

Urgency: The Sacred Present

The last century was all about speed, and by its end the developed world seemed to have lost its ability to do anything slowly. Individuals and organizations have reached the point where all are racing about, frantically dealing with myriad crises that "cannot wait." And with the events of autumn 2001, our lives are infused even more with a sense of urgency on every level, our most common refrain: "We have to do ... something!" That may well be the case, but if we are to avoid the mistakes of the past in this new century, we will have to rediscover the importance of the long view, the ability to see ourselves as more than just agents of the religion of urgency.

URGENCY is a pattern of time that aptly characterizes our modern condition - because it is in our urgent situations that we are likely to think most thoroughly. Indeed, urgent time is precious time, time that forces us to think and act quickly, to do the best that we can under pressing circumstances. In urgent situations, individuals and groups are constrained to act or react with speed either to protect themselves from an extreme and potentially dangerous change in circumstances or to realize a desirable new reality. And most often the most extreme reality for human beings is that of death, which of course stalks each of us and fuels our species' endearingly mad - but entirely natural - desire to postpone it indefinitely. For humans, urgency is perhaps best embodied in this lifelong anxiousness - as we confront time that becomes at once more precious and more mocking.

It is thus somewhat pointless to question the meaning of urgency - this rarified time. The meaning of this sort of time is accompanied by a necessary acceptance - urgency places itself squarely in an action-oriented locale, where it insists on confronting time on its own playing field. In an accelerated environment, where things move unpredictably, we have to act even faster in order to get ourselves ahead of events. But this operational vision of time is not without danger. Once accepted, the idea of urgency spreads itself to all corners of time and thought. Its strength in fact resides in its capacity to erode all other dimensions of time, in particular, the time to come, the future. By doing this, urgency creates an arbitration which favours the present and devalorizes the future - now linked with a feeling of uncertainty; this condition creates a value-loaded estimate of the present as a force simply too weighty to allow us to consider the future. In this way *urgency constitutes a sort of cultural devalorization of the future.*

To really comprehend this new condition we have to be able to delineate the idea of urgency and understand how it has invaded with such ease all the dimensions of social time. And what is so highly problematic is the passage of the idea of urgency from its dimension of exceptional temporality to the status of a banal and ordinary characteristic of time. Certainly society will continue to live with a plurality of social times, but in all likelihood these will be more and more encroached upon by the idea of urgency, which then becomes not only a giver of time - *zeitgeber* - but also a giver of meaning.

On the Origins of Urgency

Our idea of urgency is very much bound to the medical context. We think of hospital emergency rooms, ambulances and paramedics racing to the aid of patients "who, cannot wait," who must be admitted without the usual formalities and referrals. This medical dimension is interesting for two reasons.

First of all, medical emergencies confront humanity with situations so extreme that they can readily be separated from other areas of life. A severely injured person is admitted to hospital as an "emergency" case because his or her state does not allow delay. Yet in the specialized world of medical professionals, the concept of urgency is far from being an objective one. A recent report to the French government concludes that the vast majority of patients admitted to, emergency services would be better served by more specialized psychological or social services. *Urgency* translates itself here as having a subjective relation to time. It expresses one's anxiety - or outright panic - when confronted with an immediate future loaded with uncertainty and risk. It is a state of emotional overload in which one is unable to evaluate oneself and one's situation in reasoned calm. This uncertainty is accompanied by anguish and often fear, leaving many people to flee to the one place in our society where the word "Emergency" appears with such emphasis, illuminated over the entrance. *And here we confront the fundamental misunderstanding between the patient who goes to the emergency room to be listened to, rather than to be taken care of, and the logic of emergency services which, once diagnostics are done, have no other priorities but to direct the patient to specialized services.* The patient comes to emergency to be listened to at some length; medical emergency institutions proceed with the inverse strategy.

The example of hospital emergency calls for another remark of a more analogical nature. Admission to an emergency ward is associated with an exceptional situation confronting the patient. Admittance to, an emergency ward occurs when no other solution appears applicable. If we generalize the meaning of this idea, one sees in the emerging power of the urgent condition the expression of a wish to solicit exceptional action as a result of the slowness or ineptitude of ordinary institutions.

Urgency as Simulacra

SIMULACRA are appearances that pass themselves off as plain reality. Simulacra are very adept at facilitating this diversion of perception and are often utilized by political institutions. Either because government agencies are unable to take the real measure of a problem or because they are unable to face up to the consequences of making a particular choice, use of simulacra has become irresistible.

Urgency as simulacra has been and remains the template of a political dimension in at least two important domains: *social emergency within* national political spaces and *humanitarian urgency beyond* a country's borders. These two modes of urgency are rooted in two great regulations of the twentieth century: first, the social integration and generalization of the wage-earner workplace; and, second, the stabilization of international relations by the creation of nation states. Beyond their practical applications, these two relations have also, served to, foster identity. Since the nineteenth century, labour and war have been the matrixes of social and political identity for individuals and nations, labour becoming the main source of internal identity, war becoming the main source of external identity. Of course the main point of contact between these two has been the provider state, which has reinforced itself after every war as if every war was in fact a validation of the cohesiveness of a nation.

And now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, neither work nor war, of course, have disappeared from the social horizon. But in becoming more scarce, work reveals itself as a powerful instrument of integration. As for war, it has become less and less a confrontation between nations, and has increasingly taken the form of ethnic or religious strife taking place *within* national spaces. This kind of conflict now provides for new identities. Yet even without the integrating character that war once fostered when one whole nation was fighting another, such violence has spawned a new humanitarian urgency. And this is what best typifies the new alliance of time and simulacra.

