

Excursions

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Essays: Research in Times of Chaos

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What Does Chaos Mean to You?

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With the onset of the global pandemic, we quickly had to rearrange our lifestyles and work. For many of us, this meant working from home where possible, teaching children from home while working from home, doing only “the essential shopping”, and adhering to spending only a limited time outside. The world had to adjust.

Academia was not exempted. For many doctoral researchers, COVID-19 meant putting work on halt; others had to tweak their research outline, and with that get their ethics re-approved, swap study designs, and quickly adjust to doing everything online. This ranged from conference participation to teaching, from conducting interviews to counselling sessions. If that was not enough, many staff members and doctoral researchers also faced the uncertainty whether they would still have a job after the pandemic, which is particularly detrimental for self-funded, and/or international students, as well as for students with caring responsibilities. And don't get me started on the impact this has on people's mental health...

Although the world was facing “disorder”, I wondered: *Had everything been “in order” before?* More than creating chaos, the pandemic has brought many long-standing societal problems to the surface and made them very present: not everyone has the privilege of working from home, and, moreover, the uncertainty (or, in some cases, the certainty) of losing income has also made the divide between classes even more pronounced.

Similarly, it made systemic inequalities on an academic level even more visible. The year 2020 has certainly brought us “chaotic times”, but life was not exactly “*in order*” before.

While reflecting on that, I talked to friends and colleagues about what chaos means to them in their research and their PhD, and I learnt that for many, chaos has always been there, either as part of their academic journey or as an essential part of their objects of study.

Reflecting on his own experience as a PhD student at the University of Sussex, social psychologist Patricio Saavedra argues that chaos was an inevitable part of every PhD student’s academic career and that it shouldn’t necessarily be seen as something negative, but as something that could lead to creative connections and new ways of analysing phenomena. This is the definition of chaos that he also likes to apply to his research, where he has learnt that, sometimes, what appeared to be chaotic actually followed a pattern, a rationale, was not a “random” construction; it was more “ordered” than it seemed at first sight.

Isabelle Felsner, also a social psychologist, added that perceiving something as chaotic could sometimes be caused by the fact that the system that explains its structure has not been identified yet. So, similarly to Patricio, her understanding of chaos is not a necessarily negative one, but one that can indeed be beneficial, even productive of new things and ways of understanding our societies. She argues against established ideas that conceive chaos and structure as complete opposite experiences.

The opposition between chaos and order was not questioned only by Isabelle. Computer scientist Benedikt Kleinmeier suggested to me a revision of the dichotomy between chaos and order. Although in his field order was the “watchword”, through his research he discovered that sometimes chaos was not too far away.

Finally, social psychologist Selin Tekin Guven explained that thanks to her research, she had come to see chaos as a necessary “tool” that could

move processes and structures in new directions, eventually contributing to the change of unfair societal relations.

In general, these researchers' experiences – both in terms of their lives as PhD students and in relation to their research projects – invite us to understand and conceptualise chaos in ways that diverge from common sense explanations that see it as pure disorganisation and lack of control, something that has to be avoided. Instead, they see it as an inherent part of our personal and social everyday lives.

What do we take from this? Against its sometimes bad and messy reputation, the conversations I had with my friends and colleagues brought forward different understandings and uses for the word “chaos”. Although it is not always what we wished for, it can help us to identify weaknesses in “the system” (and sometimes the system itself). Thus, it can help us to learn and to grow, and to lead to change and progress.

I can only hope that “the chaos” we are facing right now, will result in exactly that: Social change.

Chaos in Career, Subject, And Life, by **Patricio Saavedra**

(Listen to the interview: <https://soundcloud.com/carina-hoerst/patricio-saavedra-on-chaos>)

I think chaos it's not necessarily something negative but something positive. It, furthermore, has a permanent role during a PhD. Chaos is always there. To put it differently: PhD programmes are not linear. It's not that you follow a certain path and say: I will reach my goal and then I will get my thesis. You go forward and you go backwards. And you can feel very stressed and you can feel chaotic. You can feel “this is not going anywhere”. But the thing is: Chaos means process. You need to think about that, and you need to organise that in some way. When you realise that getting a PhD is chaos, chaos is a part of a PhD life. You are in a situation where you have to make a lot of

decisions. You will have different paths, different options that you can follow. But you need to pick some of them and follow some structure and you create your own structure. You need to be patient, and you need to be aware that things cannot work as you plan. But that's part of the process. It's part of the cycle. A PhD is a chaotic experience, again, you go forward, you go backwards. And then you go forward, again. And your thesis definitely doesn't reflect your thought process, it's just a little piece of the whole process. [...]

