

# Time and Space Reunited

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**ABSTRACT:** Separation of time from space – through making the speed of movement dependent on technological artifice and movement of information independent of the transport of bodies – has led eventually to the passage from heavy (hardware) to light (software) modernity. The result is devaluation of space and duration and profound transformation in the structure of domination and life-politics. **KEYWORDS** • duration • modernity – heavy and light • transience

When I was a child (and that happened in another time and another space) it was not uncommon to hear the question ‘How far is it from here to there?’ answered by ‘About an hour, or a bit less, if you walk briskly.’ In the time more ancient yet than my childhood years the more usual answer, I suppose, would have been ‘If you start now, you will be there about noon’ or ‘Better start now, if you want to be there before dusk.’ Nowadays, you may hear on occasion similar answers. But it will be normally preceded by a request to be more specific: ‘Do you have a car? Or do you mean on foot?’

‘Far’ and ‘long’, just like ‘near’ and ‘soon’, used to mean nearly the same: just how much, or how little effort would it take for a human being to span a certain distance – be it by walking, by ploughing or harvesting. If people were pressed to explain what did they mean by ‘space’ and ‘time’ – they could have said that ‘space’ is what you can pass in a given time, while ‘time’ is what you need to pass it. Unless pressed hard, though, they would not play the game of definition at all. And why should they? Most things involved in daily life one understands well enough until asked to define them: unless asked, one would hardly need to define them in the first place. And the way one understood those things which we tend to call now ‘space’ and ‘time’ was not just satisfactory, but as precise as one needed, as long as it was but the humans, the oxen or the horses who made the effort. One pair of human legs may be different from

another, but replacement of one pair with another would not make large enough difference to call for measures other than the capacity of human muscles. In the times of Greek Olympics no one thought of track and Olympic records and breaking them. Invention and deployment of something else than human or animal power was needed for such ideas, as well as for the decision to assign importance to the differences between the capacities of human individuals to move, to be born and to stimulate practice: and so for the *prehistory* of time, that long era of wetware-bound practice, to end, and the *history* of time to start. History of time began with modernity. Indeed, modernity is, apart from anything else, perhaps even more than anything else, *history of time*: the time when time has history.

### Modernity as History of Time

Searching history books for the reason why space and time, once blended in human life labours, have fallen apart and drifted away from each other in human thought and practice, one would most probably read the uplifting stories of the knights of reason, intrepid philosophers and valiant scientists. One would learn of astronomers measuring distances and velocity of celestial bodies, of Newton calculating the exact relations between acceleration and the distance passed by the 'physical body' and their painstaking efforts to express all that in numbers – those most abstract and objective of imaginable measures; or of Kant being impressed enough to cast space and time as two transcendently separate and mutually independent categories of human cognition. And yet however justified is the claim of philosophers to think *sub specie aeternitatis*, it is always a part of infinity and eternity, the part currently within the reach of human practice, that is open to philosophical and scientific reflection and can be kneaded into timeless truths – this limitation setting apart the great thinkers from those who went down in history as empty-headed fantasists, mythmakers and other dreamers of dreams. And so something must have happened to the scope and carrying capacity of human practice, for the sovereignties of space and time to stare suddenly in the philosophers' eyes.

That 'something' was, as one may guess, the appearance of vehicles quicker than human or horse legs could ever be; and such vehicles unlike humans or horses could be made quicker and quicker, so that traversing distances could take less and less time. When such non-human and non-animal means of transportation appeared, the time needed to travel ceased to be the feature of distance; it has become instead the attribute of the means of travelling. Now time was the question of the 'hardware' humans could invent, build, appropriate, use and control – not of the inflexible and unstretchable 'wetware', or the notoriously capricious and whimsical powers of wind resistant to human

manipulation; by the same token, time became a question independent of inert and immutable dimensions of land masses or seas. Time was different from space because, unlike space, it could be changed and manipulated – and most importantly, made shorter, less costly, and so more productive.

Benjamin Franklin famously announced that ‘time is money’; he could make that declaration with confidence since he had already defined man as a ‘tool-making animal’. Summing up the experience of a further two centuries, John Kennedy could advise his fellow Americans in 1961 that ‘we must use time as a tool, not as a couch’. Time became money once it had become a tool (or was it rather a weapon?) deployed primarily in the ongoing effort of overcoming resistance of space – shortening distances, depriving ‘remoteness’ of its meaning as an obstacle, let alone a limit, to human ambition. Armed with that weapon, one could set oneself the task of conquering space and in all earnestness set about its implementation.