When in 1863 Henri Dunant founded what would become the International Red Cross, he had in mind the institutionalization of a bond of humanity between belligerents through the institutionalized protection of the wounded, the prisoners of war, and the civilian population. This revolutionary humanitarian action was meant to, address the violations inherent in the bloody confrontations between rival states. The notion of so utilizing neutrality and discretion, the hallmark of the Red Cross, has its origin here.

This model of the Red Cross would remain practically unchanged until the conflict in Biafra, where the *Médecins-sans-frontières* group first appeared. And it is at this point that there were two major departures from the Red Cross philosophy. The first was a refusal to, accept the "rules of war" as dictated by states - nothing less than a challenge to these states' idea of their own sovereignty. The second was reflected in the news media's amplification of the suffering and horrors of war.

In this new pattern of humanitarian action, we see a double anticipation. First, state sovereignty is challenged; second, and more important, is the displacement of attention to conflict between states to conflict within states. The deregulation of war engenders an anarchic violence wherein the traditional distance between civilian and soldier disappears - to the extent that it is now the civilians who always seem to be in the middle of the violence.

What we see happening in this generalized chaos, in which the humanitarian movement finds itself mired, is the *systematic abduction of humanitarian action by the states themselves*. These states have now bought into the logic of the arguments of humanitarian urgency, and in so doing, have amplified and generalized the consequences of all strategies of urgency: the pursuit of means at the expense of ends; the exacerbation of tension in the short term, while neglecting the long term; and an "urgent demand" reflected in the growing and ever more institutionalized agencies of urgency.

The urgency situation mobilizes a new crucial resource: emotion. Through the power of media we see reinforced on a global scale the sentimentalization of modern societies. Yet by its intrinsic nature emotion has enormous temporal consequences; it legitimizes immediate action and disqualifies ahead of time any attempt at contesting this immediacy. *How can one not act when victims call for help? How can one countenance any delay when tomorrow may be too late?* Urgency relies on an absolute ethic of the present, and presses the *now* as that imperative moment of "now or never."

Thus for humanitarian urgency the present is sacrosanct. But in what time context should we consider this absolute present? The refusal to distance oneself with respect to immediate action is amplified and augmented when the humanitarian act is co-opted by the state to create a diversion. Because the state does not want to act politically, it introduces the scenario of the humanitarian gesture. In a world that is now ideologically less comprehensible, *states have come to understand that humanitarian urgency justifies lack of action by playing up activism*. It becomes a simulacrum that allows governments to avoid making real decisions. Typically, the urgent humanitarian interventions,

co-opted by states, have reflected a deep desire to eschew meaningful responses to the real sources of crises. The priority given to aiding the victims thus becomes a way to avoid tough political decisions. This political avoidance reflects a social and cultural evolution in the Western world, where state and international institutions increasingly look away from the responsibility of the perpetrators, and focus all their energy on a sort of holy mission to attend, with all dispatch, to needs of the victims. *Acting now* replaces *choosing now*.

Emotional and reactive at its core, such humanitarian urgency presumes to act only on the consequences of a crisis and not on its causes. But how can one justify such a policy, when these recurring consequences are so consistently the result of deliberate choice? What can one say when it is clear that these horrific displacements of civilian populations -or the outright annihilation of civilians - is in fact the main object of war, and not merely one of its consequences?

The key problem here is that any action must take a political position - either becoming directly involved in the conflict or trying to strike the difficult balance of aiding the victims at the cost of directly or indirectly lending support to the criminal perpetrators. This is exactly what has happened in the Central African conflicts; in the absence of political control, the humanitarian aid dispensed in the numerous refugee camps found itself unable to differentiate between innocent refugees and the war criminals among them. Whatever help the victims receive comes also with a new dispossession and dependence. The urgency of the situation provides for daily survival without offering any meaningful long-term perspective. *Today you saved my life... but for what future?* This is the growing lament of the victims. One of the most prominent paradoxes of humanitarian urgency is that the frenzy of urgent actions, all in the name of the primacy of human life, ends up fostering a true dehumanization of the victims. And here the biological dimension of sheer survival is disconnected from an understanding of what it means for the population to recover its life. By consistently focusing on the technical aspects of humanitarian operations, we end up dehumanizing the victims, and breaking with the long humanist tradition of medicine itself

And it is at this point that the third factor intervenes, the one connected with the creation of an increasing need as designed by humanitarian assistance itself. The rendering of such assistance has grown more and more professional and applies itself to a sort of world market of suffering - *where suffering is a resource and the victims become consumers*. To remain on site, to remain ahead of their competitors and to preserve their sources of funding, the urgency professionals are expert solicitors of urgent appeals.

One could of course, without great difficulty~ look at a whole different scheme of social urgency and one would find the same emotional mobilization applied to reducing unemployment. One would find there a long list of mechanisms more adept at containing the problem. than in treating it in depth. One would find the tendency here of urgency institutions to institutionalize, to create an environment where supply and demand reinforce one another. This supply and demand milieu, once considered as a short-term phenomenon, ultimately will see its existence becoming quasi-permanent. And at this point, a real blindness to root causes has been reached - the simulacrum is in its full eminence.