Discomfiture in Time; and the Future as Birthright

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The aim of this special issue, Morten Nielsen has explained, is analytically to conjoin 'urban' and 'time' the better to conceptualize contemporary predicaments, anxieties and challenges of social life in the world's cities. The invitation is to a temporally orientated ethnography of urban life.

Nielsen wants us to take this proposal absolutely literally. If cities have been characterized thus far in terms of an intensified *spatial* agglomeration of persons and things then there is an imminent need, he claims, to understand also an inherently *temporal* aspect to these processes. Nielsen's contributors then chart how temporal topologies are implicated in the lives of urbanites in a diversity of settings throughout the world. The temporal city comes to be at once a *frame of mind,* a *social condition,* a *methodology* and a *political-cum-moral programme*.

Discomfiture in time

My intention in this epilogue is a comparatively narrow one. I would draw attention to one theme in particular, variations on which recur throughout the volume. The theme

concerns *discomfiture in time*, by which I mean a sense of uncertainty with passing time; also a seeking out of certainty and fixity—in effect, beyond time—to offset the discomfort. The temporal city is a site that foregrounds questions of individual senses of existential security.

Let me first briefly rehearse how this theme appears in the context of the different contributions:

* In a poor Recife neighborhood, characterized by material want, lack of mobility and acute physical crowding, *Anne Line Dalsgaard* depicts people's uncertainty concerning whether their and their neighbours' lives are temporally synchronized. Without knowledge of one's interlocutors' imagined futures, one cannot be sure of their current motives towards oneself and of their sincerity. Can they be loaned money? In an attempt to offset their discomfiture, residents try to read their individual neighbours' character: a 'simple' person is trustworthy because he or she is not two or plural, but hardworking and stable over time. Here is time both as resource and impedance.

* In post-socialist Ulaanbaatar and its sprawling peri-urban townships, *Morten Axel Pedersen* describes how for many urbanites a large proportion of an average day is dedicated to tracking down others by whom they are owed money, or looking for potential creditors from whom they could themselves borrow. Debt compels a particular kind of movement around the city; also a particular kind of nostalgia. During the 'socialist age' relations of debt were longterm and mostly restricted to closed circuits of friends; with the dawning 'age of the market', both the number of debt obligations and the size of monetary loans have expanded dramatically. Yet there is little regulation or formalization of this lending, whether legal, moral or temporal. The fact that people keep

on lending and borrowing money regardless—and irrespective of people's reputed trustworthiness—shows debt acquiring a gift-like quality.

*   In a Kingston where bursts of economic inflation have disrupted the predictability of many kinds of street transactions and relationships, where infrastructural collapse means that many have no access to sewerage and water flow is often disabled, and where political terrorism condenses urbanites into garrison communities, *Huon Wardle* describes the practice of affording temporal experience a spiritual accountability. Social life is experienced as a double-bind: transient and free-floating on the one hand, intransitive and blocked on the other. It is 'a sufferation'. However, for members of the Jamaican spiritist church, 'Revival Zion', the Holy Spirit and angels activate gifts innate to the particular individual which provide an anchoring point for personal experience and also an index of permanence.

*   In contemporary Madrid, *Alberto Corsín Jiménez* describes a kind of sociality based on the rationality and the temporality of the mortgage: mediated by legalistic language and actuary calculations, and characterized by talk of interest rates, square metreage and real-estate brokers. Urban life is rendered a physical and social project 'in construction' and 'in-progress', permanently in suspension, founded upon a hopeful yet fearful economy of credit. The 'mortgaged polis', Corsín Jiménez urges, is a contemporary urban condition of accelerated time, of conspiracy and apocalypse, whose sensorial and experiential rhythms oscillate between urgency and uncertainty, and hopefulness and expectation. Madrid emerges as a tricksterish figure conjuring up subjective worlds of turbulence and confusion, but also hope.