Kings could perhaps travel more comfortably than their bailiffs and the barons more conveniently than their serfs, but none of them could travel at a greater speed than the others could. Wetware made humans similar; hardware made them different – and these differences (unlike those deriving from dissimilarity of human muscles) were the outcomes of human actions before they could become conditions of their effectiveness, and before they could be deployed to make yet more differences, and the differences more profound and less contestable than before. Come the steam and the internal combustion engines, and the wetware-bound equality came to an end. Some people could now arrive wherever they wished, arrive well before anyone else, escape the chase and effectively resist being slowed down or arrested. Whoever travelled faster could claim more territory – and having done that, could survey it and supervise, keeping competitors at arm’s length and intruders out of bounds.

One can associate the beginning of the modern era with various facets of changing human practices, but the emancipation of time from space, subordinating it to human inventiveness and technical capacity and setting it against space as a tool of its conquest and appropriation, is no worse a moment to start reckoning from than any other. Modernity has been born under the stars of acceleration and space conquest, and these stars form a constellation which contains all the information about its character, conduct and fate and needs but a trained sociologist, not an imaginative astrologer, to read it out.

The relation between time and space was to be from now on processual and dynamic, not preordained and stagnant. The ‘conquest of space’ came to mean faster machines. Accelerated time meant larger space, and accelerating time was the sole means of enlarging space. In this chase, space was the game and the stake; space was value, time was the tool. To maximize the value, it was necessary to sharpen the instruments: much of the ‘instrumental rationality’ which, as Max Weber suggested, was the operative principle of modern

civilization, focused on designing the ways of performing the tasks faster, while eliminating idle, empty and thus wasted time; or, to tell the same story in terms of effects – it focused on filling the space with objects more densely and expanding the space that could be so filled in a given time. At the threshold of the modern conquest of space, Descartes, looking forward, identified existence with spatiality, defining whatever exists materially as *res extensa* (as Rob Shields wittily put it, one could rephrase, though not distort, Descartes' famous cogito as 'I occupy space therefore I exist'<sup>1</sup>). At a time when that conquest ran out of steam and drew to a close, Michele de Certeau – looking backward – declared that power was about territory and boundaries (as Tim Cresswell summarized recently de Certeau's view, 'the weapons of the strong are . . . classification, delineation, division. The strong depend on the certainty of mapping'<sup>2</sup> – all of these being operations performed on the space). As a matter of fact, one could say that the difference between the strong and the weak is that between the territory shaped out in the image of the map, closely guarded and tightly controlled, and territory open to intrusion, to redrawing of boundaries and recharting the maps. At least it was so for a good part of modern history.

### **Modernity: First Heavy, Then Light**

That part of history, now coming to its close, could be dubbed, for the lack of a better name, the era of *hardware*, or *heavy* modernity: the bulk-obsessed modernity, 'the larger the better' kind of modernity, 'the size is power, the volume is success' sort. That was the hardware era; the epoch of weighty and ever more cumbersome machines, of the ever longer factory walls enclosing ever wider factory floors and ingesting ever more populous factory crews, of ponderous rail engines and gigantic ocean liners. To conquer the space was the supreme goal: to grasp as much of it as one could hold, and hold to it, marking it all over with the tangible signs of possession. Territory was the most acute of modern obsessions, its acquisition the most compulsive of modern urges, while guarding the boundaries was the most ubiquitous, resilient and relentlessly growing among modern addictions.

Heavy modernity was the era of territorial conquest. Wealth and power were spread over the surface or lay deeply inside the land, bulky and ponderous like beds of iron ore and deposits of coal. Empires spread to fill every nook and cranny of the globe: only other empires of equal or superior strength set limits to their expansion. Anything lying between the outer outposts of competing imperial realms was masterless, a 'no man's' land – and thus an *empty* space, and empty space was a challenge and reproach (the popular science of the time grasped the mood of the era when informing the public that 'nature suffers no void'). Even more off-putting and less bearable was the thought of the globe's

'blank spots'; islands and archipelagos as yet unheard of and unadumbrated, land masses undiscovered and waiting to be colonized, untrodden and unclaimed interiors of continents, the uncounted 'hearts of darkness' clamouring for light. Intrepid explorers were the heroes of the new, modern versions of Walter Benjamin's 'sailor stories', childhood dreams and adult nostalgia; enthusiastically cheered on their departure and showered with honours on their return, expedition after expedition wandered through the jungle, bush or permafrost in search of an as yet uncharted mountain range, lake or plateau. Also the modern paradise, like James Hilton's Shangri La, was 'out there', in a place hidden and inaccessible, beyond the unpassed and impassable mountain masses or deadly deserts, at the end of a path yet to be found. Adventure and happiness, wealth and might were geographical concepts or 'landed properties' – tied to the place and immovable. And all that called for impenetrable walls, dense and tight checkpoints, constantly awake border guards, and keeping locations secret; one of the most closely guarded secrets of the last war, the American air base from which the murderous raid on Tokyo was to be launched in 1942, was nicknamed *Shangri La*.

