Repossessing the future

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You are not surprised at the force of the storm–
you have seen it growing.
The trees flee. Their flight
sets the boulevards streaming.

      Rainer Maria Rilke

The image of a gathering storm seems an appropriate metaphor for 2011. Many defining events were characterised by rupture, revolution or collapse, and they often occurred with unprecedented speed. From the Arab spring and Occupy to the ongoing financial crisis and the building European sovereign debt crisis. It is evident that collapse and revolution are symptoms not of separate crises but of a larger crisis in the modes of thinking and being that underpin Western civilization[1] – progress, growth and linear time no longer offer viable solutions to the crises they engender. Looking back at 2011 one of the most fascinating aspects of the unfolding crisis is its temporal dimension – the speed with which it unfolds, the instantaneous and chaotic consequences of (re)actions in a connected and increasingly unstable globalising world. At the same time our democratic institutions are incapable of dealing effectively with the crisis because they are unable to keep up with the pace at which events unfold. No, a storm is a fitting metaphor.

Two related themes emerged from the conversations we've had with friends and colleagues about the past year[2]. First, to many of us, time seems to be going ever faster. Both in personal and public spheres events have unfolded with such speed and intensity that it was often only in hindsight their consequences could be grasped. Second, the future seems increasingly uncertain. Whether it is the future of the Euro-zone, employment prospects, political developments, the outlook for savings/pensions, or energy and food security, a large element of uncertainty underpinned our conversations. It is difficult even to say what the world will look like a couple of months down the line. Predictions based on abstractions from past events become less meaningful faced with the high level of uncertainty surrounding the developments of markets, politics, technology and even the physical environment (remember the UK drought that disappeared almost as soon as it was declared late last spring?). In our connected and instantaneous global present information travels near the speed of light and events happen in real-time. Time and space seem to have been erased from our inter-connected socio-economic systems.

That time has sped up and the future become more uncertain over the last year may sound whimsical (how can absolute clock-time move faster?) or cliché (the increasing speed of time has been discussed by people ranging from Paul Virilio to Terence McKenna). While there is nothing particularly new or novel about this perspective, we suggest that paying attention to the temporal aspects of the crisis offers an analytical entry point to understanding its roots and logic[3]. Taking seriously that time is created in social contexts and that life unfolds in a diversity of temporalities as well as in the external clock-time, allows us to see how and why many of our political and socio-

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[1] The crisis can be described in terms of the logic and ideology of capitalism and neoliberalism (e.g. *David Graeber, Debt (New York: First Melville House Printing, 2011*), or our cognitive limits to process dense information in increasingly complex and networked systems (e.g. *Dwight Read, Sander van der Leeuw, and David Lane, "The Innovation Innovation", available at: http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2798j162*), or the disconnect with nature that underpins our culture (e.g. *Clive Hamilton, Requiem for a Species (London: Earthscan, 2010*).

[2] This text developed as a series of written and spoken conversations between the authors but also benefited from much wider discussions with friends and colleagues. Thanks to Peter Holm-Jensen, Mathis Hampel and Christian Gormsen Schmidt in particular.

[3] This discussion draws on and resonates with the work and thought of Barbara Adam, Robert Hassan, Paul Virilio, Jay Griffiths, Alan Watts, Sander van der Leeuw and Michel Serres.

economic institutions are showing signs of dysfunction. Everything, from mountains and stars, to trees, bodies, and social institutions have their own temporality, or *Eigenzeit*, which manifest as landslides, orbits, respiration, sleep patterns or electoral cycles. In a world where the spectrum of time is narrowing and shifting towards the faster end of the scale some of these temporalities disappear from view or become irrelevant. A world characterised by the need for speed is a world increasingly cut off from context and place – an abstract hyper-reality where even the future becomes decontextualised and empty. But before we dive into the future let's start with the past and see how we arrived here in the first place.

