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– BROKEN INFRASTRUCTURES AND URBAN SPACIOUSNESS (COMPASSION)

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Abstract

Compassion in urban settings is manifested less as a definitive practice than as a panoply of spatial and temporal orientations that lend uncertainty to the dispositions of actions and events. This is an uncertainty that can be either generative or debilitating, and it is difficult to predict which in advance. Thus, apertures and opportunities can appear beyond the consideration of eligibility or preparedness, and there can be a refusal of the terms on offer. In this way, the intersections of bodies, materials, built environments and political structures can generate unanticipated opportunities amid what otherwise seem to be innumerable foreclosures.

Introduction

Naples in its stereotypical representations exudes chaos, a panoply of fragments and the predominance of the illicit. Although *Gomorra*, one of Italy's most popular television shows, does not stray far from these stereotypes, in its third season the consolidation of the illicit becomes a lens onto the ways in which built environments in their often ambiguous temporalities embody improbable possibilities and hopes. Its landscape of empty churches, abandoned factories and warehouses, dilapidated housing projects and seaside resorts, unused parking garages and jettisoned construction sites becomes a platform through which a supposedly vanquished Camorra don relaunches a career, repurposing these spatial products as an integrated urban economy, as places to hide the storage and transactions in narcotics, seed small enterprises to launder the illicit gains, conduct secret meetings among actors who are not supposed to get along, all as an extended fabric of surprise, of a city constantly moving on.

Not dissimilarly in the supposedly vanquished peripheries of Naples and Athens, Chinese factories producing garments, cheap handicrafts and electrical parts forge an autonomous industrial zone under the radar. Likewise, the Parisian suburbs reaching outwards from Gare du Nord become a parallel city with their improvised real estate systems that house the barely documented, that operate as the interfaces and intersections among various diasporic commercial activities, all under the pretense of being car washes, petrol stations, box stores, delivery services, auto parts markets, recycling centers and truck parts. These are the back doors into a larger world, of goods and services moving outside official channels, of ethnicities being sutured into provisional complicities. Here, a 'strange' urban geography emerges where it is not clear what things are, what they do or what form they take (Simone, 2022b). The apparent function of things, the ghostly specters of their past identities, shimmer into a blurred network of connections, both inviting and circumventing new modalities of urban control. But what might we make of such strangeness? What does it point to?

One possible response is to fold its consideration into the recent attention that has been placed on so-called infrastructures of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015; Alam and Houston, 2020), all of those entanglements of social practice, material affordance and spatial design capable of sustaining a viable enunciation of life and liveliness. It also points to extensivity of the work performed to ensure both the direct maintenance of such liveliness and the platforms on which it takes place: all of the transformative work

required in order to convert specific material formations into affordances and to sustain that materiality over time in face of its potential depletion. The usual and familiar tropes of caring enroll metaphors of solidity, nurturance or compassion. It often seems obvious as to what caring looks and feels like. It is often considered the purview of or particularly exemplified by specific gendered practices and domains—that is, the caring mother of the hearth. Care is physically demonstrated by acts of holding as a physics of support and comfort; an act of physical intimacy that momentarily relieves the individual from having to stand all on their own, to bear the weight of the world. But like every extension of one to another, the holding bears its own risk, its own dangers of becoming acts that hold up, in the sense of interdict, forestall or interrupt a sense of motion (Berlant, 2016). The hold veers on becoming a baseline that defines specific trajectories of expected future behavior or attainment, that from which the value of an existence is to be measured, a starting point that assigns a value to that which has come before and which can only be redeemed, considered significant, if particular care is taken in how one proceeds.

Stiegler (2017) extends these considerations by reaffirming the need for thinking care-fully, a thought that is directed towards what he calls the pharmacological dimensions of conventional modalities of taking care, of holding. He demonstrates the ways in which that which is purportedly ‘good for us’ is also a form of ‘poison’, and that these aspects are inextricable and must be navigated carefully to break open the hold that particular arrangements have on us. At the same time, we must mobilize that breakage, momentary though it may be, as an opening onto a new horizon of everyday thought and practices. For Stiegler, the future has been pre-programmed by digital calculation and thus is cancelled or pre-empted as it is folded into the present as a specific outcome. He argues that the entropic forms of calculation circumscribe the capacity to extend into and through the world and thus disable the capacity to care (Bishop and Ross, 2021).