Wealth and might that depend on the size and the quality of hardware tended to be sluggish, unwieldy and awkward to move. They grew by expanding the place they occupy and are protected by protecting that place: the place was, simultaneously, their hotbed, their fortress and their prison. Daniel Bell described one of the most powerful and most envied and emulated of such hotbeds/fortresses/prisons: the General Motors 'Willow Run' plant in Michigan.<sup>3</sup> The site occupied by the plant was two-thirds by a quarter of a mile in size. All the materials needed to produce cars were gathered under one gigantic roof, in one monstrous cage. The logic of power and the logic of control were combined with the logic of the boundary separating the 'inside' from the 'outside'; once blended in one, they were embodied in the logic of size, organized around one precept: bigger is more efficient. In heavy modernity, progress meant big size and spatial expansion.

What held the place whole, compact and subject to homogenous logic was routinized time (Bell invoked the principal tool of routinization when calling such time 'metric'). In the conquest of space, time had to be pliant and malleable, and above all shrinkable: to go around the world in 80 days was an alluring dream, but to do it in eight days was infinitely more attractive; flying over the English Channel and then over the Atlantic were the milestones by which progress was measured. When it came, however, to the fortification of the conquered space, to its colonization, taming and domestication, a tough, uniform and inflexible time was needed: the kind of time that could be cut in slices of equal thickness following each other in monotonous and unalterable sequence. Space was truly possessed when controlled – and control meant, first and foremost, time coordination. It was wonderful and exciting to reach the

source of the Nile before other explorers managed to adumbrate its position, but a train running ahead of schedule or parts of automobile arriving to the assembly line ahead of other parts were heavy modernity's nightmares.

Site walls topped with barbed wire or broken glass, closely guarded gates and routinized time protected the place against any intruders, but also prevented all those inside the place from leaving it at will. The 'Fordist factory', that most coveted and avidly pursued model of engineered rationality in times of heavy modernity, was the site of face-to-face meeting, but also a 'till death us do part' type of marriage vow, between capital and labour. The wedding could be of convenience or of necessity, hardly ever was it a marriage of love – but it was meant to last 'forever' (whatever that means in terms of individual life), and more often than not it did. Divorce was out of the question. For better or worse, the partners in marriage were bound to stay in each other's company – none of the partners could survive without the other. Routinized time tied labour to the ground, while the massiveness of factory buildings, heaviness of the machinery and, last but not least, the permanently tied labour, tied the capital. None was eager, or able, to move. Like any other marriage lacking the safety valve of painless divorce, the story of cohabitation was full of sound and fury, fraught with violent eruptions of enmity and filled by less dramatic, but instead more persistent, day-in-day-out, trench war. At no time, though, did the plebeians leave the city, and the patricians were no more free to do so. Mennenius Agrippa's oratory was not needed to keep them in place. The very intensity and perpetuity of conflict was a vivid evidence of commonality of fate. Frozen time of factory routine and bricks and mortar of factory walls immobilized the capital as effectively as it bound the labour it employed.

It all changed, though, with the advent of software capitalism and light modernity.

Sorbonne economist Daniel Cohen put it in a nutshell: 'Whoever begins a career at Microsoft has not the slightest idea where it will end. Whoever started it at Ford or Renault, could be well-nigh certain that it will finish in the same place.'<sup>4</sup> I am not sure whether in both cases the use of the term 'career' is legitimate. 'Career' brings to mind a set trajectory, like the American universities' 'tenure tracks', with a sequence of stages marked in advance and accompanied by clear conditions of entry and rules of admission. The 'career path' is shaped by coordinated pressures of space and time. Whatever happens to the employees of Microsoft or its countless watchers and imitators, where all concern of the managers is 'with looser organizational forms which are more able to "go with the flow"' and where business organization is increasingly seen as a never-conclusive, ongoing attempt 'to form an island of superior adaptability' in a world perceived as 'multiple, complex and fast moving, and therefore as "ambiguous", "fuzzy" or "plastic"',<sup>5</sup> resents and repels durable structures, and notably the structures with a built-in life expectation commensurable with