*   *Andrew Irving*'s concern is to know New York's Lower East Side as a 'semantic' neighbourhood mediated by modes of internally represented experience, expression and memory: unvoiced speech-acts and internal conversation. In particular he would reveal the mental and emotional shift among New York men and women living with HIV/AIDS that accompanied the arrival in the mid-1990s of anti-retroviral medications. Time and space have been 're-opened' for these people but their physical neighbourhood remains a mnemonic of radical changes in being, belief, and perception, of the loss and contingency that accompany terminal illness.

*   In the setting of London zoo, *Adam Reed* finds individuals reflecting on their lives in the city and also able to set up a critical distance from an everyday human condition, at least to an extent. While an individual human life, both planned or unfolding, possesses a modicum of freedom and control relative to those of the animals in the zoo, then—for which reason 'time might well be up' on the very idea of the zoo as an appropriate space—nevertheless there is a sense in which human and animal lives articulate. For the natural history of evolution suggests an understanding of time that is enveloping, out of individual control, and at the same time inclusive of all organic life. Evolution reveals an organic kinship in time, and a mutuality of life-trajectories, comparable to the connections across the city provided by an individual's network of human kinship and friendship.

Future shock

Discomfiture in time is not a new finding. 'Future shock' was the way in which sociologist Alvin Toffler popularized an idea that rapid technological-cum-social change

was so major and so universal that the effect was equivalent to finding oneself immersed in another culture. Even if one stayed in the same physical space it became difficult to reconcile one's changing environment with one's world-views: difficult to measure, anticipate, treat, the passage of time. And yet, Toffler suggested (1970), 'the future *is* our way of life' inasmuch as the pace of change in human environments can be expected to grow rather than decrease. However popularist and broad-brush Toffler's depiction was, in the urban strategies which the above ethnographic accounts variously detail one may read of members of contemporary cities universally experiencing a disorientation not unfamiliar to Toffler's.

But then again, is such a disorientation necessarily so urban and so contemporary a phenomenon? Can one not be said to witness different *degrees* of temporal discomfiture at different historical periods and different physical sites? So that the phenomenon Toffler identifies as inherently contemporary and 'modern' is different in degree but perhaps not in kind to the experience of a 'generation gap' that repeatedly recurs in the historical record? In her historical reconstruction of the life of Martin Guerre in sixteenth-century France, for instance, Natalie Zemon Davis (1983:2) cites the reminiscing of an old Breton peasant, Lubin (as recorded and published by the lawyer Noel du Fail in 1547) to the effect that when he (Lubin) got married at the age of thirty-four: 'I hardly knew what it was to be in love (…), whereas nowadays there is hardly a young man past fifteen who hasn't tried something out with the girls'. One is *humanly* discomfited by the passage of time, including one's ageing body, insofar as it delivers an inability to understand the behaviour and outlook of those younger or older than oneself, and one has recourse to strategies of displacement to assure oneself of an existential security: 'things were

different, and better, before, and hence may be again'; 'the generational miscreants will receive their come-uppance when their misbehaviour incurs the wrath of the gods or of the natural environment or their own ageing bodies'. There is a universality to discomfiture in time, one may conclude; such discomfiture is part of a human phenomenology that is as immediately sourced as our ageing bodies.

However, I do not wish to disavow the originality and contemporaneity of Toffler's observation either. There is something that a discomfiture in time points to that *is* very new and very up-to-date: very scientific and also esoteric. Let me quote from chemistry Nobel-Laureate, Ilya Prigogine: 'In effect, all human and social interaction and all literature is the expression of uncertainty about the future, and of a construction of the future' (1989:398). The wider context of Prigogine's apparently presumptuous and reductive claim is a scientific thesis concerning the instability and creativity inherent in the natural world which makes absolute control and precise forecasting impossible. Instability has in the past been paradigmatically repressed, Prigogine elaborates, but talk in natural science today emphasises instability as against determinism, and creative engagement in the world as against an independent materialism. A clearer understanding is emerging, he suggests, of natural systems as 'dualistic': order and disorder co-exist and imply one another, although the relation between them is instable, non-equilibrial, unpredictable, distorted. The universe, on this view, (including our human nervous system, our human societies, earth's climate and ecology) is intrinsically formed of disorder, while species of order float within it. The temporal horizon of possible prediction is small even if we are thoroughly conversant with starting conditions.