In this essay, I want to reflect on the compassion of brokenness, of imaginaries of care that do not rely on a sense of organic wholeness or encompassment. This is particularly important in supplementing the depiction of intensified precarity for a particularly youthful population with a series of implicit affordances embedded in that same condition. For in many Southern urban latitudes, a younger generation of residents is situated in the midst of nascent residential/commercial landscapes that are unlikely to consolidate into any substantive platform of accumulation or social reproduction—former territories of belonging that are broken, leaving only remnants of materials and relations. Their lives mediate situations that will never be sufficient and those that are no longer sufficient. They occupy an interstitial positioning that exposes them to vast uncertainty and incessant and short-term opportunism.

At the same time, these landscapes of remnants and incompleteness offer a generosity of possibility because in each disposition there is in actuality, as opposed to claims and ideological framing, an absence of integrity. These are settings where the likely foreclosure of either repair or completion means that there is little to defend and little specification as to how the materials and relations that ensue ought to be used. The very profusion of non-subsumed details becomes materials of provisional rearrangement, where bits and pieces of family and other affinal ties, locations, infrastructures, institutional positions and income streams are interwoven into the making of mobile territories of operation.

Let me tell a small story from Jakarta to illustrate these points. Ridwan at 28 years of age already dreams of a retirement that will never come, as his life is ensconced in a multitude of temporary engagements across geographical circuits that become ever more extended. Every day he returns to his family’s original neighborhood of Mampang in Jakarta’s urban core with orders from neighbors in their present location in the distant periphery of Cileungsi for a variety of foods and artisanal goods. These will be momentarily stored on a friend’s balcony in a social housing project in nearby Tanah Tinggi, where Ridwan will pick up small packets of *shabu shabu* (methamphetamine)

that he will distribute to salespersons at an old shopping mall in Cempaka during their lunch breaks. On the way he will pick up his seven-year-old son from school and deliver him to his mother, who works in the mall, just in time for her cousin to pick him up and take him back to her parents' house, where she now stays in order to be closer to work. Ridwan will then rush to yet another side of the city near the major market of Tanah Abang, where his brother tends a small clothing outlet. Ridwan will help him arrange deliveries of jeans that have been made in small cottage industries in Tanah Sereal outside of the official commodity circuits. The brothers have invested the drug profits in rehabilitating several old shophouses into dormitory rooms for young migrant workers employed in the hundreds of small clothing factories. A sister, Ami, manages the upkeep of these *koskosans* (rooming houses), but she is also often on the run from an abusive husband, hiding out in Mampang at the flat of a distant cousin, who now is working in another city. Often Ridwan must recruit short-term cleaners and security guards for these facilities, so he frequently scours the back lanes back in Tanah Tinggi for cheap labor. Thus, his days are a constant relay of picking things up and putting them down, of going here to there, destinations like puzzle pieces in a vast network of fragmented ties—family members spread out across different geographies and small-scale livelihoods, across a variety of dramas and exigencies. Ridwan mobilizes and maneuvers a large cast of characters, and where he is just a bit less precarious than them.

Instead of viewing these partial, loose ties among remnants and incompletions solely as signs of the unraveling of coherence, rights and sociality, they also accord a form of *compassionate leave*. By this I mean a way in which persons might take leave of their senses, take leave of the obligations to demonstrate rational or coherent trajectories of self-development and take leave of the imperative to become something in particular. At the same time, they curate lives that are also *specific* in the sense of both 'saying' something about how urban conditions are read, assessed and hedged and being untranslatable into some overarching generalization or pattern. Here, specificity is the determination to convert that which has been dispossessed and broken into potential affordances, the refusal to 'play by the rules' and a concession to the provisional as a way of operating.