the customary length of working life. Under such conditions the idea of a 'career' looks uncannily like a contradiction in terms. This is, though, but a terminological quibble. Whether the terms are correctly or wrongly used, the main point is that Cohen's comparison grasps unerringly the watershed-like change in the modern history of time and the impact it is beginning to make on the human existential condition. The change in question is the new irrelevance of space, masquerading as annihilation of time. In the software universe, space may be traversed, literally, in 'no time'; the difference between 'far away' and 'down here' is cancelled. And so space counts little, or does not count at all.

All values, as Georg Simmel observed, are values in as far as they are to be gained 'only by foregoing other values'; it is the 'detour to the attainment of certain things' which is the cause to 'regard them as valuable'. Things, wrote Simmel, 'are worth just what they cost'; and this circumstance appears, perversely, 'to mean that they cost what they are worth'. It is the obstacles on the way that leads to their appropriation, 'the tension of the struggle for it' which makes values valuable.<sup>6</sup> Once distances can be spanned (and so the materially remote parts of space acted upon and affected) with the velocity of electronic signals, all references to time appear, as Jacques Derrida would put it, 'sous rature'; 'instantaneity' apparently refers to a very quick movement and very short time, but in fact it denotes the absence of time as a factor of event and by the same token as an element in the calculation of value. Time no more is the value which 'must be foregone', that 'detour to the attainment', and thus no more lends value to space. The near-instantaneity of software time augurs the devaluation of space.

In the era of the hardware, 'heavy' modernity, which in Max Weber's terms was also the era of instrumental rationality, time was the means that needed to be husbanded and managed prudently so that the returns of value, which was space, could be maximized; in the era of the software 'light' modernity the effectiveness of time as a means of value-attainment tends to approach infinity, with the paradoxical effect of levelling up (or rather down) the value of all units in the field of potential objectives. The question mark has moved from the side of the means to that of the ends. If applied to the time-space relation, this means that since all parts of space can be reached in the same timespan (that is, in 'no-time'), no part of space is privileged, none has 'special value'. If all parts of space can be reached at any moment, there is no reason to reach any of them at any particular moment and no reason to worry about securing the right of access to any. If you know that you can visit a place at any time you wish, there is no urge to visit it often or to spend money on a valid-for-life ticket.

### The Seductive Lightness of Being

The insubstantial, instantaneous time of the software world is also an inconsequential time. 'Instantaneity' means immediate, 'on-the-spot' fulfilment – but also immediate exhaustion. There is no time-distance separating the end from the beginning; the two notions used to plot the passing, and so to calculate the 'forfeited value' of time, have lost their meaning. There are only 'moments': points without dimensions. But is such a time with the morphology of an aggregate of moments still the time 'as we know it'? The expression 'moment of *time*' seems, at least in certain vital respects, an oxymoron. Perhaps having killed space as value, time has committed suicide? Was not space the first corpse on the time's road to self-annihilation?

What has been described here is, of course, a liminal condition in the history of time: that history's ultimate tendency. However close to zero is the time needed to reach a spatial destination, it is not quite there yet. Even the most advanced technology armed with ever more powerful processors has some way to go to attain genuine 'instantaneity'. Neither the logically following irrelevance of space has truly and fully happened, nor has the weightlessness, the infinite volatility and flexibility of human agency been achieved. But the described condition is indeed the developmental horizon of 'light modernity'. More importantly yet, it is the ever-to-be-pursued though never-to-be-reached ideal of its major operators, which in the avatar of a new norm pervade and saturate every organ, tissue and cell of the social body. Milan Kundera portrayed 'the unbearable lightness of being' as the hub of the tragedy of modern life. Lightness and speed (together!) have been offered by Italo Calvino, the inventor of those ultimately free, because unensnareable, elusive, impossible to lay hold of characters – the tree-jumping baron and the non-existent knight – as the present-day incarnations of the eternal emancipatory function of literary art.

