Metronome

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1. Of cities and time

From the muffled midnight coffee sipping inside the Jewish Ghetto walls of renaissance Venice all the way to the roaring, high-speed commuter connections of the present, the greatest task in city-building has been to master time. To measure and to regulate, to compress or even to expand time as a dimension has been an indispensable precondition for the growth of the city itself.

At its most elemental, the city turns time into space: stretching out the human capacity for speed, and thereby condensing time, is what facilitates the unrelenting amassing of bodies, concrete and energy that constitutes the urban. But in its innermost part, the city has also been about potentiality: it has been built on, and always held in its essence, a promise of some kind of surplus, of freedom, growth, or whatever success. This potentiality only becomes possible once time is tamed; once it is stretched beyond the human capacity for movement and for speed, for urban transportation.

In its vein-like form, then, urban transportation is what makes the heart of the city beat. Metropolitan transportation holds a potential, a sublime power capable of becoming tangible: its sheer potential, this idea that one may plausibly arrive at a point from another within a fraction of the time required otherwise, has a very real, concrete effect. Sprawl, the growth of a city toward any point on the horizon, is facilitated by, and indeed becomes possible thanks to, urban transport. Transportation is in this sense no less than the city’s great colonising force, a force that domesticates the uncontrollable time and through this, colonises and renders space urbanisable.

Not by chance, in the urban archipelago of our present time, the most glaring megalopolises are those featuring a dense transportation grid. The metro has become a city status symbol. Its mere existence constitutes a sign of affirmation not entirely unlike the social status assigned by the middle-class suburbanite to vehicle ownership. It is a reverse symbolism wherein an absolutely concrete and tangible system of public transportation—or a private medium—holds the potential of transporting and lifting its owner up through the ranks, to the middle-class, in the case of the individual living under capitalism; and onto some global city status in the case of the urban entity.

This perpetual potentiality, the capacity to endlessly insinuate some seemingly plausible ascendancy, has been a core constituent of urban power. Movement generously offers the sense of such a potential ascendancy, even if this may turn out to be always reversed, and therefore false. Once in the metro, the urbanite moves along a strictly predefined route and back again, always. The order, the nomos, in the urban relies upon this metro tempo being kept rigorously: it’s a metronome holding and feeling the city’s beat.
2. The metro-urban-apparatus

This simple time-keeping device perfectly encapsulates and reflects the human desire to keep hold of time, a blazingly futile attempt to fully master the dimension that permeates human existence to its core, over the dimension that defines and exposes human impermanence.

In building cities, humans were still able to partially master time, if only in order to rule over space. But the process of founding, of expanding cities — and sustaining this expansion — has required much more than any ruling over space. This stretching of human capacity, and this unrelenting amassing of bodies, of concrete and energy, have all required some great mastery: an entire finely-tuned set of techniques of calculating, ordering and governing populations and space. In sort: a set of techniques that constitute the urban apparatus. And what, exactly, is meant by the apparatus? Foucault:

[A] thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions — in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the network that can be established between these elements.1

An urban apparatus would include the discourses, institutions and forms that constitute the urban, those that make it possible. On the other hand, it becomes an apparatus when these elements connect to become a network. And studying this network in time, a sort of historical element of sorts, helps us understand how power relations come to be. A historical element? Agamben:

By “the historical element,” I mean the set of institutions, of processes of subjectification, and of rules in which power relations become concrete.2

The metro is the arterial system of the urban apparatus, driven by and even dictating its heart, not just in the sense of connecting, transporting subjects through the urban network, but in the sense of creating them, in the sense of forming the commuter-subject.

Commuting is the essence of the urban: a city truly becomes urban once it has exceeded the size threshold by which its workers must exercise this practice in order to reach their workplace. It only becomes a ‘global’ city when it has a metro; urbanites are defined by being commuters. The longest commuting times, however, those that stretch the total hours of daily labour to and beyond the limits of human capacity, are exclusive to the global city, to any megalopolis of the present.

The apparatus, as a notion, founds itself upon that which remains unsaid: more than just a connecting thread, the apparatus is the insinuation and the given. The great force of the apparatus is that it renders itself invisible. As a vehicle, the metro renders urban life both possible and given; better even, it is what makes itself appear as something of a given, it renders supra-human urban speed normal. It is a speed-apparatus that lies at the core of the urban normal.