Paradoxically as it may seem, however, in a universe based on instability, human agency and creativity again become central to fundamental laws of the universe (for the first time since Galileo). Time is not something readymade that a supra-human consciousness unfolds, and humankind—the human individual—is a participant in the construction of natural order amid disorder. 'Time is construction', as Paul Valéry phrases it (cited in Prigogine 1989:399). The role of temporal-human-activity-within-nature turns this new universe into a riskier one than its determined predecessor but also a homelier one (potentially at least) for it includes the power of human agency and choice, and responsibility.

To return this to a more established social-scientific discourse is to recall Simmel's discussion of modernity—epitomized by the urban—as an era and an attitude of mind characterized by *excess*: by stimulation, opportunity, choice and risk. For participants in urban milieux, who act as co-constructors of its social nature, the excess may lead to a blasé attitude, Simmel surmised (1971:329ff.), as a kind of defensive reaction to the fullness of modern experience. The key insight for Simmel, however, is that urban excess instantiates, inter alia, a freedom from limitations and constraints. The modern city is 'the natural habitat of civilized man', as his erstwhile student Robert Park (1968:3) phrased it. The excessive variety and difference that the city encompassed—however transitory, casual, instable and fortuitous may be the meetings and communications between this variety—was instrumental in facilitating a general expanding of the norms of civility in an expansive future.

But then I am also aware that talk of 'excess' and 'freedom from limitation', of 'civility' and 'civilization', can seem a far remove from the urban experience mapped in

this volume: from the billion people and more now occupants of squatter settlements that pervade the global developing city (and whose number the United Nations predicts as doubling in the next thirty years), as also from the seemingly more settled inhabitants of established cities for whom an aspirational life also appears under threat. *How can we analytically allow for the temporal city as embodying both the instability and excess of creativity—of modern civilized man—and of potentially alienating collapse—of future shock?*

Anxiety of freedom

Key to Morten Nielsen's conceptualizing of the temporal city is a kind of relationality whose ontology owes much to individuals' imaginative capacities. *What there is* in the urban milieu derives from what can be effected through an imaginative construction of time and space. The failures of urban infrastructure might mean that life is characterized by a permanent provisionality, and the likelihood of future plans coming to fruition might already, and always, have collapsed in the present …. and yet the present is still marked by the traces of those collapsed futures. The future that is always unrealisable still possesses a kind of negative resilience that acts as a gravitational pull on the present, leading one's life and relations in a certain projected direction.

I read this as saying that the temporal city is home to a kind of method of hope. It is a site where the future pulls the present out of the past. Moreover, the capacity to occupy the temporal city as a frame of mind, to gather to oneself the wherewithal to begin the imagined journey from now to then, despite the instable project of any desired future outcome, is, I would say, to be read in this volume as a distinctive feature of

human experience. We find Andrew Irving's informant, 'Neil', then, being buoyed up by hope in New York as we find Anne Line Dalsgaard's 'Eduardo' in Recife, Huon Wardle's 'Jeanette' in Kingston and Alberto Corsin-Jimenez's 'Luna' in Madrid. As a frame of mind the temporal city is a kind of resource drawn upon to inject an excessive potential for the future into a debilitating present.

Endemic to the human situation, Kierkegaard suggested (anticipating Prigogine), was a constant striving; since at the heart of every individual life was a tension and unrest concerning future possibilities and yet 'eternally it is the task of every individual to become an entire human being' (1941:309). By 'task' Kierkegaard implied both necessity and duty. To be a human individual was to exist in a mode of becoming since one's identity was a product of one's will, one's desire and one's work. It was also the case that it was vital to exercise this human freedom, for an authentic and personal life was obliged to possess its own project and not to follow that of another: 'It is not so much a question of choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses. Thereby the personality announces its inner infinity, and thereby in turn the personality is consolidated' (Kierkegaard 1987:144). Individuality entailed choice and passion, freedom and commitment. At the same time, Kierkegaard recognised the anxiety associated with having the responsibility to face the future. The freedom of the individual could be dizzying and incur vertigo: 'I could throw myself into the yawning abyss; I shall'. Notwithstanding, it is one's human necessity and one's duty at that point is to go on: to appreciate that 'anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when (…) freedom looks down into its own possibility' (Kierkegaard 1981:61).

