

The Time of Turbulence

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The early years of the 21st century are still cluttered with all the conceptual debris of the modern period: revolution, modernity, development, secularism, planning. It is also not possible to speak with easy confidence about representation, subjectivity, history, nation, class, or just about any of the concepts the previous generations grew up with. Who can remember today that for a long time the revolutionary 'moment' seemed ascendant? Acceleration was the inspiring mood of the long revolutionary epoch, from the French Jacobins to the avant-garde, from the Futurists (who worshipped war and speed), to the Bolsheviks, and the early years of the Chinese revolution. Mao's poem captures this mood the best:

So many deeds cry out to be done,
And always urgently;
The world rolls on,
Time presses.
Ten thousand years are too long,
Seize the day, seize the hour.
(FLPH, Beijing, 1965:46)

When Marxism went into a decisive spin by 1989, who could have known that this would also signal the crisis of so many other parallel ideas: liberal sovereignty and citizenship, secularism, development, and radical modernism in general? When the statues of Marx and Lenin came down in Tirana and Tbilisi, hidden cracks developed in the figures of Kant and Locke. "Down with all the hypotheses that have allowed the belief in a true world", Nietzsche once wrote bitterly, little realising that this would become the slogan of the 1980s. This crisis of the modern West's legacy has been blindingly fast, throwing into confusion and depression generations of state builders, committed activists and secular intellectuals.

The most intriguing casualty has been the idea of transition itself. The notion of modern transition was based on the idea of enlightened elites posing political, economic or utopian solutions to an existing contradiction.¹ The consensus on transition was so overwhelming that it was one thing that united liberals, nationalists and Marxists.² In the post-war period,

transitions of the kind imagined by its architects became less and less likely, and the questions began. In his dying days, Gramsci had agonised about this: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". The first casualties of the transition imaginary were the developmentalists, followed rapidly by the radicals; the recent quagmire of the US Empire in Iraq has put to rest the neo-conservative dream of 'democracy' at the barrel of the gun.

Media 'Events'

As the old imaginaries retreated, we began to move at the 'speed of light', so much so that the past two decades seem like a blurred landscape of events: wars, massacres, catastrophes and more wars. Bombed cities and boom landscapes, famine and globalisation, bubble culture and staged events. Some called it postmodernism, some called it technological life, new empires, and new displacements. This crowding of the landscape of objects, events, images, shows up best in the over-informationalised screen of news television: with pop-ups, and scrolling text. What Indian viewers once associated with the pirate aesthetic of the local cable movie channel has now moved on to the main news channel. This produces a thematic non-synchronicity that would have bewildered and horrified the modernists: stock price tickers co-existing with tragic death reports, sports updates in the corner of the screen with melodramas. This mediascape weirdly coexists with violent urban displacements in the so-called boom regions of China and India. In Delhi, which has seen the some of the largest displacements of non-legal working-class settlements since the Emergency of 1975-77, the most unusual stories have actually filtered from *viral* networks: emails, blogs, broadsheets, conversations in the now-shattered localities. Like a virus, these media fragments often remain hidden, and ruthlessly ignore origins, be they that of commercial or 'alternative' media.

In the TV era of the last century, the dominant critical attitude to media was best summed up by Heidegger's well-known comment that television abolished every possibility of remoteness. This notion of the overwhelming centralising and disembodying role of the modern media experience, best epitomised by television, has been a mark of critical writing from Adorno to Debord. TV centralises, organises time, and represents the loss of the body to spectacle. This is best captured by the 'media event'. The 'media event' represents the absolute centralisation and the near-complete 'binding' of the media experience: we are all transfixed witnesses at the same moment. Do technological media then block the shock-effects of traumatic events, screening them, allowing them to be viewed from a distance? In her essay "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe", Mary Ann Doane suggests that television promises us the chance encounter with the 'reality' of catastrophe. Television shocks, and then repeatedly assures; a comforting presence in an insecure world. "Televisual catastrophe is thus characterised by everything which it is said not to be ; it is expected, predictable, its presence crucial to television's operation"³. In reiterating the idea that technological media produces distance, 'concealing' and containing bodily violence, Doane is in line with a strand of thinking ranging from Heidegger to Debord. In this reading, the

only relationship to the screen can be that of the individual/household⁴ to the media object.⁵ The placelessness of the viewer is enacted by the placelessness of the transmission. We can 'witness' only as distanced, passive voyeurs.