More than 30 years ago (in his classic *Bureaucratic Phenomenon*) Michel Crozier identified domination (in all its varieties) as the 'closeness to the sources of uncertainty'. His verdict still holds: people who manage to keep their own actions norm-free and so unpredictable, while normatively regulating (routinizing and so rendering monotonous, repetitive and predictable) actions of their protagonists, rule. People whose hands are untied rule over people with tied hands; freedom of the first is the main cause of the unfreedom of the second – while unfreedom of the second is the ultimate meaning of the freedom of the first. Nothing has changed in this respect with the passage from heavy to light modernity. But the eternal frame has filled with a new content; more precisely, the pursuit of closeness to the source of uncertainty has narrowed down to, and focused on, one objective: instantaneity. People who come closest to the momentariness of movement are now the people who rule. And it is the people who cannot move as quickly, and more conspicuously yet the people who



cannot voluntarily leave the place at all, who are ruled. Domination consists in one's own capacity to escape and the right to decide one's speed – while simultaneously stripping the people on the dominated side of their ability to arrest or constrain one's own moves or slow down their velocity.

Differential access to instantaneity is the present-day version of that everlasting and indestructible foundation of social division in all its historically changing forms: the differential access to unpredictability, and hence to freedom. In the world populated by ground-plodding serfs, the tree-jumping barons are absolute monarchs. It is the barons' facility to jump the trees that keeps the serfs in place, and it is the serfs' boundedness to the ground that allows the barons to go on jumping. There was no one in sight for the serfs to rebel against, and had they rebelled, they would not have caught up with the fast-moving targets of their rebellion. Heavy modernity kept capital and labour in an iron cage none of them could escape. Light modernity let one partner out of the cage. Heavy modernity was the era of mutual engagement. Light modernity is the epoch of disengagement, of elusiveness, facile escape and hopeless chase: it is the most elusive, those free to move without notice, who rule.

Karl Polanyi (in *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origin of our Time*, published in 1944) proclaimed the treatment of labour as 'commodity' as fiction – and unwrapped the consequences of the social arrangement grounded in that fiction. Labour is not commodity (that is, not a commodity like other commodities), since it cannot be sold or bought separately from its performers. Labour that Polanyi wrote about was indeed the *embodied* labour: labour which could not be moved around without moving the workers in flesh. One could hire such human labour only together with the rest of the labourers' bodies, and the inertia of the hired bodies set limits to the freedom of the hiring. To supervise labour and to channel it according to the design, one had to survey and supervise the labourers. To control the work process, one had to control the workers. That requirement brought capital and labour face to face and kept them, for better or worse, in each other's company. The result was a lot of conflict, but also a lot of mutual accommodation: acrimonious charges, bitter struggle and altogether little love lost, but also ingenuity in designing the moderately satisfying or just-bearable rules of cohabitation. Revolutions and welfare state were both the unanticipated, but unavoidable outcome of disengagement not being, emphatically, a feasible and viable option.

We live now, however, through another 'great transformation', and one of its most prominent aspects is the phenomenon exactly opposite to Polanyi's assumption: the 'disembodiment' of that type of human labour which serves as the principal source of nourishment, or the grazing ground, of contemporary capital. Panopticon-like installations of surveillance and drill are no longer necessary. Labour has been let out of panopticon, but most importantly capital has shed the awkward burden and exorbitant costs of running it; capital got rid

of the task which tied it to the ground and forced it into direct engagement with the agents of its self-reproduction and self-aggrandizement. The disembodied labour of the software era allows the capital to be exterritorial, volatile and fickle. Disembodiment of labour augurs weightlessness of capital. Their mutual dependency has been broken unilaterally; while labour remains as before incomplete and unfulfillable, and so dependent on capital – the obverse does not apply any more. Capital can travel fast and travel light – and so its motility has turned into the paramount source of uncertainty for all the rest: the present-day basis of domination and the principal factor of social divisions.

Bulkiness and size are no longer advantages. For the capital that exchanged massive office buildings for hot-air balloon cabins, buoyancy is the most profitable and the most cherished asset; and buoyancy can be best enhanced by throwing overboard every shred of non-vital load and leaving the non-indispensable members of the crew on the ground. One of the most cumbersome ballast which needs to be disposed of is the onerous task of management and supervision of a large staff – the task which has a vexing tendency to swell incessantly, and the unwholesome inclination to put on weight through adding ever new layers of commitments and obligations. The ‘managerial science’ of heavy modernity focused on keeping the ‘manpower’ in and forcing it or cajoling to work on schedule; the art of management of light modernity is concerned with letting ‘humanpower’ out and better still forcing it to go. Brief encounters replace lasting engagements. One does not now grow a citrus-tree grove to squash a lemon.