The setting from which 'Urban Times' emerges as a volume was a conference held at the University of St. Andrews under the auspices of the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies, as was mentioned in the Introduction. One of the shorthands used to justify the Centre, and to depict the 'cosmopolitan project' in anthropology, is to say that it puts the concept of culture in its proper place. 'Culture' can be defined as those symbolic systems and those rhetorical devices by which particular conventional versions of the world's objects and relations are classified and expressed in community exchange. But while cultural forms (systems and devices) facilitate expression and exchange they are not things-in-themselves, in possession of their own agency, and they do not represent some kind of horizon, shaping, limiting and determining (Rapport 1997, 2007).

'Culture', in Michael Jackson's (2002:125) summary, should 'be seen as an idiom or vehicle of intersubjective life, but not its foundation or final cause'. Having borrowed the concept from nineteenth-century German Romanticism and lately seen the concept embraced and employed in an essentialistic, exclusionary sense by communitarian lobbyists involved in a politics of collective identity, the work of anthropology, Jackson urges, must now be deconstructionist: to 'purge our discourse of the idealist connotation of the culture concept' (2002:109-110). Cultures are symbolic tools, put to particular uses, but they do not represent destinies, they possess no hegemony over cognition and embodiment, and they speak more to the customary 'truths' of tradition and commensality than any knowledge of absolute ontologies. 'Culture' as set of conventional codes need in no way coincide with the true nature of being. As Ernest Gellner's (1995:6) quipped: 'A collectivity united in a false belief is a culture. Truths, especially demonstrable truths, are available to all and sundry, and do not define any

continuity of faith. But errors (…) tend to be the badges of community and loyalty'. The starting point of any adequate contemporary anthropology, Gellner went on to suggest (1993a:54), is to work out the social options and necessities of a post-Enlightenment world of 'trans-cultural and amoral knowledge'. This is a world of mobility, egalitarianism and the 'free, individualistic choice of identity', but also of anxiety and insecurity: rapid change, fission and fusion, dispute (Gellner 1993b:3).

To 'put culture in its place', I would argue, is to recognise the ways and extents to which truth exists beyond cultures; as do also rationality, science, civilization and morality (Rapport 2011). A 'cosmopolitan anthropology'—one that deems not culture to be its foundational concept, or even society, but the universal human actor, an 'Anyone', immersed in the instable world of his or her creative activities (Rapport 2010)—begins from the truth that there are universal human capacities and that these manifest themselves in individual human bodies: individuality incorporates the universal commonality of humanity.

The work of anthropology is then to flesh out this polar dimension: What it means to be an individual human being; How the dialectic of species wholeness ('cosmos') and embodied particularity ('polis') might give onto universal insights into humanity concerning knowledge and morality alike (Rapport 2009). Moreover, if individuality and humanity represent the poles of an ontological truth concerning the human condition, then classificatory distinctions that are erected between the individual and the human— nation and community, ethnicity, religiosity and class—are to be critically examined and deconstructed. Cultural categories are recognised as rhetorical devices epiphenomenal

upon the ontological polar relation between individuality and humanity, and not misconceived as other than symbolic, idealist and instrumental.

On this view, if I say that the temporal city is at once a frame of mind, a social condition, a methodology and a political-cum-moral programme, then I am seeing its grounding as lying beyond the cultural. *The temporal city evidences a general human complex of experience*: it does not pertain to particular cultural constructions, particular communitarian or class memberships, or specific symbolic classifications of the world. Albeit that experience of the temporal city will come to be expressed and exchanged in different cultural forms (as the chapters in this volume attest), the anthropological work is to report on these en route to discerning human commonalities in the ethnographic diversity: to discovering what the temporal city discloses in the way of human capabilities and liabilities. Why is the freedom of modern constructive activity-in-the-world sometimes a site of human suffering and sometimes of an authenticating creativity? How can the latter condition be nourished in urbane ('humane') settings and the former condition be guarded against? So that futurity is a fulfilment and not an alienation?

