

# The Contraction of Time

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*Progress toward a better future is a notion about time, but emerged from a feeling of spaciousness. At the end of the 19th Century, European peoples confronted the end of their capacity to expand spatially into other parts of the world. It was the end of the Age of Empires and the end of the Frontier for Americans. Optimistic expansionism was undaunted, however, and the 20th Century opened with a new version: a future paradise based on a combination of technology with social science and political-economic nostrums. As the Century closes, we are facing the exhaustion of that world view. The frontier of time is closing. The 21st Century is dawning on the end of the future.*

## The Search for an Open Space

At the end of the XVth century, the "European world economy" was bursting at the seams.<sup>1</sup> "For long periods in the past, [it had] rested on the slender basis of a single city state, one with near perfect freedom of movement but with few resources outside itself."<sup>2</sup> It was bursting physically; its area covered about 3,750,000 square miles and its population "pressed hard upon the means of substance."<sup>3</sup>

It was bursting intellectually as older concepts had become obsolete, incapable of grasping technological and social changes. Times were difficult and restless but hope, forged by the Crusades and fostered by the millennium movement, was searching for a more worldly form than the promise of an eternal heaven after death.

## Invention of the Future

The ship and the clock allowed the dream to find a focus and take shape. The return of the first galleons brought narrators who titillated imaginations with stories of bottomless pots of gold, inexhaustible supplies of spices and vivid descriptions of strange mores. A limitless space was available for grabbing. It was not by any means the first occasion on which explorers had returned with such tales, but supporting circumstances made this burst of discoveries.

<sup>1</sup> Fernand Braudel. *The Perspective of the World*.

Translation from the French by Siân Reynolds. New York: Harpers and Row, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Smith. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London, Methuen and Co.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Prestcott Webb. *The Great Frontier*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1964, p. 9.

To start with, the conquistadors were not riding exhausted horses like Attila the Hun but expensive galleons chartered by bourgeois and supported economically by a galleon-structured social, political and economic web structure around galleon technologies. Their mission was not to conquer and settle, but to expand the economic world of Europe.

For, unlike the symbolic mission of the Crusades, the object of conquest this time was "a vast body of wealth without proprietors" Nor that the new lands were uninhabited – far from it – but its aboriginal populations were perceived as unworthy of being treated as fully human in either trade or war. Europeans were becoming conscious of their technological advantages, which fostered the sensation that they were more advanced.

As a consequence, nature lost its overwhelming mystery, made of fear, respect and magic. It became a neutral given, an objective space, separate from man.

### Modern State, neutral space and eternal promises

The ensuing excitement, made of unshakable greed and genuine curiosity created a new "world economy". There were drastic shifts and displacement of fortunes as power passed to the "nouveaux riches". The corollary was a new class of poor made up of farmers, serfs and other misfits, displaced by the frantic transformation of this first globalisation. More important, a formidable ideology emerged to integrate the rigidity of the past (the Christian dogma) and the frenzy of the present (open space, new technology and new classes). The future as a collective focus and policy orientation was begging to be born. Heaven left the realm of the after-life to become an expectation of earthly paradise in the near future - at very least to a collective entity named "future generation". The modern state, promised on 'rational' behaviour of the polity, was the instrument conceived to carry this expectation.

*There was no limit to the promises of time since there was no limit to the promises of space. Nature would provide resources as needed. It was a question of organising science and techniques, regarded as the only neutral tools able to deal with neutral space. An immense leap of faith implied that a march of progress would transform this neutrality into a morality.*

#### **The closing of the time capsule**

At the end of the 19th. century European peoples confronted the end of their capacity to expand spacially into other parts of the world. It was the end of the Age of Empires and the end of the Frontier for Americans. Optimistic expansionism was undaunted, however, and the 20th Century opened with a new version: a future paradise based on a combination of technology with social science and political-economic nostrums. Economic growth, as a collective global dream, created a new kind of space, a sphere for action and conquest which partially replaced increasingly scarce physical space.

The jet plane and the computer chip are being used to reshape the dream of heaven by denying both time and space, for they shrink time and create a sensation of openness which does not require ownership of a large physical territory. The concept of a future and the real limitations of space are put out of mind in a grab for the sensation of affluence and power in real time. Support for the idea of a manageable rational state is under attack everywhere as the collective dream is replaced by an

individual one. Future studies and strategic planning for collective welfare are being replaced by versions which either transform the volatility of the present into a rational path (opinion surveys as policy) or are used to agitate fears by opportunistic evangelists.

In the absence of open spaces and open times, a frustrated humanity has turned to a frantic internal growth which could be compared to a cancer: it has a structure but no order, no other goal but growth for its own sake; it does not negotiate its survival with its host and eventually kills it.

But a trend is not a destiny, for the collective genius of humanity so far has been always to escape from deterministic models. The fragmented ecological movement, and associations carrying the crisis of global government are but two examples of attempts to renegotiate the time/space relationship and reconceive humankind in a context of limitations. These are not idle, if sophisticated drawing room discussions; they are urgent reactions to political and ecological disasters forced by hard realities incident to scarcity of natural resources. Coping with this reality is deterred by five hundred years of stubborn faith in limitless horizons, the propensity of the human animal to deny entropy as long as it can fool itself with words, and the dependence of political stability on economic growth. – the latter fed by consumption.

**Time is space.**

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