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Déjà vu and the Horizontal Reinstitution of Future

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We become epigones or spectators, but epigones or spectators of our very own potential-to-be.

~Paolo Virno¹

Within bureaucratic settings time seems to simultaneously rush and stay frozen – an endless cycle of past-presentism that shrinks leisure and creativity, producing a feeling of déjà vu and futurelessness. It is a condition that withers imagination and makes life miserable. It conditions us to simply observe our future, rather than allow us to inhabit and actively shape it. To alter this we first must obtain an understanding of why we tend to experience our present as stagnant and the structural architecture that corrodes our ability to imagine beyond the horizon of what currently exists.

Our daily experiences are being rushed by the capitalist clock. We feel as if there is never enough time for all the things we have to

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¹ Paolo Virno, *Deja vu and the end of history*, London: Verso Books, 2015, p. 32

do or desire to experience. And this is true, as our daily temporalities are being densely fragmented in a highly precarious setting, where we have to rush from one task to another, in increasingly fragmented routines, if we don't want to find ourselves at the bottom layers of society, among the most disempowered.

On the central political stage, characterized by oligarchic elements such as professional politicians, elections, and supposed representation, there too seems to be a lot going on in the short-term. On daily bases we are bombarded, both on social media and on mainstream media, by the spectacle of rival partisan factions clashing with each other in their never-ending pursuit for political authority. On the geopolitical field too, competing blocks of Capital clash with each other.

But there is simultaneously another feeling, that of time saturation, when looking at the world on a long-term temporal scale. We are not speaking here of *history repeating itself*, as argued by Marx when quoting Hegel.² Instead, what we have is a general feeling of *déjà vu*. People grow older, things get worn out, the planet keeps spinning, politicians quarrel, but on the social level things remain generally the same. Yes, governments still change, new reforms are being passed and alliances are forged or disbanded etc., but the general political architecture of our societies remains unchanged. This is the promise of stability and normality offered by the genuinely bureaucratic Capital-Nation-State complex—an oligarchic order, whose institutions remain unapt for alteration and only harden their grip on society. The only choice people have beyond begging the ruling class for minor reforms is to revolt and initiate their own alternative institutions from below. But this is by no means an easy task as the status quo is aware of this potentiality and develops an ever increasing array of obstacles to prevent people from even thinking of revolution.

² Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Even before Fukuyama's proclamation of the end of history we had two opposing sides, each claiming to be the alternative to the other. But, in reality, they were the two faces of the same coin. Cornelius Castoriadis described them as *Fragmented* (i.e. Western) versus *Totalitarian* (i.e. Soviet) bureaucratic capitalism,³ thus underlying their core similarity. The same holds, to an even greater degree, for the emerging multipolar geopolitical reality of today or for the rival partisan factions that quarrel in parliaments worldwide, as they all are inclined to operate strictly within the frameworks of statecraft and capitalism.

This "similarity" is not a product of mere "chance" or a political failure, but the logical outcome of the way our temporal imagination is systemized. When we think of the future, we lean on our conception of the past, and our thinking takes place at the present. In every moment we reflect on time, we find ourselves both immersed in and detached from a temporal flow that seems to supersede us in every way. Immersed, since our envisioning of the future is never in *nihilum* or *cum nihilo*, but rather conditioned by our present situation, which, in turn, is framed by the past; detached, since our envisioning of the future places us at an imaginative a-temporal point of view, which functions as an imaginary escape from our past and present reality. However, neither this immersion nor this detachment is complete, since we are always present, always open to outside temporality, but also, we are always individuals, always rooted in our own personal perspective. Social time is what mediates between natural temporality and psychical temporality and the common field where our conscious individual time is formed and integrated within our collective history. No society could exist on a 'no future' assumption and the terror of such a possibility nurtures the most nightmarish dystopias.

³ *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. David Ames Curtis, London: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 218-238.

Yet, our capacity to determine our own future is constantly sabotaged by the very structures we inhabit. This reality corrodes our abilities to imagine a future that will go beyond that *déjà vu*. We hear of Degrowth, Commons, Circular economy, Zero Waste economy, etc. but often the advocates of such new theories seem to remain entrapped within the very same imaginary they aim to challenge: Thinking of social change mainly in economic terms. Of course, this does not mean that we can be led to a state of being where an alternative will be forever unimaginable, but only that imagining will require more effort.

Paolo Virno suggests that *[d]éjà vu arises when the past-form, applied to the present, is exchanged for a past-content, which the present will repeat with obsessive loyalty – that is to say, when a possible-present is exchanged for a real-past.*⁴ This is exactly what nation-states do as they strive to create a national identity by homogenizing their subjects—extracting a certain interpretation of a particular event from the past and turning it into what McKenzie Wark calls past-in-general.⁵ In the imaginary of the nation-state, the national identity is something that does not change over time. Minor developments, like those occurring in the language, are being recognized, but the present nation is seen as a direct continuation of the past. In this sense there is no really tangible future in the imaginary of any national framework, only a futuristic setting in which future generations will continue their national legacy. As Virno underlines:

In the real anachronism, the past-form – which confers a virtual character on the present – is systematically re-

⁴ Paolo Virno, *Deja vu and the end of history*, London: Verso Books, 2015, p. 18.