Futurity as modern birthright

The exchange of cultural forms, Michael Jackson (2002:126) suggests, is an instance of how human beings hope for intersubjectivity, which itself reflects a timeless human striving to strike a balance between autonomy and anonymity. That is, in order to ward off the anxiety of our solitary subjective embodied consciousness—faced with the uncertain future—we imagine groupness and common being, traditionalism and communication. Beyond these imaginings, however, beyond any such 'phantasy of

groupness' (Laing 1968:81), exists the truth of individuality and humanity: of the universalities of human embodiment and the particularities of discrete individual consciousness. It is to these ontologies, I have argued, that a cosmopolitan anthropology provides scientific and moral testimony. The anthropological objective, then, is to work out those social conditions wherein universal human capacities for creativity might find their fulfilment in every individual human life, irrespective of the accidental circumstances of their birth (and their urban life) and allowing for the intrinsic instability of our being-in-the-world.

Ideally, futurity may be conceived as a kind of human birthright. Human beings have the capacity to author their own individual versions of self, other and environment, their own cultural worlds or world-views (Rapport 1993). According to a cosmopolitan vision, moreover, they should enjoy the right to live by these individual versions at least to the extent that they do not curtail the rights of others. That is, a human life needs to pay no dues to versions of reality other than its own—to the symbolic classifications and traditions constructed by others. A life is the precious possession of its individual incumbent alone. It is destined to belong to no culture, no community, no state. The future is that ideal domain in which the individual becomes, and keeps on becoming, according to his or her own 'choice, passion, freedom and commitment' (to recall Kierkegaard's phrasing).

If the future is accorded this space, then 'modernity', after Simmel, with its representative moment of urban excess, is a way to describe the distinctive *latitude* that has existed since the Enlightenment for free individual being and expression. Individual versions, world-views and life-projects are allowed to pile up against one another in an

'urbane' fashion (Rapport 2003). Modernity provides an opportunity for an excess of potential futures. Modern urbanity we have heard Morten Nielsen characterize as an 'intensified agglomeration' of people and things, and of kinds of people and kinds of things. Modernity and urbanity together—which we might know as 'the temporal city'— offer that heady mix in which futurity might actually become a universal human birthright. This is not to downplay the <u>favela</u> of the global south and the collapse of welfare-state programmes elsewhere but to emphasise that anxiety and excess also instantiates the 'dizziness of freedom'.

The rise of fundamentalist religions may attest, according to Zygmunt Bauman (1998), to individuals choosing to pledge their loyalties to a totalitarian ideology—to fundamentalist religiosity and to fascism—as an escape from risk. Anxiety is replaced by freedom from choice, big and small, with the promise of infinite powers of community, of collective ideology, tradition and leadership, being deployed towards the goal of existential security. Here, the potential futurity of a unique individual life is replaced by needs and rules proclaimed in the group's name and towards the reproduction of 'it's' culture. The problems that such fundamentalism addresses are real, Bauman urges: real discomfiture in time. The issue, he concurs with Gellner, is to find non-totalitarian solutions. This, to repeat, is fundamental to the project of a cosmopolitan anthropology.

The importance of conceptualizing the temporal city, and providing ethnographic testament to its being individually lived, is also this: one discovers those conditions optimal to enjoying the human birthright to become. One recognises, in Jonathan Raban's (1974) phrasing, the intrinsic 'softness' of the city: a time and a space awaiting the shaping intentionality of its individual resident but otherwise devoid of any intrinsic

supporting mechanisms. In the *ideal* temporal city—and notwithstanding the time and distance yet to travel—the individual fulfils capacities to author his or her own future while the anxiety of freedom and uncertainty do not psychically overwhelm and are not physically life-threatening. A discomfiture in time is perhaps part of the instability of the real but it does not alienate the individual from the modern, urbane opportunity to pursue a personal life-project.

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