest variety of actors but also establishing many different ways and procedures to shape policy. Technically this is not a problem; the main obstacle would be adherence to the modern ideal of control that is totally counterproductive for postnormal times.

Second, we need to appreciate that in a complex environment the guiding mechanism must itself be complex – this is known as Ashby’s Law of Requisite Variety. In other words, plurality and diversity have to be at the heart of governance, and reflected in all state institutions, for democracies to endure. When this does not happen, even the most successful states face serious chaotic obstacles.

Third, a policy worthy of the name must consider the impact of positive feedback loops. How are we going to cope with myriads of unintended consequences? How are we going to negotiate chaotic upheavals? While we cannot predict the outcome of a policy, we ought to have some awareness of its potential consequences.

The answer to postnormal challenges is not to hark back to some perceived normal (or pre-normal) responses – as demonstrated so well by the situation in the Ukraine, the fall of President Morsi and the rise of military dictatorship in Egypt, and the inane religious sentiments of the conservative government in Spain. It is to understand and embrace the dynamics of postnormal times and act accordingly. We have lost our capacity to control and steer change. We could mourn that loss. Or make the most of the postnormal condition.

References