Without clear maps about how the shards and the incompletions of his itineraries and resources are to be used or repurposed, Ridwan exemplifies how the urban materializes a sense of compassion even as his vulnerability may be intensified. Yet, if specific libidinal attachments remain salient in relationships to family, household, community and state, what happens as particular roles and responsibilities are refused, even if not necessarily broken? What happens when detachment, rather than indicating social breakdown or disintegration, simply signals a tacit refusal to 'tie up' one's desires into the expected formats? For example:

What happens to the desires for familial affection when fathers refuse to attach themselves to the purportedly normative behaviors that constitute fatherhood; what happens when women concretely manifest indifference to the presence of men as an integral aspect of household composition? What happens when the role of 'worker' no longer provides a valorized basis through which individuals identify themselves and their worth? What happens when localities refuse to reflect compliance to the prevailing standards of viability? How and to what extent are familiar obligations recalibrated in new terms or simply refused altogether? What kinds of arrangements mark a detachment from the normative tropes of socialization, and then seek to compensate for the implications of such detachment? Here, brokenness outlines a plane of other possible maneuvers that shift from compensations for difficult situations to their outright refusal (Simone, 2022a: 274).

What does this mean for urban politics?

The provisional reshaping of the dispossessed

Urban politics has largely been about mediating the oscillating needs to define the dispositions of the present and to relinquish that control in favour of the improbable (Farias and Blok, 2016). For the productivity of urban spatial expansion was viewed largely in terms of synergistic connections—country to city, local ecologies and resources to urban regions—and to set things in motion, to propel and distribute. Identifications and functions had to be unsettled to enable their availability and resettlement in new constellations of use. Thus, the consolidation of scale, the subsumption of things within a voluminous rubric, always required dispossession, dispossession of land, livelihoods, ways of living and potentiality. Here, the urban consolidates itself as determiner of proportionality, about who counts and in what way, who is eligible for specific designations of value. Such consolidation was not simply a formatting, an assignation of predefined roles and functions, but also had to allow the components to experiment with their relations with each other so as to minimize friction and the possibilities of dissipation (McNeill, 2020). The consolidation of scale and volume was something that could never be settled once and for all, so the appearance of such, the inclination to settle urban questions and populations, remained a ruse, a necessary deception (Billé, 2020).

This unsettlement is important to keep in mind, for although Cowen (2020) tells us that voluminous reproduction has long been predicated on theft, dispossession also has a specifically experimental quality. For what is uprooted, plundered and made available is not simply plugged into some new function as an intact entity. Rather, the processes of unsettling and dispossessing ‘plays with’ those that are dispossessed in order to figure out what the resultant instability could do in relation to emergent forms of value creation and economic development. Making things available constitutes a moment of indecision, where the ‘writing in’ of the dispossessed to new configurations of inhabitation could veer off into unanticipated futures. Here, an urban politics might emerge that is not directed towards either reversing dispossession or repossessing, but towards using the moment of dispossession to prefigure or predispose the available unbodying of the dispossessed to forms of gathering, sensing and living that do not fully complete the process of resocialization in the terms imposed by the hegemonic apparatuses of political rule, infrastructure, accumulation and territorial administration.

There are always dispositions which might be taking place that either don’t surface or for which we don’t have the words or cognition to recognize, to discern from complex patterns of power. As Jane Doe walks the heavily commercialized street full of neon lights and traffic near midnight crying inconsolably, there is no clear ontogenesis of these tears. To be sure, she may have just broken up with a lover whom she found had been cheating on her, but she also traverses the thick affects of the street exuding the struggles and tears of a myriad of actants. The tears might have been withheld if not for the heavy pollution in the air or the stress of roadside hawkers desperate to make a few bucks before the two-hour commute home. The tears might have been further precipitated by the digital news on a towering billboard announcing that the death toll in Gaza had just exceeded 40,000 or might be attenuated by fond memories when she sees in a bakery window a cake like the one her mother had bought her when she was little. There are interminable lines of implication too overwhelming for any cogitating body, all which curate atmospherics of existence that are neither good nor bad, that are beyond the exigencies of acting in the next moment, where decisions must be made about what to pay attention to and how those decisions are frequently made for one in ways that are incomprehensible in that moment.

