

Time and being awkward

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Abstract

The commentary focuses on the techno-cultural mediation of temporality. While lauding the paper's tracing of continuities between colonial pasts and smart futures, it asks how 'distant time' spans two such different forms of temporal organisation.

Keywords

Mediation, smart city, technology, temporality

Smart cities and subjectivities

Datta's (2026) fascinating paper on 'distant time' continues her sustained interrogation of so-called smart cities, which has focused mainly on the Indian government's designation between 2015 and 2018 of 100 cities to receive funding to become 'smart'. This article focuses on a neighbourhood in one of those cities, Krishna Nagar (though it has and has had many more names), in Shimla. The concept and practice of smart cities have received much criticism from many urban scholars for many reasons of course. The logic underpinning smart city approaches assumes that cities, and the life within them, are a series of interconnecting systems (Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2020) which can be managed most effectively using near-real-time digital data. The consequent form of smart urbanism has been condemned as technocratic and therefore fundamentally undemocratic (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019). Converting cities into sensor-generated data also means constituting their populations in specific ways, through techniques of surveillance and metricisation which Isin and Ruppert (2020) argue are a modified form of Foucauldian biopower. It is also spatially discriminatory, in that some areas benefit

from better infrastructure while others are rendered irrelevant or even disposable.

Datta adds her own analysis to these critiques, and this article specifically examines the designation of Krishna Nagar as surplus to Shimla's smart requirements. But the main focus of her work, I think, is the multiple subjective experiences and forms of agency practised by those who, although marginalised by urban management projects, are not passive. So one of the most powerful parts of this article for me is Datta's reading of documents held in the Shimla Municipal Corporation's Records Room. Datta evokes files stacked high, rolled in cloth and smelling of damp, the dust of their decay floating into clothing, hair, and mouth. She describes the fragile textures of cloth and paper, and amplifies the voices caught there, building a picture of a shifting urban landscape constantly reconfigured by its inhabitants. Applications for new floors, roofs, and walls, demands that manure

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be removed and extensions demolished: these are read as indications of the constant mutation of the built environment, which was in part a response to shifts in the physical environment and in part a reflection of changing modes of life in Krishna Nagar. Datta points to expanding families, the need for new places of worship, immigrant arrivals. In this mix of voices, not only are distinctions between the imperialist state and local inhabitants enacted, but so too are other distinctions within Krishna Nagar including class, caste, and religion.

This is not read in terms of ‘resistance’, however. Datta speaks more to making do and even to aspiration, in fact, than overthrow. She notes that for some, the aim was to move up the hill towards better housing, closer to the middle-class neighbourhoods. To achieve this – or simply to get by – she reads the archive of planning applications as a process of ‘temporal arbitrage’ by Krishna Nagar residents. This is a way of using time to enact or refuse change. Datta eloquently evokes the arbitraging rhythms of repetition, prevarication, delay, waiting, and interruption. This is a temporality that is awkward: hesitating, obfuscating, stalling. It emerges from the colonial planning archive in a double sense: the archive both records it and professes its reenactment in the materialities of its documents and filing systems.

Smart temporalities

Datta connects this colonial temporality to that of the contemporary plan to make Shimla a smart city by conceptualising ‘distant time’. Distant time is ‘a tool of statecraft’ that produces marginality across past, present, and future. It is a form of connection between then and now and there and here which is negotiated and sometimes thwarted by those it marginalises. Distant time emphasises the continuities between what is presented as the better, inevitable future and a violently unequal past.

This attention to the temporality of the smart city imaginary – and indeed urban imaginaries more generally – is critically important. The smart city is caught in its own anticipatory temporality, and is perhaps already starting to feel a little *passé* as the ‘city digital twin’ looks set to succeed it as the

latest, better, faster, smoother digital technique for urban management, just as the smart city previously overtook the cybernetic city. This is exemplary of what Halpern and Mitchell (2022) have recently termed ‘the smartness mandate’ which is becoming ever more deeply and widely embedded as post-neoliberal, digitally enabled capitalism’s favourite imaginary. The smartness mandate sees ‘the planet and its denizens as data-collecting instruments’ (xi) in unstable systems; resilience in the face of systemic crises is best driven by the constant, experimental, computational analysis of that data.

This account of the smartness mandate usefully places smart urbanism in a number of contexts and relations. However, it leans towards intellectual history, focusing on cybernetics, neoliberal economic theory and systems ecology, and traces a very specific, mostly North American genealogy to these ideas. It also says little about temporality. Datta’s project, in this essay and elsewhere – along with those of other scholars examining digital urbanism in the majority world – gives this mandate other, equally important genealogies – imperialism not least – and places it in locations where it manifests in complex and messy ways.