Much of this discourse ignores the *contagious* relationship between bodies and technologies of representation, which have multiplied after the coming of the digital. Technological life is inherently turbulent, spatially dispersed and contagious ; and conflictual. It is this contagion that makes possible viral strategies⁶ of transmission; however, it also opens a serious intellectual challenge for any theory of the contemporary. A new theory of transmission after analog television is the challenge of our time. In short, it is a dreadful and violent time to be alive, but it is also a dynamic, strange and intellectually challenging one.

Conclusion

The worst thing about the century of turbulence is that the intellectual guarantees of an epoch passed are no longer available to us. We have the debris of a fast declining Western modernity falling everywhere.⁷ The great danger is that the intellectual debates of the next few years will be dominated by the academy ; a version of the Weberian prognosis in 1919 of a future world that is coolly distant, professional and productive.⁸ For those outside the historical 'West', this is not even an option. Here, most of the centres of dynamic intellectual activity may well be outside crisis-ridden and under-funded institutions, simply because there is no other option.

Walter Benjamin once suggested that the afterimages and outmoded objects of the previous epochs could be useful resources to be deployed towards a counter-memory of the present. To the debris of the previous century we can add artefacts and memories from our own time ; the violent displacements of contemporary capitalism have a greater tempo than the system in Benjamin's time. This is the paradox ; creating a counter-memory of the present that draws from the last century as well as the time of the Now ; this is the cruelty of the contemporary, which afflicts its inhabitants with a new delirium of acceleration without end.

NOTES

1. This idea of transition initiated by enlightened elites is of course different from an understanding of significant shifts in the long cycles of modern capitalism. For a useful argument, see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1994, London).
2. The exception was the Nietzschean tradition. In 1920s Germany hovering on the brink of a crisis, there was a fascination of the avant-garde with decisionism. Here a sudden irruption or shift based on an aesthetic sensibility could not always be linked to a clear causal explanation. A range of diverse writers from Jünger to Schmitt drew from this tradition. In India, Gandhi's later writings represent a significant critique of the notion of modern transition. For Gandhi's ideas on the Constitution of India, see Shriman

Narayan Agarwal, *Gandhian Constitution for Free India*, foreword by Mahatma Gandhi (Kitabistan Press, 1946, Allahabad). Cited in Douglas Lummis, "The Smallest Military Imaginable", forthcoming in *Alternatives*, 2006.

3. "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe". In (ed.) Patricia Mellencamp, *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Indiana University Press, 1990, Bloomington). p. 237.
4. Marilyn Strathern shows how the Western idea of the self-contained individual self is often mapped on to nodes in networks. See her "Partners and Consumers: Making Relations Visible", in (ed.) A.D. Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift* (Routledge, 1977, London), pp. 292-311.
5. For useful corrections, see Anna McCarthy, "From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture, and its Place", in *October 98* (Fall 2001), pp. 93-111, and Thomas Keenan, "Have You Seen Your World Today?" in *Art Journal 54*, No. 4 (Winter 1995), pp. 102-105.
6. These viral strategies may be distinguished from recent efforts to reinvent the Western political avant-garde, best exemplified in Hardt and Negri's powerful books, *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004). These books revise and update a version of 1970s Italian radicalism, adding the important innovations of network capitalism and global millennialism. Hardt and Negri's work, however, remains fundamentally West-centred, both in their understanding of capitalism and their deployment of a political critique of modernity. At the end of *Empire*, the authors call on the multitudes to follow St Francis. This representational innocence is remarkable in the context of politics in Europe today.
7. This is not an exaggeration. Despite the Indian neo-liberal elites' fascination with the West, it is clear that the centre of global accumulation is shifting to East Asia and China. The structural and intellectual consequences of this (the first time since the 16th century) are too wide ranging to go into here. While the 'West' fights political Islam and disciplines its immigrant populations, China remains the most dynamic region of the globe: the highest growth-rate, the highest inequality and the highest number of incidents of social unrest worldwide. Marx once sardonically said that the circuit of knowledge follows the circuit of money. The philosophical discussions on the rise of China/East Asia will perhaps begin in 15 years. The Indian elites, who are West-centred and smug, are recent converts to a bizarre brand of neo-liberalism. The myth of the self-regulating market was exposed long ago in Karl Polanyi's classic *The Great Transformation* (1944).
8. The North American University, with its now fully professional setting (in contrast to the late 1960s and 1970s) is the most favoured site for this research. One of the significant accomplishments of professionalism is that the word 'capitalism' has been effectively been banished from most intellectual discourse.