Here, proportion, the relative weight of causes and effects, is an imposition on the city, a disciplinary effort to order it in ways that implicitly accord a specific value to the thoughts and feelings experienced. Here, compassion is the possibility of getting lost in a city thoroughly signposted, where digital maps guide the traveler to any location

through a plurality of possible itineraries, and where there is an implicit equivalence of all places but an unbodied equivalence constituted by graphemes rather than smells or sounds. This is an inhabitation disinterested in the reigning genre of our humanity, but rather impels an inclination towards a succession of passings-by where every moment is available for something to happen beyond the confines of its infrastructural signification. It is rather an inhuman enactment that exceeds discernment, for everything becomes unrecognizable yet meaningful in terms that are never yet to come but are somehow eminently familiar even as they have never transpired before. It is an eerie form of an aesthetic arithmetic which suggests that whatever appears in front of us is always 'less than' and 'more than' at the same time. This, in turn, is life's priority.

The urban has always exhibited complex and contradictory moral economies as applied to defining collective goods and interest, as well as undertaking often onerous interventions in the name of such collective interest. Here, compassion is not an exclusive human phenomenon but is embedded within the intricate choreographies and architectures of the urban itself—as almost an infrastructural feature. While we might grasp such capacity exclusively within the itineraries and trajectories of residents who endure without measure or reason, who manage to circumvent the otherwise immanent disasters that await them, we might garner evidence of a compassion within how built, social, material and spectral environments concretize a sense of generosity and openness.

Far from being an outgrowth or implication, everything that transpires works from all that precedes or follows it. And these are not simply the identifiable categories of history, personality and contextual situation, but also a process that is always under way, with innumerable gestations, gestures and incipience that go undetectable yet respond to the entirety of the world in a present moment, and which perhaps make themselves present with unprecedented specificity. Here, whatever happens, laden with power though it may be, always occurs within the simultaneity of many other events. Each exerts impacts beyond the locales and boundaries that would structure their relevance and the ways in which they would be conventionally attended to (Simone, 2018). In many urban settings, particularly in the global South, inhabitants frequently assumed the risk that the unprogrammed and often unruly exchanges among them, and with their relationships with the materials at hand, might generate more virtuous dispensations, even if they were hard-pressed to prove it.

For the relations of contiguity among physically proximate territories are characterized by pronounced and shifting boundaries that are not easily describable through recourse to the familiar attributions of social composition and history. The complexion of terrain shifts easily and often dramatically as one moves in any line outward from a given context. What characterizes the specificity of any district, territory also shifts in a series of continuous rearrangements of elements that are often intensely personal and specific to a history of accommodations and negotiations, increasingly supplemented and complicated by infusions of new residents and operators, many of which end up being temporary inhabitants. The varying arrangements operative within specific districts manifest an intricate architecture of vulnerabilities and opportunities at any given time, with certain opportunistic inclinations rendering the district more vulnerable to unanticipated events, while those seemingly more protected may experience undo consequences for their ability to weather certain storms further down the line. The tenuous hold on stabilities and territorial consolidation, requiring as it does participation in a wide range of external articulations in order to cushion the negative ramifications of over-entanglement, is increasingly operationalized in steering inhabitants to more individualized orientations to livelihood formation, but it is also a declension of a willingness to stay put, or rather to piece together territories of operations through 'strange alliances' among places, actors and materials that seemingly would not necessarily go together.

Without guarantees: the time of the maybe

Compassion has often been popularly construed as the certainty of care. Showing compassion does not depend on the recipient demonstrating their eligibility for it. While the recipient might be categorized as more or less worthy of compassion according to various standards, no matter what a person has done or faces, compassion can still be demonstrated as something that exceeds determinations of worthiness. Simply to be alive in this world, no matter how a person might live this life, is the grounds for compassion. We may despise what a person has done or even attribute to that person a certain measure of evil, yet there are always grounds on which compassion may be warranted. Certain doctrines may require confession or professions of faith on the part of the recipient, as well as requests for forgiveness or acts of contrition as the means to explicitly invite compassion to be demonstrated. Yet the human, in all of its frailty, in all of its final powerlessness in the face of death and in the face of an infinite cosmos, always struggles to make sense of their environs, and no matter the sense made, no matter the particular life curated, always fails in the midst of an uncertainty that consumes them.

