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Chakkalakal, Silvy ; Ren, Julie

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– INTERVENTIONS

– UN/DOING FUTURE, UNSETTLING TEMPORALIZATION

SILVY CHAKKALAKAL AND JULIE REN

Abstract

The concept of the future, its prognostications and its applications increasingly shapes present social worlds. From government policy to architectural design, from preemptive everyday practices to interventionist counter-cultural projects, imaginations of the future take concrete form and enjoy a powerful purpose. In this intervention we ask: How is the future invented, planned, renounced and researched? Specifically, how do we analyse the entanglement of temporal and spatial logics against the enveloping imperative of ‘future as crisis’? What is the role of methodology, collaboration and engagement in shaping debates about the future, and how do we research different futures as well as different positionalities within the future? Rather than taking a prescriptive approach, we consider future epistemologies as well as concrete future practices and the ways in which multiple notions of futurity might overlap. Additionally, we consider the standpoint from which different futures are imagined or renounced, and the ways in which entanglements of past, present and future might reflect a struggle on different social fields. Finally, we complicate some of the distinctions that researchers draw between the practices of imagining, planning and producing future scenarios as exclusionary, and modes of navigating and shaping futures that are embedded in everyday lives.

Introduction

The concept of the future, its prognostications and its applications increasingly shapes present social worlds. From government policy to architectural design, from preemptive everyday practices to interventionist counter-cultural projects, imaginations of the future take concrete form and enjoy a powerful purpose. ‘Cities are particularly replete with violence of the imagination (Hengehold, 2013), where hopes, fears, aspirations and dreams are shaped by the inability of past knowledge and affiliations and future promises and trajectories of livelihood formation to provide adequate maps for how individuals can lead viable lives’ (Simone, 2016: 6). The simultaneity of these multiple temporalities demand that researchers employ a variety of methods to study the concept of the future, evaluate different future routes, and interrogate their consequences for our present. A more focused attention to methods as well as epistemologies can enrich the growing yet disjointed field of future research, which traverses a variety of hermeneutical concerns and disciplines (Anderson, 2010; Appadurai, 2013; Seefried, 2014; Pow, 2015; Jasanoff 2015a; 2015b; Beckert, 2016; Datta, 2019; Bryant and Knight, 2019; Paprocki, 2019; Ghertner *et al.*, 2020; Kemmer and Simone, 2021; Färber, 2021). The way in which notions of futurity function as relational categories is evident from these works; imagination, speculation, anticipation,

aspiration, hope and promise are not only operant within the urban field; moreover they can be understood as heuristic concepts and employed as research methods. The ongoing escalation and accumulation of global crises—financial, refugee, ecological, pandemic, democratic—underscores how thinking and practicing the future entails acts of scaling, prognosticating, evaluating risk (see, for example, Elliott, 2019). This conjuncture of ‘the future as crisis’ reflects a pattern familiar in contexts where crisis has long been normalized as a way of life, ‘where “crisis” and the “everyday” are not so neatly separable’ (Bhan *et al.*, 2020). Futurity reveals itself as a special temporal mode, which materializes in explorative as well as in normative forms and formats of practicing risk, vulnerability and emergency in processes of planning, managing and governing (Chakkalakal, 2018: 10–13).

In ‘Un/Doing future’, we ask: How is the future invented, planned, renounced and researched? Specifically, how do we analyse the entanglement of temporal and spatial logics against the enveloping imperative of ‘future as crisis’? What is the role of methodology, collaboration and engagement in shaping debates about the future, and how do we research different futures and different positionalities within the future?

These leading questions are aimed at disrupting future research, which might presume a singular or essentialized notion of a future. This is perhaps most evident in urban planning literature, which seeks to manage the future (Steinberg, 2005) or take technological perspectives on planning and futurity (Graham and Marvin, 2000). Even in literature designing a multiplicity of scenarios for possible urban futures, these possibilities are seen as penultimate, unique temporalities (Barredo *et al.*, 2003). The attention in future research is often on productive, constructive forms of ‘spatializing’ and shaping desirable, improved, more equitable or sustainable future realities (Holert, 2000; Ratcliffe and Krawczyk, 2011).

Insidious forms of progressive paternalism behind these normative notions of the future have given way to participatory notions heralding everyday, ordinary life—an experience of the present. This misconception of the everyday as merely (here-and-now) experience erases the many temporalities shaping everyday life and the richness of the everyday as an analytical perspective. Ben Highmore sketches out the need for a heuristic locating of ‘the everyday as existing *between* or *traverse* society and the individual, structure and agency or domination (pressure) and resistance (willfulness)’ (Amelang, 2014: 36; quoting Highmore, emphasis in original). Rather than conclusively dismissing the notion of future as ‘violent imagination’ or clumsily (re)inscribing the future as a pre-existing kind of temporality, un/doing the future means taking a step back. In doing so, we focus attention on the danger of (re)producing simple binary oppositions between different cultural fields such as urban planning and urban dwelling. Instead, we propose an analytical standpoint that accounts for the entangled practices of future making, which also implicates our own academic involvement.