The nature of time is one of our oldest preoccupations as a species and the answers we have invented profoundly shape the kind of societies we create. Time-keepers have been at the centre of political and religious power throughout history and our relationship with time has deeply influenced how we perceive our place in the universe and structure our lives. Stories of the beginning and end times delineate the human world from the spirit world, and myths of origin and destiny in turn give meaning to our existence and guide our actions. As Barbara Adam explains 'it is the human endeavour to impose a cultural will on time'[4] – cosmology and time reckoning are central characteristics for our species. However, for most of human history time belonged to the gods and could not be appropriated or controlled by humans (this is part of the reason why usury for so long was forbidden within Christianity and still is within Islam). Control and ownership of time went hand in hand with the appearance of clock-time and the related linear conception of time. These are very recent inventions.

The rise of the mechanical clock as the standard measure of time was a slow revolution that started as far back as the early centuries of the last millennium. However, it was a revolution that completely changed the meaning of time and our relationship with the natural rhythms which embody time. In the words of Adam 'the mechanical clock captured the medieval imagination, infused understanding and changed public and private social relations'[5]. The significance of the revolution can hardly be overstated. With the development of the clock, time eventually became constant, precise and seemingly neutral. It became independent from place and natural cycles and importantly it became tractable to calculation. It is not hard to see the significance of the mechanical clock for the development of industry where time is allocated as an economic resource. Once time acquired abstract exchange-value it entered economic calculations as the central variable to achieve efficiency, higher productivity and ultimately larger profits. Perhaps the largest impact of the shift to mechanical clock-time was the cultural disenchantment of nature's temporalities (such as the rhythms of the human body, the changing of seasons, the movements of stars and planets). Lewis Mumford observes: 'Time-keeping passed into time-serving and time-accounting into time-rationing. As this took place, Eternity ceased gradually to serve as a measure and focus of human actions'[6].

The contours of our speed-addicted present can be glimpsed in the changing medieval worldviews and social relations Adam mentions. And so can the footloose economy, rationalist scientism and managerial crisis-politics of today. The conceptual re-orientation of time was accompanied by technological developments that enabled greater speed of both industrial processes and communication. With the invention of the wireless telegraph towards the end of the nineteenth century countries and continents became connected so that information about distant events became almost instantly available. This made the synchronised global time possible and in 1913 the Eiffel Tower transmitted the first time signal that reached across the globe. This marks the final transcendence of physicality and space and presents the birth of a global present. It is perhaps this moment more than any other that cements the transformation of time that had taken place in the course of the previous centuries. Robert Hassan describes it this way: 'through the convergence of the clock, industrialization and modernity, time was transformed from a mode of subjective

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4   *Barbara Adam, Time (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 95.*
5   *Ibid.*, 113
6   Mumford quoted in *ibid.*, 115

experience into an abstract value'[7]. The economic advantages that more efficient production systems and faster communication yielded continued to drive technological and social innovations. Increased synchronisation and acceleration of time characterised socio-economic developments in the first half of the twentieth century as speed became essential to compete in markets. The logic of Taylorism and Fordism dictated that *the more is produced per unit of time the larger the profit per unit of time*. This dictum drove vast increases in time 'saving' by accelerating work processes through efficiency and optimisation mechanisms.

Hassan identifies the advent of a new type of speed with the shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism in the early 1970s and the development of new information and communication technologies (ICT). Although Fordism had yielded increases in efficiency it was a rigid system because it was geared towards mass production of generic goods and ultimately tied to place. The shift towards more flexible systems of production was enabled and enhanced by new computer technologies which could make smaller production systems economically viable by making calculations and adjustments inexpensive. Labour time was also made more flexible through adjustable work hours and decentralising work tasks. This marked the beginning of a new era where ICT takes centre stage and work and leisure is increasingly organised and performed on virtual platforms. Virtual space affords enormous flexibility regarding where and when specific tasks are undertaken – it overcomes the limitations of clock-time by setting both the working day and the workplace free. Any hour can be a work hour and any place a workplace when you are connected to the internet. At the same time, virtual reality operates on the basis of the digitised binary code 1 and 0 – the smallest possible difference which by virtue of its simplicity is extremely fast.