The managerial equivalent of liposuction has become the leading stratagem of managerial art: slimming, downsizing, phasing out, closing down or selling off some units because they are not effective enough and some others because it is cheaper to let them fight for survival on their own without the burdensome, time-taxing managerial supervision, are this new art’s principal applications.

Some observers have hastened to conclude that ‘bigger’ is no longer considered to be ‘more efficient’. This is not, though, correct. The downsizing obsession is, as it happens, an undetachable complement of the merger mania. The best players in the field are known to negotiate or enforce mergers in order to acquire more scope for downsizing operations, while radical, ‘right to the bare bone’ downsizing is widely accepted as the vital precondition of success of the merger plans. Merger and downsizing are not at cross-purposes; on the contrary, they condition each other, support and reinforce. This only seems paradoxical; apparent contradiction dissolves once the ‘new and improved’ rendition of Michel Crozier’s principle is recalled. It is the blend of merger and downsizing strategies that offers capital and financial power space to move and move quickly, making it ever more global – while at the same time depriving labour of its bargaining power, immobilizing it and tying its hands ever more firmly.

Merger means a longer rope for the Houdini-style capital which has made evasion, escape, substitution of transient deals and fleeting encounters for lasting commitments, and the constant option of the ‘disappearing act’ the major vehicles of its domination. Capital acquires more room for manoeuvre – more shelters to hide, a larger matrix of possible permutations, a wider assortment of available avatars – and so more strength to keep the labour it deploys in check together with the cost-saving ability to wash its hands of the devastating consequences of the successive rounds of downsizing; this is, as it happens, the contemporary face of domination. As the American Management Association learned from the study it commissioned, ‘the morale and motivation of workers dropped sharply in the various squeeze plays of downsizing. Surviving workers waited for the next blow of the ax rather than exulting in competitive victory over those who were fired’.<sup>7</sup>

Competition for survival, to be sure, is not just the fate of the workers – or, more generally, of those on the receiving side. It penetrates the slim and fit company of light modernity from the top to the bottom. Managers must downsize the workers-employing outfit to stay alive; top managers must downsize the managerial offices in order to earn recognition of stock exchanges, gain shareholders votes and secure the right to the golden handshake once the current round of hatchet jobs has been completed. Once embarked upon, the ‘slimming’ trend develops its own momentum. The tendency becomes self-propelling and self-accelerating, and (like in the case of Max Weber’s perfectionist businessmen who no longer needed Calvin’s exhortations to repent to keep going) the original motive – that of increased efficiency – becomes increasingly irrelevant; fear of losing in the competition game, of being overtaken, left behind or out of business altogether, are quite sufficient to keep the merging/downsizing game going. This game becomes, increasingly, its own purpose and its own reward; or, rather, the game no longer needs purpose when staying in the game is its only reward.

### **Instant Living**

Richard Sennett was for a number of years a regular observer of the worldwide gathering of the High and Mighty, held annually in Davos. Money and time spent on Davos trips paid handsomely; Sennett brought from his escapades quite a few striking and shocking insights into the motives and character traits that keep the present-day top players of the global game on the move. Judging from his report, Sennett was impressed most by the personality, performance and publicly articulated life-creed of Bill Gates. Gates, says Sennett, ‘seems free of the obsession to hold on to things. His products are furious in coming forth and as fast in disappearing, whereas Rockefeller wanted to own oil rigs, build-

ings, machinery, or railroads for the long term'. Gates repeatedly announced that he prefers 'positioning oneself in a network of possibilities rather than paralyzing oneself in one particular job'. What seems to have struck Sennett most (and rightly so), was Gates' demonstrative willingness to 'destroy what he has made, given the demands of the immediate moment'. Gates appeared to be a player who 'flourishes in the midst of dislocation'. He was cautious not to develop attachment (and particularly any sentimental attachment) or lasting commitment to anything, including his own creations. He was not afraid of taking a wrong turn, since no turn would keep him going in one direction for long and since turning back or aside remained an immediately available option. We may say that apart from the widening range of accessible opportunities nothing else was accumulating or accruing along Gates' life-track; rails kept being dismantled as soon as the engine moved a few yards further, footprints were blown away, things were dumped as quickly as they were put together – and were forgotten soon after.