This intervention seeks to complicate the way we understand ‘futurity’ in three gestures. First, rather than a prescriptive approach, we consider future epistemologies as well as concrete future practices and the ways in which multiple notions of futurity might overlap, operate in coeval ways and be shaped by a politics of time. This simultaneity is most evident in the everyday interactions of people, spaces and materialities: the everyday as a space–time way of life, routinized practices and habits, as well as space–time of power. At the same time, the everyday offers a unique insight into the tactics and strategies, the poetics and rhetorics, the tricks and feints that Michel de Certeau calls the ‘Arts de Faire’ (de Certeau, [1984] 1988). These interplays of the everyday are evident through the lens of repair, for instance, a practice of materially preparing for the future that is demanded in everyday life (see Boudreau’s ‘City of repair’, 2022, this issue).

Secondly, we also consider the standpoint from which different futures are imagined or renounced, and the ways in which entanglements of past, present

and future might reflect a struggle on different social fields. Not everybody has the opportunity to imagine a future; the future field itself is criss-crossed by inequalities and imbalances. We expand Arjun Appadurai's position that the capacity to aspire is distributed in an unequal manner by contending that the logics and narratives of future making as well as the institutionalized tools of scaling and measuring futurity (see González-Arellano's 'The future scenarios of cities', 2022, this issue) themselves create different social positionalities (see Naruka's 'Future of a dying river', 2022, this issue). Aspects of uncertainty, of risk and vulnerability, but also the politicized calculations of probability and speculation (see Hilbrandt and Grafe's 'The urban visions of global climate finance' and Bunnell's 'Where is the future?', 2022, this issue) need to be analysed from a differentiated but also a multitemporal perspective that captures the figurative interplay between various social fields and positionalities. It is important to stress that by reconsidering the everyday, we also bring to light unexpected agencies, navigational capacities and resistances.

Thirdly, we want to complicate some of the distinctions drawn between the practices of imagining, planning and producing future scenarios as exclusionary, and modes of navigating and shaping futures that are embedded in everyday lives. We draw attention to the role of research and the methodologies that reproduce these bifurcated assumptions about the actors behind the future, and the ways of looking, researching, documenting or interpreting that inscribe these distinctions. We encourage methodological possibilities drawn from a speculative-materialistic perspective, inspired by feminist works that investigate time as a material phenomenon and deal with the social relations enabled and disabled by time (Barad, 2010; Haraway, 2013; 2015; Hester, 2018). Indeed, the advent of the 'future as crisis' compels temporal thought: it shows how different actors are forced, inspired and provoked to rethink their relationship to time.

When we consider these very different political costs, risks, investments and vulnerabilities of un/doing the future, we need to revisit the spatio-temporal logics of colonialism, which stained the conceptualizations of 'development', 'history', 'modernity'—'the primitive past' underlying normative discussions of shaping the future. The constitution of temporal difference and the fallacy of developmentalism was at the heart of colonialism (Blaut, 1993; McClintock, 1995; Robinson, 2006; Mignolo, 2007). This denial of coevalness (Fabian, 1983) is deeply embedded into our social worlds, and into the epistemic concepts we work with, such as time and space. In our view, there needs to be an engaged way of questioning these concepts by questioning the temporal logics produced by our disciplinary frames and our own narrations of the future.

In this Interventions forum we highlight a sociomaterial transformation of the political through changing relationships that do not centre only on human agency, but also include rivers, bodies, shrines, streets, visions and scenario publications. Julie-Anne Boudreau, in her essay 'City of repair: practicing the future in Mexico City' (2022), develops the notion of the street not as an object of her study, but conceptualizes it as her standpoint. The author shows how orientations of futurity such as anticipation and aspiration emerge within the everyday practices and embodiments of street-relating actors. The contribution understands the street as well as the ethnographic method as a mode of relating. Such relationships are present in such various arenas as the precarious work conditions at the planning office, analysed in Yogita Naruka's 'Future of a dying river: bureaucratic practices and negotiated plans of the riverfront' (this issue). They also become apparent in the conservative, risk-averse inclinations of future scenario publications that present the key material in Salomón González-Arellano's 'The future scenarios of cities: an analysis of their institutional construction' (this issue).