There seems to be no limits to what can be converted into digital language and the abstract time of the network. The expanding virtual network integrates banking systems, tax payments, mail systems, person and business directories, cartographies as well as cultural expressions like music, films and photography or social relations on virtual platforms. Virtuality has also facilitated entirely novel forms of social networking and artistic expressions and have opened up new front lines in the war to control the flow of information. Paradoxically, the freedom that the internet has given us contains within it a threat to personal privacy and infringement of states and corporations into the smallest details our lives – as is seen in the virtual war that is being played out between hacker-activists and corporate states. In terms of time, virtual space represents complete disembodiment, it is a non-place where information can travel between any two points on the globe at the click of a button. The translation of embodied temporalities into digital language favours acceleration: coding into 1s and 0s is reductive, and reduction creates acceleration. In this way, slower temporalities which aren't readily translated and integrated into the network loose out. The logic of the network itself if speed. But rather than a widening of temporal diversity, which *more* faster temporalities could bring, translation brings homogenisation. Only systems that are fast enough survive.

This is why virtual time can be seen as an extension of Empire, a kind of colonisation of time itself. As we internalise virtual time and increasingly organise our lives around it, the danger is that we stop noticing other temporalities. Collectively, we – in the West – have already lost some sense of connection with and understanding of other human (say, what with a derogative term is called 'Indian time' in North America or Aborigine dreamtime) and natural (e.g. migration patterns or moon cycles) temporalities. With internalisation of virtual time we discipline ourselves to speed, and when time moves fast we tend to look forward rather than sideways. The ideological force that underpins the narrowing of temporal diversity (and is also at work in the socio-economic restructuring that drives societies to become faster and ever more competitive) is progress. This is seen in the general bafflement at the statement that clock-time is not neutral or universal but actually a historical and social creation – it is counter-intuitive to our progress-ridden culture that this should be so. It is also found in the sometimes very aggressive dismissal by progress ideologues of any critique as 'reactionary' or 'romantic'.

To the ideology of progress, temporal 'otherness' is backward, even dangerous. As Jay Griffiths reminds us, progress is 'a specific idea: Western, money-oriented, technologically-biased

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[7]   *Robert Hassan, Empires of Speed (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 55-6*

and racist in its history and its effects, but it pretends to universality, so that all peoples must be made to define and embrace progress in exactly the same way'[8]. She describes how progress is the enemy of place and embodied time. It is also an ideology that appropriates the future, stripping it of content in the pursuit of new or novel innovations and economic growth. The 'empty future', which appears before us like a vast blank canvas we can decorate and shape as we please, arises as a consequence of a culture steeped in the ideology of progress. The value of future promised values of goods are bought and sold in futures markets and oblige us to create the future accordingly. Divorced from context the commodified future can be discounted, traded and controlled. As a consequence, knowing the future has become the domain of mathematicians, modellers, bureaucrats and planners.

The acceleration of socio-economic processes within an empty future deeply affects or democratic institutions. In this way the pursuit of progress and profit has created a double-bind where the future seems more uncertain[9] while the consequences of our present actions reaches further and further into the depths of time[10]. While the future is decontextualised or emptied of content, the emergence of abstract and instantaneous virtual time has created a demand on political institutions to operate at ever faster speeds. However, the *Eigenzeit*, the inbuilt temporality of many of these institutions – some of which where founded before the invention of wireless communication – have reached their limits and are becoming increasingly ineffective. The electoral cycles of liberal democracies operate in a fundamentally different, and slower, temporal realm than do global finances. In Hassan's words: 'politics can no longer synchronize with the pace of change that has become an end in itself'[11]. The accelerating drive of capitalism has created a system that no one can control. Yet the stakes are high. Our technologies extend the consequences of our actions further into time than ever before. Take the pollution of the atmosphere, the manipulation of genes in plants and animals, or the lifetime of nuclear waste. Genetic manipulation reaches back into the farthest past, right back to the beginnings of life, and re-orders the outcome of time. And all of these examples affects generations further into the future than we can reliably estimate and in ways that we can never know.