Understanding speed is essential in untangling the rapidly and solidly forming landscapes of the crisis. They are rapid, just like the velocity of the metro. And they are solid, just like the metro’s steady track, the speed of the sovereign. Landscapes form in an instant, as instant as is the rupture of crisis, and most importantly, landscapes become the new normal state of being, rendering themselves into a given and therefore unquestionable state of being. But if the strength of the apparatus lies in its invis-

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3. A moment in the life of a city

Just a moment: the date is January 24, 2013 and the time is somewhere in the early afternoon. As of the past few days not a single medium of mass transit traverses the city of Athens; workers at the city’s Metro have been on strike since January 17. Today, eight days later, the Ministry of Transport has announced their civil conscription: an order for their forced return to work. In response, workers at Athens’ Urban Transport Organisation (OASA) have called rolling 24-hour strikes in solidarity, while the workers on the Metro’s Green Line (ISAP) and the city’s trams have followed suit.

There is not a single transit medium in sight. The absence confirms the assumption with which I began the Metronome project: no element of everyday urban life shouts “routine” more than mass transportation systems. Along, perhaps, with the city’s fabric — its buildings, its pavements and its streets — the image of buses, trams, and metro carriages traversing streets and running beneath them is emblematic of urban normality, emblematic of a city’s orderly function. Commuting to and from work, this ever-cyclical, ever-repetitive crawling through the urban web relies almost exclusively on this network. The routine is the habitual, the periodic, the quotidian, yet etymologically, it derives from route: it denotes taking the usual course of action, the beaten path. Carriages and buses traverse the urban body, carrying yawning faces and constrained gazes. A population might very well find itself caught in the turbulent waves of political destabilisation or a financial crisis; people’s personal lives might, and will most certainly be, caught in a vast array of personal dramas. Even then, against and despite them, the everyday marches on. No matter how large the public deficit, regardless of how many workers are laid off, their wages reduced or not, few (sometimes very few) certainties continue apace. Day in and day out, the bus, tram or metro will be there, ready to take the worker back-and-forth, from and to her spaces of habitation and labour.

What happens inside these commuting spaces? The bus, the tram, and the metro carriage constitute ambivalent, questionable, grey zones; while they allow an encroaching of the private space of dwelling into public spaces, they simultaneously, at the exact same time, materialise the aggressive imposition of the workplace onto the non-productive time of the worker, through the colonisation of their commuting time as unpaid, even if it is inextricable from the labour process. Take a look at Athens in crisis: from afar, nothing has changed. Day in, day out, the traffic is still there, the buildings are mostly in place, buses carry on carrying people along. Of course, history has a fascinating quality of changing in the most exquisite of ways. By the time a grandiose event marks our once-and-for-all passage from an era to another, the most substantial part of change will have taken place already. Throughout these crisis days, Athens’ buses, her trams and her metro carriages keep moving on. But who do they carry? Where to? With up to half of the active population officially or unofficially unemployed, commuting should perhaps be redefined, if not altogether scrapped. Fresh swarms of the unemployed come to meet the not-so-new migrants, the same people who had kept alive quintessential public spaces (the streets, the squares) and hybrid ones (the mass transit systems) alike, at times when neo-liberal euphoria was rendering them obsolete.

Returning to our chosen “now,” we inhabit this moment, this single moment in the life of the city, where even the faintest façade of normality is lifted, when the vein-like transportation halts, for a fleeting historical second, where it is most difficult, altogether impossible perhaps, to pretend in any way that things keep on as any kind of normal. The city beat has stopped, the metronome has precious little rhythm to count: this is the largest mass transportation strike that Athens — and the
country — has seen in years. For an entire week, the city is paralysed.

The stakes are high, too high. By the eighth day, a civil conscription is declared. Following the police raids in occupied spaces across the city during the winter prior, a sense, even a scent, of normality and order has to be preserved, at any expense. This is even more so, since the transportation workers would be the very first in a wave of public sector workers to go on strike, their main and common demand being exemption from the so-called single payroll. Part of the government’s agreement with the troika of lenders, this single payroll was to be applied across the entire public sector, leading to extensive wage reductions. And the essence of the single payroll as a notion lies in its universality: should one striking group be strong enough to break the enforced deal, it would almost certainly cause its collapse.