Time and its technological mediation

Thinking about smart in this wider sense, as part of a broader turn to data as a way of managing ‘the planet and its denizens’, does raise a question about ‘distant time’, however. Distant time is a rich and resonant concept, and in this essay appears to work primarily as a theoretical device. Datta deploys it as a means of making sense of different kinds of evidence by making one a temporal echo of the other. That is, in this article, distant time is something performed by its author.

Yet temporalities are co-constituted with technologies. The temporal resourcefulness read from the archive is as much an effect of the apparatus of planning as it is a sign of obfuscation, for example. The inhabitants of Krishna Nagar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were resourceful in ways co-constituted with the planning process. In stark contrast, the futurities of smart cities and their inhabitants rely heavily on corporate

and governmental stories and animated visions, as well as on databases and algorithms that convene populations and agencies. This difference begs the question of how distant time is itself mediated technologically, and it was not clear to me how the recursivity of 'distant time' is technologically constituted. Without a techno-cultural account of distant time, I wondered if as a concept it is explaining things that could also potentially be accounted for by other processes: for example, ongoing (post)colonial state power, or indeed multiple rounds of capitalist creative destruction. In other words, I wanted to understand better how the temporal inventiveness of a century ago has a materially mediated connection to contemporary forms of what Datta has elsewhere identified as the '*chatur* citizenship' that engages with current plans and smart visions (Datta, 2018).

Indeed to me, the temporal technologies of smart cities seem remarkably undistant, especially when they are visualised by the immense machinery of 'corporate storytelling' that dominates contemporary visions of future urban life (Söderström et al., 2014). Animated graphics and computer-generated videos of city digital twins do not show history, or the past. They don't even really show that future with much conviction (since we know that the big visions will not come to pass, and they all tend to look like something out of a sci-fi movie anyway). Rather, smart urban visions focus on a present: a real-time present, in which delay and friction are erased and everything proceeds efficiently all the time. Computer graphics software and the 'volumetric regime' similarly smooth out space into transparent cartesian grids and 3D blocks so pervasive that it's becoming hard to think space otherwise (Rocha and Snelting, 2022). These digital technologies are as integral to the smartness mandate as environmental sensors, dashboards, and control centres. They proffer particular forms of spatiality and temporality which are distinctive to digital media: real-time, three-dimensional, animated global positioning systems. This affords a very different temporality to that of earlier planning apparatus.

In making these remarks I am drawing on the recent work of feminist media studies scholar Sarah Sharma, who has written about temporality

in ways that support Datta's understanding of temporality (Sharma, 2014). But Sharma also emphasises the technological mediation of space and time. In her decidedly unfaithful re-reading of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan (Sharma, 2022), Sharma proposes that recent decades have seen a shift in the technologies that bind the times and spaces of empires from the analogue to the digital. Her suggestion that there has been, or might have been, at least in some situations, a technologically mediated shift in the organisation of temporality raises a question about the relationality at the heart of Datta's conceptualisation of distant time. How does that relationality persist when (if?) technological change has been so profound? In other words, can distant time occur when technologies have changed so profoundly?

Of course, the technological break identified by Sharma is not a clean one; and if 'the terrain of struggle is technologically produced' (Sharma, 2022: 7), it is also produced by culture and discourse, and the kind of scholarship that Datta proffers. Indeed, Sharma's provocation adds another layer to the richness of Datta's contribution, encouraging us not to refuse 'the digital' but rather to inhabit it in all its forms, and to interrogate how forms of social difference are being (re)configured with multiple and glitchy digital images, sounds, devices, networks and imaginaries. Elsewhere Datta and her collaborators have done precisely this: in an essay on young women using WhatsApp in Delhi (Datta and Thomas, 2021), in a StoryMap (Datta, n.d.), in thinking about podcasts (Datta, 2022).

All this is to say that Datta and the scholars she works with are posing some of the most necessary questions about the conceptualisation and experiencing of digitally mediated urbanism now. In examining the question of temporality – an innovative and necessary question – this essay also insists above all on the importance not only of the technological mediation of infrastructure and institutional governance, but also of the differentiated discursive and subjective experience of space and time. This is deeply pertinent for all of us interested in the simultaneously technological, imaginary, social, and governance projects that are 'smart', whether that is smart cities, platform urbanism, city digital twins, artificial

intelligence cities, and whatever form the next iteration of the white capitalist techbro dream of controlling the city takes.


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