⁵ McKenzie Wark, “Virno and History,” *Public Seminar* (blog), February 23, 2015, <https://publicseminar.org/2015/02/virno-and-history/>

without pause, or a different, radical present, based on the anti-systemic and humane values of equality, freedom and respect for nature. It is not a free option that we can freely decide. It is rather a cause of struggle against the system, in order to create the free public space and time where we can actually have an option. Then there are the countless grassroots movements around the world that demand a radical systemic change toward a common future for all. Sometimes consciously and sometimes not, many demand a paradigm shift beyond hierarchal stratification, oriented instead toward a project of direct democracy, which will allow all people to participate in the shaping of institutions and all spheres of public life. These movements provoke a break from the *déjà vu* effect of capitalism and nation-states and lay the foundations for a democratic and ecological future. This means that we have to radically alter our present, thus reclaiming the future.

*duced to a past fact, and the present provides a coterminous copy of it.*⁶

The absence of future is also present on an existential level. Due to the danger of global warming, our existence as a species on this planet has come under question. Cities and other human settlements are at risk of being submerged under water, or buried by ever more rapidly expanding deserts, displacing millions of people from their homes, creating massive waves of climate refugees, etc. The worst thing is that such processes are already underway in many parts of the world.

The planetary conditions that make life as we know it possible are very fragile. The smallest climate change might have disastrous consequences and our societies are set on a course that is already overtaking the danger-zone. World governments and corporations seem unable, but also unwilling, to take any measure to tackle one of the most dangerous and existential crises in human history. Despite thousands of international treaties, summits and agreements, we are still on a collision course with planetary boundaries – a direct consequence of the political *déjà vu* enforced by the dominant oligarchic order.

From this existential crisis a sense of urgency emerges, brought up by the threat of global ecological catastrophe, toward which humanity is blindly running while striving to fulfill the unfulfillable systemic ambition of expansive growth and unlimited exploitation of nature and society. Urgency, on the one hand, complements the system's accelerationism, bounding society in an exhausting agony between a rush to the future and a fear of the future. Under the influence of *déjà vu*, it encourages people to continue acting within the parameters set by the Nation-State-Complex – the very same ones that have created the current mess in the first place. These parameters include selfishness, caring

⁶ Paolo Virno, *Deja vu and the end of history*, London: Verso Books, 2015, p. 30.

only for one's own (kin, tribe, nation), hoarding resources, and resorting to violence, with their expression coming in the form of survivalism and privatised "freedom cities". This is the temporality of speed, ruthless (pseudo)efficiency, and impatience.

But, on the other hand, this same urgency has the potential to develop an alternative temporality of patient restoration and mutual care that inspires social movements to rise up against the system and the dreadful dystopian horizon of self-destruction that its policies have made all too real. It calls on humanity to act as soon as possible, on a different basis – of inclusivity and cooperation – so that there be a tomorrow for all of us, and not only for the ultra-rich. This temporality also tends to take into consideration future generations whose lives will be directly influenced by our (in)action today.

This alternative sense of urgency urges us to break with *déjà vu* and act toward radical change. Nation-states and their business associates respond by attempting to enforce the *déjà vu* effect of normality, reaching as far as deeming peaceful climate movements as terrorist.⁷ Some argue that the political form, which will appropriately correspond to this urgency, is the totalitarian one, as it allows for quick unchallengeable decisions to be taken—the so-called eco-fascists. But this is a political form that remains trapped within the contemporary imaginary, based on domination and exploitation. It is this mindset that led us to exploit nature in the first place.

However, the erasure of the future is never absolute. Change and alterity are immanent in time. Time passes and this passage is manifested in the emergence of alterity, the appearance of the new, the questioning of the traditional and the opening up of unforeseeable futures. Social injustice, inequality and exploitation erode the foundations of social belonging and identification with authority.

⁷ Grierson, Jamie, and Vikram Dodd. "Terror police list that included Extinction Rebellion was shared across government." *The Guardian*. January 27, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jan/27/terror-police-list-extinction-rebellion-shared-across-government>

Future dystopias are a recent social-historical construction based on a sense of collective hopelessness and a modern feeling of fatalism. But this occurs only because we are individually excluded from the central political decision-making that brings forward future possibilities. In our nation-state societies, the official past, embodied in established authorities and official historical narratives, which function as the justification mechanism for established authorities, casts its shadow over the present both as authority and as tradition. Instituted attitudes, norms and stereotypes that reproduce social inequality and exploitation invest in the repetitive dimension of temporality and try to control the future, thus securing the status quo.

The creative dimension of time erupts without warning in rebellions, revolutions and the rise of new significations. These are the moments when the arbitrary foundations of established authorities are exposed as such and the political question regains its full existential depth, being rephrased as a questioning of society's institution as a whole and a collective impetus toward the reclaiming of the future, which means the re-institution of the present. As Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz wrote:

*A revolution is an exceptional event that will alter the history of societies, while changing humanity itself. It is a rupture in time and space, where humans live between two periods: the period of power and the period of revolution. A revolution's victory, however, is ultimately achieving the independence of its time in order to move into a new era.*⁸

So, at this moment, we, as co-existing social individuals face an unprecedented dilemma between a fervent, agonizing presentism

⁸ Omar Aziz, "A Discussion Paper on Local Councils in Syria", *The Anarchist Library* (2013), accessed November 21, 2015, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/omar-aziz-a-discussion-paper-on-local-councils-in-syria>