Yet this certainty of the possibility of compassion, of compassion as the act that renders a degree of certainty to life in that love and kindness can be extended to any situation or act no matter how unforgivable, sets up a binary where compassion can be rejected. This rejection may entail recognizing compassion for what it is and then refusing it either in intensive feelings of self-disgust, indifference or resistance to acting with compassion to the other's performance of it. As reflected in the other contributions to this Interventions collection, this is why it is important to distinguish compassion from care.

For if compassion engenders spaciousness, in extending or dissipating the parameters of any act, unsettling a fixed connection between the person and the act or situation, then the refusal of compassion marks the collapse of space onto the primacy of a single signification. For compassion basically says, 'Hey, wait a minute, despite all that is said and done, is there something else we are missing here; is there something at work, in either the person's life or context that has led this individual down a particular route, that could have been different if only someone treated that person in a different way; if they had only taken them more or less seriously; if only they had gotten in the way of them doing evil?'

Here, the enactment of any life becomes a collective responsibility. Not in the sense that everyone bears a collective responsibility for everyone else, but rather in the sense that looking out for ourselves always means particular ways of looking out for others. Compassion accords spaciousness in terms of opening up the consideration of any life to a vast ensemble of meanings that decenter hardship or evil being precisely or singularly located within the territory of the self. The accordance of compassion is an accordance of spatiality, granting a surfeit of maneuverability that permits unanticipated courses of action, the provision of new witnesses and new collectives. As compassion is demonstrated *for* and *to* a particular person, the compassionate assumes a responsibility on behalf of the person to regard them as more than the evidence they embody, and in doing so accord that evidence an altered domain of consideration. The provision of this space is what the compassionate does to the victim, however persecuted, marginalized, deranged. But the mode of conveyance must also anticipate its prospect of refusal, a refusal that exceeds the specific encounter. So compassion may sometimes need not to be recognized as such, even as demonstrations of compassion are that which offers life its most spacious terrain. To disarm the refusal of compassion, it may be necessary that the potential recipient be compelled to take the risk of not knowing whether such compassion is present or not, that they co-produce that moment of compassion rather than just passively receive it.

Compassion is, as alluded to just now, a temporal matter as well: 'wait a moment'. Pause the flow of events, the forward trajectory of tragedy, to allow something else to

take place, some other form of paying attention. This is a time of the ‘maybe’, where things could go many different ways, but despite the precision of calculated anticipation or the most careful planning, the prospects for making a specific disposition happen are no greater than a complete lack of preparation. Will one make it through a roadblock or checkpoint unimpeded; will one make it home safely during a tremendous storm? Maybe yes, maybe no. In such a temporal frame, it is impossible to weigh the variables, to assign a statistical probability one way or another.

Such temporality reflects the conjunction between inhabitant and environment where things could go many different ways:

It is a notion that resonates with Deleuze’s figuration of a ‘center of determinacy’ (1991) but which does not line up completely, as the maybe reflects the ellipsis in all performance. All of the traumas of the past, everything that has been tried so far, whether it works or not, all of the times where one has fallen down to pick oneself up again does not prepare a person for what will take place now. All of that suffering that won’t be redeemed, but which has thickened your skin, turned the surface of the body into a confusing map of contradictory itineraries. All this both comes to matter and won’t matter on whether the person passes through the roadblock, manages to mobilize a life’s savings into something tangible, manages to turn that corner just before the police or debt collectors arrive ... This time of the maybe, more than simply a wager or speculation, is a continuous refusal against what is on offer, against how one is regarded. It is a situation where no matter what a person has doesn’t count, and where all that the person doesn’t have is also refused count. Given all of the ways larger numbers of inhabitants in our cities are on the move, often relinquishing things of value in order to better position themselves in relation to often opaque opportunities, as well as the stories they tell both themselves and others about how they assess and decide, this politics of the *maybe* becomes increasingly salient to intensified circulations of bodies and things (Akoth *et al.*, 2024: 4).

It also becomes a concretization of compassion in that nothing counts for sure, that even the least deserving, prepared or eligible have a chance, as do those now seemingly thoroughly dispossessed of their hard work and integrity. While this does not sound fair nor just, an even unwelcome equilibration of significant differences for being in the world, such positionality shows compassion by turning every performance, every context into something more than what it is, even if only an impenetrable and cruel arbitrariness.

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