So the strike had to end, and its long, historical moment did so with the declaration of the civil conscription by the Ministry of Transport. It was an order that was exceptional, in more than one sense. The measure carries some formidable symbolic weight, since the law that provides for it traces back to 1974, that is to the very early days of the post-dictatorial state. This is Law 17/1974, “Concerning the Political Address of Emergency Situations.” The “emergency situations” are specified to include a deliberate vagueness: “every sudden situation caused either by natural or other events, or by anomalies of nature and which result in the hindrance and the disruption of the financial and the social life of the country” (emphasis added). The order is rife with symbolism: Law 17/1974 was spelled out almost at the same time as the commencement of the post-dictatorial state; it was an attempt to draw and to outline the limits of the democratic regime, to define normality by deduction, by articulating what is to be deemed exceptional, and therefore unacceptable. Just short of four decades on, as the long cycle of the post-dictatorial Third Greek Democracy seemed to be drawing to an end, one of the most symbolically charged decisions was executed upon workers who were disrupting the mundane, the quotidian. The striking metro workers were committing the ultimate sin: they were exposing the urban apparatus, making it visible. This is simply unacceptable. Despite and against pivoting social change, the perception of routine has to continue: the everyday must and will carry on.

4. Tick–tock

And the everyday did carry on. On January 25, hours after the metro workers had been forced back to work, I jumped back into the metro. I rode on its Green Line, the ISAP — the Electric Railway of Athens and Piraeus — a remnant of a time when the two cities were entirely separate entities. The ISAP stretches from the port of Piraeus, with its anachronistic grandiosity, eighties-style, dense glass buildings reflecting on the water, opening up to sea routes to the Aegean and far beyond. At the line’s other end, pretty much due north at the other end of the Attica Basin, lies the leafy old suburb of Kifisia. Sunk in its blissful middle-class tranquility, Kifisia oversees Athens through its distant snobbishness, the metro extension being a necessary evil that connects it to a city it wants to have as little as possible to do with. Yet more affluent estates lie even further north: here, distance from, and not proximity to, the station is a privilege, a symbol of affluence and power.

In-between its two end stations, the ISAP weaves together working-class southern neighbourhoods, the eternal buzz of Omonoia, the density of Victoria, the ultimate commuter hub of Attiki; and central neighbourhoods that slowly give way to the northern affluence. There is something particular about the ISAP, a part of the Athenian metro that is not quite so: its unsteady pace and access to natural light displays a tranquility that is nowhere to be seen in the metro’s underground darkness. ISAP has, in this way, a quality shared by particular metro lines the world over: Berlin’s S-Bahn, with its socialist-reminiscent spaciousness and its overground outwardness; London’s old Silverlink (now the Overground), the way it used to
be, with its record delays and its seemingly unorthodox routes, ignoring and bypassing the city centre; or New York’s night-time and weekend subway services, reliable in their unreliability… Nearly every city, it would seem, has at least one metro line that reveals something of its psyche, one part of the network that for whatever reason escapes the readiness and accuracy of the apparatus. In Athens this is the ISAP, and if there is anywhere that’s fit to eavesdrop for words between the metronome’s strikes, it’s here.

Tick. “I never thought it would come to this. But I probably have to go, I have to get out of this place. And soon, you know it, so will you.”

Tock. The middle-aged man has one of the most shy but frenzied gazes I have seen in a long while. The combination is a peculiar one, and it gets me thinking. In the metro, in the bus or in the tram, our utmost struggle is to rest our gaze somewhere; better even, to allow it a private thoroughfare, a trajectory to reach beyond the point where we stand. In a space of intense togetherness, every single other sense of ours is exposed, naked: we may overhear conversations, we may smell and we may touch our fellow passengers. Taste aside, the only sense acting as line of defence against this cramped and forced conviviality is sight. The old man’s gaze appears to be lost, and yet it may be anything but. The swivelling movement of his eyes is an ever-constant attempt to negotiate momentary grace. As our gaze extends away from our bodies toward the closest visible obstacle (whether in the way of a fellow passenger, or merely an intermediate surface), resting it somewhere may very well be an attempt to claim back some of the privacy that has been taken away from us: the frenzied moving around of the old man’s eyes brings to mind nothing less than a motionless duck-and-cover, trying to fight against this oppression of a forced conviviality, this fast and furious coming-together-apart at the exact moment when the city comes apart. It breaks down as a whole. Above the ground lies a society reduced to a spectator of its own destruction, and what a perplexing spectacle its underground reflection makes for. Here, in the spaces of the metro, Athenians do not watch their city being destroyed; like women in John Berger, they “watch themselves being looked at,” this timeless destiny reserved for the oppressed. To place our gaze outside the trajectory of one another becomes a near-instant attempt to reflect away from, and to compensate for, our over-ground inertia.