Among the contributions to 'Un/Doing Future' that follow, there are strategies that delinearize the temporal logic and resituate our narrative position. The 'retrofuturism' in Tim Bunnell's essay 'Where is the future? Geography, expectation and

experience across three decades of Malaysia's Vision 2020' (2022, this issue) operates on multiple fronts: the researcher revisits his own research from the past to draw implications for a new time; the research is about a vision for the future from the past and the political figure at the centre of the past re-emerging in the present. Thus the future does not fit into a linear or singular logic, nor was it envisioned or researched as such. In Hanna Hilbrandt and Fritz Julius Grafe's 'The urban visions of global climate finance: dispossessive mechanisms of futuring and the making of Groy' (this issue), the authors' use of science fiction illustrates the ways in which financialization, coupled with green growth, through its speculative logics and institutional arrangements of power, represents a kind of colonialism of the future. They write this 'fiction' of Groy as a narration of power, highlighting how colonial relations are temporal relations, noxiously legitimizing relationships of exploitation and dependency.

When we take this repositioning of the political into account, we also approach futures as sociomaterial figurations generated by acts of constant imagination and narration. In envisioning futures, speculative-materialistic methodologies formulated by feminist theory as mentioned above put the political into action. Here, critical scholarship takes on the form of concrete future scenarios—queer futures, antiracist futures (see, for example, Asberg *et al.*, 2015; Oswin, 2019). From a speculative-materialistic standpoint any analysis of futures and criticizing them already entail alternative futures. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the 'green' vision of speculative sustainability. Importantly, the contributions to this Interventions forum do not simply highlight the dichotomy of the imaginary and the real, but instead show constant acts of renegotiating this binary opposition. Thus, they underscore the dialectic constitution of futurity.

These contributions to 'Un/Doing Future' also highlight how the future is constantly in a process of being made, is relationally constituted vis-à-vis other temporal concepts, is performative, material and spatial. This means that futures and future thinking are products of social situations and of bigger cultural conjunctures (Grossberg, 2010). They come with their own histories and simultaneously they become part of routinized and embodied everyday practices. Future concepts function by assessing and shaping the present, whether they are dealing with shaping the liveability and epistemology of a street through embodied notions of repair ('City of repair'), temporal logics of bureaucratic planning processes ('Planning city futures'), the politics of the spectacular promise ('Where is the future?') or exacerbating exploitative commitments and dependencies associated with infrastructure finance ('Urban futures of global climate finance'). The authors highlight how futures do not merely exist: they are constantly institutionally produced ('Institutional construction of future scenarios'), (per)formed and represented.

At the same time, the notion of un/doing future accounts for various critiques of future-oriented thinking and highlights the fragility of the future as lived experience and as a concept. Aspirations for and explorations of the future are consistently accompanied by phenomena of failure, austerity and uncertainty. The conjuncture of 'future as crisis' exposes this fragility in tragic, powerful ways, acting in the everyday, habituated and materializing in bodies in constant acts of subjectivation. The lived-in future draws attention to the more or less hidden vulnerabilities of different bodies and their lived temporalities (Das, 2010) and the economic, political and material fragility of infrastructure (Graham and Marvin, 2001). Moreover, concepts such as 'queering time and space' (Halberstam, 2005), 'queer futurity' (Muñoz, 2009) or 'feeling backward' (Love, 2007) help to criticize the racist, classicist or heteronormative figurations of future thinking and the commodification of the future (Graeber, 2001: 9; Appadurai, 2010: 66–88). By considering the omnipresence of crisis in future thinking and practice we emphasize in this Interventions forum that the future generates unevenly distributed vulnerabilities and risks (Lakoff, 2008; Berlant, 2011; Narotzky and Besnier, 2014; Kleist

and Jansen, 2016; Knight and Stewart, 2016). As Achille Mbembe (2020, n.p.n.) writes of the unequal distribution of vulnerability for prognostications from the pandemic, 'the worst is yet to come'. From youth activists advocating for climate-change policy that will disproportionately affect their futures, to the clinical trials for coronavirus vaccines by pharmaceutical corporations in countries such as Brazil, these uneven distributions are rampant. Confidence in the future itself is indeed fragile.

In sum, when scholars tackle the mechanisms of inventing, researching and renouncing the future, they intentionally trespass the distinctions between invention and research. They offer us a guide to critically reflect on practices of urban and regional research. Through this Interventions forum, we raise the concern to 'Always temporalize!', analog to Frederic Jameson's slogan 'Always spatialize!'.¹ Our intent is not to (re-)naturalize or positivize time and temporality, but rather to work out the material and symbolic potency of time within cultural practice (Koselleck, 1989). There is a new urgency to dealing with the future, for clarity, resolution and certainty. By dissecting the nature of these dealings, we offer a more reflective contribution to understanding what could be.

Silvy Chakkalakal, Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany, silvy.chakkalakal@hu-berlin.de

Julie Ren, Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Winterthurerstrasse 190, 8057 Zurich, Switzerland, julie.ren@uzh.ch

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1 See Massey (1992) for a discussion of the concepts of space and time, specifically in the analysis of Jameson and Lacan. Massey's text addresses the ways in which conceptualizations of temporality often depoliticize space. For us, this provides a basis for thinking about the necessity for scholarship on temporality, in this case the concept of the future, always in relation to the notion of an everyday that is situated in material, social, politicized space.

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