In this analysis we can perhaps see why 2011 to many of us appeared as a year that passed faster than any other we have lived through. Large-scale events actually do unfold faster than ever before in the time of virtual reality where information reaches the speed of light. It also gives explanations as to why the future may seem more uncertain. The speed and connectivity of virtual space make the cascading consequences of actions increasingly chaotic while public institutions have reached the limits of their ability to affect their own future in the face of a financial system operating in the virtual realm. Rupture and collapse become more likely. As a consequence we are seeing how previously 'unimaginable' futures are opening up (just a couple of years ago the collapse of the Euro-zone would have been considered a bad joke by most). When capital relocates it affects employment, pensions, and social security. In this sense, our livelihoods are becoming more insecure. This is what makes the storm so frightening: few places are left untouched by it and ripples are felt everywhere in the networked society.

But the increasing pace of time is part illusion. The Earth still takes 365,25 days to orbit around the sun. Our bodies still need sleep and mountains still age at the same pace. This is not to say that natural temporalities are static. They have their own variations and increasingly are affected by virtual speed (say, when our sleep patterns are altered because we no longer have to work nine to five, spring arrives several days earlier because of global warming, or when mountains are blown apart to obtain minerals or metals for sale in the market). The paradox of the abstract lightning speed of hyper-reality is that although it is changing our collective experience of time and integrating more and more systems which have real life consequences into its logic, its very existence is produced by and depends on us and our technologies. Despite appearances, clock-time

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[8]   *Jay Griffiths, Pip Pip, London: Flamingo (1999), 184*
[9]   As explained in *Robert Hassan, Empires of Speed (Leiden: Brill, 2009)*
[10] Here we follow Adam and Groves' analysis in *Barbara Adam and Chris Groves, Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics (Leiden: Brill, 2007)*
[11] *Robert Hassan, Empires of Speed (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 17*

and virtual time are only real in so far that we use them to organise our lives. They are not time itself. This was apparent in our conversations about 2011 because not all of us feel time is moving faster. Some did not experience the same onrush of time, perhaps because they have been paying more attention to other, embodied temporalities and have had more time for reflection. While we can observe virtual time is moving faster we can still choose to live in embodied temporalities. We live in an age where it has become a life skill to balance the power and advantages of virtual time against embodied temporalities.

Because the emergence of the global present has also open cracks and produced new ways of resisting and subverting the hegemonic forces of speed, progress, and growth. It has undermined the comfortable position of being distanced observers and forced the 'other' into the conversation. People find friends and allies further afield than before and people mobilise with unprecedented speed. It has shown how the promises of liberal democracy cannot deliver and revealed the centres of power that have been built behind their facades. The danger inherent to the storm is evident – 2011 was also the year when the tragedy of Mark Kennedy was revealed and the extent of surveillance and repression became painfully obvious. But when illusions become apparent and structures collapse there is a moment where the vacuum of old and dying imaginaries needs to be filled with new stories and ideas. The crisis of civilization has brought redefinitions of wealth, rethinking of money and economics, and opened up for new modes of organisation. It is imperative that the futures we imagine now are embodied and contextualised futures not to be commodified, discounted and exchanged. Today's crisis is the result of past generations' imaginaries of an empty, progressive and commodified future[12]. Let's stop making the same mistake.

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[12] See *Barbara Adam, "History of the future: Paradoxes and challenges", Rethinking History 14, no. 3 (2010): 361–378*