Tick. I never thought it would come to this. I never thought that I myself would be here, overhearing this young couple (are they twenty-early-something? At most). Day in, day out, here in the ISAP it is difficult to avoid all the clichés about a society that is at war with itself, about the people who I encounter, who are traumatised almost as much, it feels, as by being caught in a physical war. I encounter people who had simply not expected to be in this position, ever, in their lives. I never thought it would come to this. And, as tremendously devastating as it may be, at the very least, an actual, physical war carries with it some tangible signs of warning. There may be some precursory acts, and even if not, the sheer force of physical destruction would at the very least allow everyone a concrete realisation of where they now stand, of what they have been caught up in. But here? What happens to a city engulfed into this metaphysical transcendence of crisis? The combination of abstract cause and absolutely concrete effect is mesmerising. Nothing short of a catastrophe, similar only to the vast humanitarian disasters left behind by the likes of hurricanes and earthquakes, the crisis is nevertheless never fully (and almost not even partially) explained, or rationalised: it just is. Austerity, supposedly coming in response to this very crisis, has emerged as the new carte blanche: “a veritable 9/11 in Europe: a watchword, in other words, for neoliberal governments to quieten any dissenting voice.”

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the altogether sudden, becomes a norm. It is an invisible threat that rams through our lives, coming from seemingly nowhere and, therefore, potentially, from anywhere, an invisible threat that sends our gaze into a restless search for a cause.

*Tock.* Perhaps, more than any else, the word that epitomises our present condition is *soon.* The young man’s words to his lover ring, once again in my years. “I will probably have to go… and *soon,* you know it, so will you.” He knows little other than his imminent arrival, and he also knows that the same goes for his lover: both of them will leap into some swifter-than-ever-expected migration. Why? That matters little, and essentially not at all. The same is true of what matters during our trip on a metro, when we wait for the announcement of the next stop: why is everyone in a carriage? Why are they all heading in the same direction? Why is the route defined and drawn the way it is? Would anyone be able to answer these questions? Their sheer complexity protects the apparatus, the invisible. We don’t even know from where to begin. Why we are here and why we are going elsewhere matters little. What does matter, is that this transportation will indeed happen. And *soon.*

Somehow the ever-restless gaze of the old man now makes sense. In the metro carriage, swivelling along the tracks, just like a whole world caught into the turbulence of the crisis, there is next to no time to reflect. A primordial *reflex* replaces reflection, taking the gaze away from where danger may potentially lie: that is, from anywhere. It is a jump to the exit — even if by sight alone — and the ever-accelerating, swivelling landscape that surrounds us.

5. “I never thought it would come to this”

“I never thought it would come to this.” The rest of the passengers in the carriage and I—at least those of us close enough to the young couple—have long become accidental eavesdroppers. Why are we bearing witness to this conversation? Why are we allowed to listen to what ought to have been tucked deep inside the realm of the private? Why does the couple seem indifferent to safeguarding the privacy of their precious words?

*Tick. Tick.* And *tick* again. At this time of crisis, unable to fully comprehend what is happening to us, we jump to any exit from the scene around us, to be sure: gazes extend far, far beyond the metro carriage. Yet still, defying mind and gaze, our bodies are still here, their inescapable materiality binding us behind and inside its steel panels, fixing us to its trembling ground. *Tick, tick, tick*… As historical time around us muddles and speeds up, the rhythmic repetition of the everyday gives way to an ever-more-frantic tempo, asynchronous and rapid, incomprehensible and mesmerising. In what may be an instinctive attempt to drag my mind away from its unintentional eavesdropping, I trace with my eyes the arm of the young man, all the way down to his hands and to his fingers. While he talks to his lover calmly, his hands gesture fiercely. Soon, both hands become so tense that the veins appear to acquire a separate volume of their very own: from where I stand, they seem as if they were disjointed from his hands and somehow fixed back onto them. His fingers’ muscles are completely locked into position. He continues to spell his words out calmly, staggering words, words that one would only expect to hear with some devastating ferociousness, a ferociousness shoved into his body’s intense inertia instead. The realisation begins to sink in that the young man may be performing what he cannot bear to articulate through his words. He is literally embodying what he would have wanted to keep altogether unfelt, unseen and, more than anything, unsaid.