Anthony Flew quotes one of the characters impersonated by Woody Allen: 'I don't want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve immortality by not dying'.<sup>8</sup> But immortality derives its sense from human mortality, and the preference for 'not dying' is not so much a choice of another form of immortality (alternative to the 'immortality through works') as a declaration of unconcern with eternal duration in favour of *carpe diem*. Immortality becomes then the object of immediate consumption: it is the way you live-through-the-moment that makes that moment into an 'immortal experience'. If 'infinity' survives the transmutation, it is only as a measure of the depth or intensity of the *Erlebnis*. Infinity of possibilities slips into the place vacated in dreams by the infinite duration. Instantaneity (nullifying the resistance of space and liquefying the materiality of objects) makes every moment infinitely capacious; and infinite capacity means that there are no limits to what could be squeezed out of the moment – however brief and 'fleeting'.

'Long term', though still referred to by habit, is a hollow shell carrying no meaning; if infinity, like time, is instantaneous and for immediate use and immediate disposal, then 'more time' can add little to what the moment has already offered and nothing can be gained from the 'long-term' considerations. If heavy modernity posited eternal duration as the main motive and principle of action – light modernity has no function for the eternal duration to play. 'Short term' has replaced the 'long term' and appointed instantaneity as its ultimate ideal. While promoting time to the rank of an infinitely capacious container, light modernity denigrates and devalues its duration.

Twenty years ago Michael Thompson published a pioneering study of the convoluted historical fate of the durable/transient distinction.<sup>9</sup> 'Durable' objects are meant to be preserved for a long, long time; they come as close as possible to embodying the otherwise ethereal notion of 'eternity'; indeed, it is from the

postulated or projected antiquity of the 'durables' that the idea of eternity is extrapolated. Durable objects are assigned special value and are cherished and coveted thanks to their association with immortality – that ultimate value, 'naturally' desired and requiring neither argument nor persuasion to be embraced. The opposite of the 'durable' objects are 'transient' ones, meant to be 'used up' – consumed – and to disappear in the process of their consumption. Thompson points out that 'those people near the top . . . can ensure that their own objects are always durable and those of others are always transient . . . [T]hey cannot lose'. Thompson takes it for granted that the wish to 'make their own objects durable' is the constant wish of 'those people near the top'; perhaps even that ability to make objects durable, to amass them, keep them, best of all monopolize, is what puts people 'near the top'.

Such thoughts rang true (or at least credible) amidst the realities of heavy modernity. I suggest, though, that the advent of light modernity has radically undermined their credibility. It is Bill Gates-style capacity to 'shorten the time-span of durability', to forget about the 'long term', to manipulate transience rather than durability, to dispose of things to clear the site for other things similarly transient and similarly meant to be instantly 'used up', which is the privilege of the 'top people' and which makes them the top people that they are. Once the infinity of possibilities empties the infinity of time of its seductive power, durability loses its attraction and turns from an asset into a liability. Perhaps more to the point is to observe that the very borderline dividing the 'durable' from the 'transient', once a focus of intense contention and engineering bustle, has been by now all but abandoned by the border troops and construction teams.

Devaluation of immortality cannot but augur a cultural upheaval; probably the most decisive turning point in human cultural history. The passage from 'heavy' to 'light' modernity may yet prove more radical and seminal than the advent of modernity itself, heretofore seen as by far the most crucial milestone at least since the neolithic revolution. Throughout human history the work of culture consisted in sifting the kernels of perpetuity out of the transient human lives and fleeting human actions: in conjuring up duration out of transience, continuity out of discontinuity – and in transcending thereby the limits imposed by human mortality and deploying mortal men and women in the service of an immortal human species. Demand for this kind of work is nowadays shrinking. The consequences of falling demand remain to be seen and are difficult to visualize in advance, since there are no precedents to recall and to lean on.

The novel instantaneity of time also changes radically the modality of human cohabitation – and most conspicuously the way in which humans attend (or do not attend) to their collective affairs; or rather the way in which they make (or do not make) certain affairs into collective ones.