My research was on [social movement] protests and how people that are not taking part support the use of violence in protests. Chaos is a very important concept. If we take the classical approach to protests or crowds, chaos is something negative. People say “oh, crowds – we need to avoid them because they are chaotic, they are dangerous, they are violent”. But actually, what I found out in my research is that although people can perceive it likes this, crowds are actually not chaotic. They follow some oddities; people’s actions within a crowd are not random, they follow a rationale. So, actually, in terms of violence, specifically, people can see that when protestors use violence it is because of the action the police or the authorities use in relation to the protesters. It’s a reaction. People can react violently and use violence because of the action of the police and the government, as a justification, there is a rationale, it's not random stuff that happened. People follow some logic. There is a system in the chaos because there is something that can explain people actions.

Patricio Saavedra is an Assistant Professor in Social Psychology at the Universidad de O'Higgins, Chile, and alumni of the University of Sussex, United Kingdom.

The Dichotomy Between Chaos and Order, by **Benedikt Kleinmeier**

As computer scientists, we believe in order and structure. Chaos is the absence of order and structure. The source

code of our programs shall be well structured and easy to read. Therefore, I try to avoid chaos. The final computer program should help people and not slow them down. Though, we often follow the KISS principle (“Keep It Stupid Simple”) to keep things as simple as possible. In the field of computer science, I think that machine learning (ML) is quite chaotic though. Most people use techniques from this domain, but they do not understand how a machine “learns” something. We cannot explain properly how a machine can detect (“learn”) something which is a very dangerous approach since ML-based applications are penetrating our lives (see Tesla's driving assistance and many other examples).

Benedikt Kleinmeier is a Doctoral Researcher in computer science at the Munich University of Applied Sciences, Germany.

Identifying the System, by **Isabelle Felsner**

If I had to define chaos, it would be the absence of a structure, it would be confusion, a lot of overlapping events, things, sounds, and I think that this can be seen in many things, such as objects in a room, or many people trying to get around a very busy market place. There is no real apparent system or organisation. I think actual chaos is mostly seen as a negative thing, but things will also appear to be chaotic when in reality a person has just not identified the system within them yet.

My research focus is on how social identification can influence the perception of sound. Part of my future studies will examine how the creation of noise is used as a tool by groups to express their identity but moreover, to influence empowerment of the own group and disempowerment of the outgroup. I think when opposing groups meet (for example at a protest or a football match), a lot of the collective creation of sound may seem to be chaotic when listening as an outsider. As many times the sounds overlap, it is one major wall of sound. Teasing it apart to

see which sound belongs to whom and what this sound means to one group or the other is a part of my research. So, in simple terms, I look at auditory chaos and how maybe it is less chaotic than it appears in the first instance when looking at it through a social psychological perspective.

Isabelle Felsner is a doctoral researcher in social psychology at Nottingham Trent University, UK.

Chaos as a Tool for Social Change, by **Selin Tekin Guven**

Against the authorities' point of view that defines chaos as a disorder or confusion and as something that we need to avoid or get rid of, I believe that communities need chaos to transform and revitalize their conditions and raise the aspirations of the community especially in the context of systemic inequality. When resources in a society are only available for a specific group of people (e.g. based on racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic levels of people), disadvantaged groups can raise their voice with the activities that damage the order of that community. For instance, women fight for equal rights, working-class communities fight for equal opportunities, environmental activists fight for climate change, and ethnic minorities fight against physical and systemic racism, discrimination, and inequality. To demand more resources (related to education, health, accommodation etc.) and social change against inequality, chaos can be created in different normative (e.g. signing petitions or attending peaceful protests) and non-normative (e.g. riots or sabotage) actions. I am working with campaigners who support survivors and bereaved families to seek justice in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire that occurred on 14th June 2017 in North Kensington, London. I am trying to understand how embodied collective behaviour can operate as a mechanism for solidarity among

campaigners, enabling them to articulate their identity politically and to foster internal and external group connections. On the 14th of every month in the aftermath of the fire, community members and supporters from wider communities come together for one of the main campaign activities, the “Silent Walk”. It is a respectable form of collective action to influence those in power and to challenge authorities’ ignorance and inactions by creating a strategy (chaos) that makes authorities listen to Grenfell campaigners.

Selin Tekin Guven is a Doctoral Researcher in social and community psychology at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom.