A Biocentric Critique of Urban Time: Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop*.

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Aldous Huxley's Time Must Have a Stop *(1944) is here re-read in the light of the topics addressed within Contesti's special issue Urban and Territorial Resilience. Urbanism Facing Crisis. In order to address the multiple crises, the hidden paradigms are explored and urbanism's relation to time spans is problematised in order to re-centre the role of life and ecosystems, unavoidably representing the foundations of any human activity. This scientific commentary also serves as an introduction to the book excerpts offered in the next pages.*

Reading the following excerpt from *Time Must Have a Stop* by Huxley alongside the debates gathered in this special issue may make visible an older, yet still unresolved, paradox at the core of urbanism and territorial governance: the persistent belief that spatial planning can out-think uncertainty. Such a claim falls within a wider economically-biased growthist paradigm based on which human activities would out-think the actually wider social and ecological systems in which they are framed, upon which they necessarily depend, and by which they are necessarily limited, and that the technique would be able to control and solve major complex issues involving within the larger socio-ecological systems.

Huxley dismantles this belief with disturbing clarity. «*Thought's the slave of life*», he writes, reminding us that human reason is never autonomous, never abstract, and never outside the metabolic and political conditions that shape it. And if «*life's time's fool*» then our models, forecasts, and long-term plans are necessarily undone by the elapsing of time itself—by the proliferation of variables that no system can fully anticipate.

This is precisely what the

definitions of *resilience* try to frame within academic discourse, yet they often struggle to internalise or operationalise it. Urbanism historically aligned itself with the promise of mastery: progress as inevitability, development as linear ascent, «*the bigger and better Future*» as both horizon and justification. Huxley would call this a form of idolatry–«*Progress towards Utopia*» as a secular religion–built not on empirical foresight but on faith in what the future is expected to deliver. In this sense, many crises we now face are not merely environmental or socio-economic phenomena, they are the consequences of a civilisation trained to sacrifice the present to an imagined future.

It is precisely this faith in predictability and control that resilience theory, at its origins, sought to unsettle. Holling (1973) demonstrates that systems designed to maximise stability and optimise specific functions often reduce variability and adaptive capacity, thereby becoming more vulnerable to disturbance. Building on this insight, Davoudi (2012) shows how planning and governance systems grounded in assumptions of predictability, equilibrium and linear futures struggle to engage with uncertainty, complexity and multi-risk conditions, and may even reproduce vulnerability.

In contrast, the contributions collected in this issue repeatedly show that ecosystems do not share this temporal obsession. Nature is neither *"slave of thought"* nor *"slave of life"* in the human sense; rather, it reorganises, adapts, and evolves. Urban systems, however, continue to treat land, water, and species as resources–predictable, subordinate, optimisable. Huxley calls out the incoherence of this logic: «*we sacrifice a pretty accurately predictable future to present greed*». Contemporary environmental degradation may then not be the result of insufficient foresight but of the refusal to act on the foresight we already possess.

Another passage could speak directly to territorial risk: «*Victims have long memories – a fact which oppressors can never understand*».

In spatial terms, we could state that landscapes *do* have long memories. They register extraction, contamination, infrastructural violence, and centuries of uneven development. Some of the case studies in this special issue – Ostiense, Terra dei Fuochi, Bagnoli – are not merely risk-prone territories (at least, not *per se:* we know that risk is the product of hazards – which wicked spatial planning choices can also yield and/or amplify –, exposition – i.e. the collection of people, building, and infrastructures to which spatial planning also directly gives a major contribution –, and the vulnerability of what is exposed – and the relation of what is placed where with what is placed or done elsewhere: «*that if we massacre the forests our children will lack timber and see their uplands eroded, their valleys swept by floods*»); they are the sedimented record of exploitation, metabolic disruption, and spatial

injustice. A territorial system cannot be resilient if it continues to suppress these memories or refuse accountability for their origins.

Ultimately, the excerpt from Huxley (1944), invites us to think beyond chronocentric planning, beyond the obsession with future optimisation. He proposes an alternative orientation: «*taking the fact of eternity into account*»–not as metaphysics, but as a reminder of the limits, continuities, and interdependencies that exceed human temporal frameworks. In a secular urbanistic vocabulary, this might translate as the requirement to anchor planning in ecological time, biophysical cycles, and the slow variables that actually sustain life – life that cannot be transcended by any social or economic *desideratum*.

Attributions

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References

Davoudi, S. (2012). Resilience: A Bridging Concept or a Dead End? "Reframing" Resilience: Challenges for Planning Theory and Practice Interacting Traps: *Planning Theory & Practice*, *13*(2), 299–333. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649 357.2012.677124

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