The 'public choice theory', making currently truly phenomenal advances in political science, aptly grasped the new departure, though – as often happens when new human practices set a new stage for human imagination – it hastened to generalize the relatively recent developments into the eternal truth of human condition, overlooked, neglected or belied by 'all past scholarship'. According to Gordon Tullock, one of the most distinguished promoters of the new theoretical fashion, '[t]he new approach begins by assuming that voters are much like customers and that politicians are much like businesspeople'. Sceptical about the value of 'public choice' approach, Leif Lewin caustically retorted that the thinkers of the 'public choice' school of thought 'depict political man as . . . a myopic cave man'. Lewin thinks this to be utterly wrong. It might have been true in the troglodytes' era, 'before man "discovered tomorrow" and learned to make long-term calculations' – but not now, in our modern times, when everyone knows, or most of us, the electors and the politicians alike, that 'tomorrow we meet again' and so credibility is 'the politician's most valuable asset'<sup>10</sup> (and allocation of trust, we may add, is the elector's most eagerly used weapon). To support his critique of 'public choice' theory, Lewin refers to numerous *empirical* studies, showing that only a few electors admit to voting with their wallets, while most of them declare that what guides them in their voting behaviour is the state of the country as a whole. This is, Lewin says, what could have been expected; this is, I suggest, what the interviewed voters thought they were expected to say. If one makes the necessary allowances for the notorious disparity between what we do and how we narrate our actions, one would not reject the claims of 'public choice' theorists (as distinct from the universal and extemporal validity of those claims) offhand. Theory might have actually gained in insight by cutting itself loose from 'empirical data'. It is true that once upon a time the cavemen 'discovered tomorrow'. But history is a process of forgetting as much as it is a process of learning, and memory is famous for its selectivity. Perhaps we will 'meet tomorrow again'. But then perhaps we will not, or rather the 'we' who will meet tomorrow won't be the 'we' who met a moment ago. If this is the case, are the credibility and the allocation of trust assets, or liabilities?

Lewin recalls Jean-Jacques Rousseau's parable of stag hunters. Before men 'discovered tomorrow' – so the story goes – it could happen that a hunter, instead of waiting patiently for the stag to emerge from the woods, may be distracted by his appetite for a rabbit running by, despite the fact that his share of meat in the jointly hunted stag would have been greater. Indeed, but it so happens today that few hunting teams survive as long as it takes for the stag to appear, and so whoever trusts in the benefits of the joint enterprise may be bitterly disappointed. And it so happens that unlike the stags calling for closing of ranks and standing arm to arm, the rabbits fit for individual consumption are many and different and take little time to hit and cook. These are also dis-

coveries – *new* discoveries, perhaps as pregnant with consequences as the discovery of tomorrow once was.

### Notes

1. See Rob Shields (1997) 'Spatial Stress and Resistance: Social Meanings of Spatialization', in Georges Benko and Ulf Strohmayer (eds) *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity*, p. 194. Oxford: Blackwell.
2. See Michel de Certeau (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Tim Cresswell 'Imagining the Nomad; Mobility and the Postmodern Primitive', in *Social Meanings and Spatialization*, pp. 362–3.
3. See Daniel Bell (1988) *The End of Ideology*, pp. 230–5. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
4. Daniel Cohen (1997) *Richesse du monde, pauvretés des nations*, p. 84. Paris: Flammarion.
5. Nigel Thrift (1997) 'The Rise of Soft Capitalism', *Cultural Values* April: 39–40. Thrift's essays can be only described as eye-opening and seminal, but the concept of 'soft capitalism' used in the title and throughout the text seems to be a misnomer – and a misleading characterization. There is nothing 'soft' about software capitalism of light modernization. Thrift points out that 'dancing' and 'surfing' are among the best metaphors to approximate the nature of capitalism in its new avatar. Metaphors are well chosen, since they suggest weightlessness, lightness and facility of movement. But there is nothing 'soft' about daily dancing and surfing. Dancers and surfers, and particularly those on the overcrowded ballroom floor and on a coast buffeted by high tide, need to be tough, not soft. And they are – as few of their predecessors – able to stand still or move along clearly marked and well serviced tracks, ever needed to be. Software capitalism is no less hard and tough than its hardware ancestor used to be.
6. See Georg Simmel (1968) 'A Chapter in the Philosophy of Value', in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, pp. 52–4, K. Peter Etkorn, trans. New York: Teachers College Press.
7. As reported in Eileen Applebaum and Rosemary Batt (1993) *The New American Workplace*, p. 23. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Here quoted after Richard Sennett (1998) *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, p. 50. New York: W.W. Norton.
8. Anthony Flew (1987) *The Logic of Mortality*, p. 3. Oxford: Blackwell.
9. See Michael Thompson (1979) *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press – particularly pp. 113–19.
10. Leif Lewin (1998) 'Man, Society, and the Failure of Politics' *Critical Review* Winter–Spring: 10. The criticized quotation comes from Gordon Tullock's preface to William C. Mitchell and Randy T. Simmons (1994) *Beyond Politics: Markets, Welfare, and the Failure of Bureaucracy*, p. XIII. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

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