Neither of them would have suspected that they were going to live through the puzzled moment they now do. The disparity is unbearable: for most of us, it would feel impossible to even play witness to a condition that we are unable to articulate. What is, in the end, this mystifying crisis? How did it come about? When might it end? The questions, for most, have taken on some theological quality. They are theological both in the sense of the incapacity of our reason and in the stoicism these people deploy in dealing with an unbearable present. It seems
as if the “this, too, shall pass” mantra has been replaced by an exodus to the past and, at the same time, a jump into the future. The young couple “never thought” (this “never” was in their happier times past) and they know, they sense, what will happen to them “soon” (in their near future). And so here lies the ultimate contradiction. Even if our bodies are located inside the metro carriage, joined to its moving space, our minds are in synch with present time precisely by their distancing from it; contemporary as per Agamben, that is, “that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and anachronism.” It is a disjunction, a distance as a pre-requisite for us to gain any sense of perspective, to be able to then become contemporaries to our present in Agamben’s second sense: “the contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.” As the mesmerising rhythm of history raises its tempo, more and more of us find ourselves in this in-between time, detached from the darkness of a present we cannot read through. More and more of us linger between a tick, and a tock.

6. The prónoia beat

This is, then, the bipartite theology of the crisis: one the one hand, there is the helplessness we feel in face of acts that seem divine in their undefinable root, stemming from some superior force that we can neither fully comprehend, nor do we really want to delve into that much. On the other hand, the crisis is dealt with through a new, reinforced oikonomia: by getting things done at the level of the mundane, we are controlling and governing human behaviour, as per Agamben. This is a crisis of judgement in quite some literal sense, then: we are doing away with thinking overall, and just making sure that we get things done. We traverse through our everyday, not more than flies in Wittgenstein’s famous glass bottle.

For Wittgenstein’s fly, the bottle is a transparent cage that traps it, barring it from roaming the rest of the world. At the exact same time, this bottle is the fly’s entire world. The bottle, says Wittgenstein, is language: this is what allows us to comprehend and to communicate, to see into a world we can otherwise never quite fully reach. In the urban realm, Wittgenstein’s fly is the commuter, and her medium of urban transportation is her transparent bottle. Allowing her to reach the world that surrounds her, this is the exact same medium that nails her, that traps her inside. The commuting medium is what helps her comprehend the existence of an entire world, the urban whole, that she can never quite physically traverse in its vast entirety.

This feeling of incomplete traversal, of knowing where she stands, is exactly the source of disorientation and loss for the commuter. One would have been tempted to play down, to question the attachment of the commuter to her transportation medium, or her following of its retrogression, as just some source of disorientation or loss, particularly when compared to the sheer devastation of migration, or exile.

And yet this is quite some loss: it is the loss of much of a capacity to think outside the apparatus, an apparatus that thinks both before the urbanite and for him. In the Greek language, the notions of welfare and of forethought are both articulated through the term prónoia. The welfare state, then, translates into the kratos prónoias, and it is most intriguing to see that as this form of state apparatus, experienced in Europe in the preceding decades, fades away, a new kind of a prónoia rises in the horizon. This one is in much closer proximity to the second notion, that of forethought. So far, the prónoia has come to denote the prudence of providence, the act of securing against future pitfalls. But etymologically, the prónoia is that which precedes (pro-) thought (-nous): not just securing against future risk, it is what rests before, and lies beneath, the intelligible as a whole. The present crisis — social, political, economic — exposes this crisis of judgement in its most pure, its most naked of forms. It exposes the mechanism,
the network, that lies beneath and before thought; that which renders the urbanite a commuter, their perambulation a retrogression, their freedom of movement confined to a gaze and a thought. It is an apparatus that seeps through the said and the unsaid, the uttered as much as the unuttered. This is the historical moment when individuals come face to face with the historical element, as Agamben would have it, the moment when these processes of subjectification become evident; when the thread of the power relations that send them in their endless retrogression become visible; and when the metronome acquires its volume, making the unuttered thoughts in the metro all the more startling, all the more violent.

References


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