

NYC 2050: A Talk of the Future of New York City

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In preparation for this talk I went to see *The Time Machine*. Set in late 19c NYC, this H.G. Wells update sends its time traveler off to the future, and in the course of his temporal sojourns, he stops off in New York City 2037 – within reasonable proximity of our target date. Unfortunately for him, and the planet at large, that's the year in which the Moon falls into the Earth, touching off virtual Armageddon. It was not, you'll be interested to know, the result of natural causes, but of overzealous development: seems entrepreneurs had been using A bombs to blast out suitable terrains for underground golf courses for condo owners, and the explosions knock the Moon out of orbit. (There are wonderful special effects of the Earth's new night sky seen from 800,000 AD, with shattered fragments of Luna still rising and falling on the horizon).

This imaginary jaunt in time reminded me of the perils, not to say the lunacy, of our enterprise this evening. Future forecasting is a fool's game – for many reasons, not the least of which is the “utterly unexpected event”. Now condoizing the Moon isn't quite in that category – not something like an “Invasion from Outer Space” – it's a far fetched version of the more customary approach to prognostication, the extrapolation of present trends into the future. Where usually forecasters like to say the future is the present, plus or minus 5%, Hollywood is prepared to work with bigger percentages. (So are science fiction writers: Robert Heinlein, if memory serves, once wrote about a soft drink company that bought the Moon as an advertising billboard, so that “7 UP” now gleamed down at us on clear and starry nights.)

Historians in general, and me in particular, tend to be much more constrained; my imagination is notably impoverished, quite incapable of writing even a historical novel, much less a science fiction fantasy. The best we're capable of, I think, is charting the various trajectories (or currents, if you prefer a riverine metaphor) along which particular social constellations have been traveling (in our case, that unbelievably complex

artifact known as NYC), and then suggesting that, given inertia, the future is most likely to continue more or less in the same direction, seldom bearing off on a completely new course but rather along one that varies by only a few degrees. The problem with this approach – setting aside the invasion from outer space problem (an overwhelming event from outside the system altogether) – is that it leaves little room for human agency, and seems to suggest history is a matter of the ineluctable working out of supra-human Trends. (At best it assumes that long range trends have, as it were, discounted human agency, assuming that the vector in question is already the resultant of contending human initiatives, and that the most likely scenario is that one or another agents might increase their capacity to move the trajectory slightly in a different direction, but not to utterly send things off in a startling new [aka revolutionary] direction).

So where does that leave us this evening? The most useful thing I can think of doing is draw attention to a series of trajectories/currents, which have been operating for quite some time, and which have provided the matrix of constraints and opportunities within which local players have been acting, and to raise questions about how they might shape the contours of the future. Suggesting the range of variables – and recalling that the final result will be a combination of all their interactions – will at least alert us to the difficulties of our task.

So: one of the most profound trajectories that has operated on NYC has been the flux and flow of planetary demographic currents (otherwise known as immigration). Over the centuries, a great range of incidents and influences have dislodged whole peoples and set them in motion toward the Hudson (war, assorted imperialisms, capitalist destabilization of local economies and societies, internal crises in other countries). Sequences of migration waves have repeatedly and profoundly reshaped the city, and are in the midst of doing so once again. Among the questions worth considering then, is which peoples will be arriving and in what numbers a half century hence – or will the long term given of net positive migration streams be reversed, and will we witness the kind of out-migration characteristic of the post WWII domestic exodus to the suburbs, but now operating on an international scale?

This in turn – like NYC's position on the global scene in general – is

largely a function of the strength and position of the United States, of which Gotham has been the premier interlink with the rest of the planet for two centuries now. The shifting center of the global capitalist economy, from Amsterdam to London to New York, has so far mirrored the positions of the nation states that hosted them. Will our current superpower status – and the metropolitan ascendancy it provides NYC's financial and business services sectors – survive for another fifty years? The speed with which empires rise and fall has increased to a relatively breathtaking velocity: might, say, China (and Shanghai) be the next hegemon if the course of empire continues on its westward way?

That in turn reminds us that the state of the city has at any given time been largely a function of American military power on the planet, and that its condition at any one point in time is to an important degree a function of the existence of war or peace. Wars for the most part have been good for local business, if not for local soldiers, but 9/11 raises dismaying new possibilities. Worst case scenarios must now include smuggled-in nuclear devices that could obliterate the city altogether, while starwars devices circle the skies uselessly. These concerns segue into the dystopian possibility Mike Davis has outlined, of a police state 'homeland', hunkered down behind security devices.

Even should a Pax Americana extend and deepen its sway, with New York remaining the glittering jewel in its imperial crown, will the vicissitudes of global capitalism likely be erased, an "end of history" achieved? Or will, more likely, the rhythms of the accumulation cycle continue to hold sway, but on an ever more expanded scale, requiring us to guess if 2050 will mark the apogee or nadir of the latest business cycle, with prosperity or misery accordingly in the ascendancy?

And what of global ecological developments?: will pollution and global warming continue, and rebound here with particularly disastrous force, moving us fifty years hence beyond sunny winters and summer droughts to a full scale drowning of our city of islands as the sea level rises?

What of the bases of the city's macroeconomy – so repeatedly transformed over the long term? Will its cultural primacy survive, together with the immense and ever more centralized apparatus of media and

communications which is ever more central to our macroeconomic mix, or will the technological diversification lurking in the possibilities of the internet – and its as yet unimaginable successors – lead to a democratization and decentering of cultural production? A similar question must of course be asked about the likelihood that the financial markets will continue to cluster in physical space, rather than disaggregating into hyperspace, and knocking out yet another pillar of our current economic arrangements.

Current projections of increased global trade suggest a renaissance of our ancient maritime status, if we move quickly enough to take advantage of our still superior natural position and resources. Or will transformations in air travel (or transoceanic tunnels replete with maglev trains) once again supersede waterborne transport.

And what of manufacturing?: if current modes of hi tech, niche sector, just-in-time production continue, NY is well placed to resuscitate yet another of its ancient economic bases; or will the drift to cheaper labor zones, made ever more feasible by faster global freight transport, continue to counteract such developments? Is it conceivable that in so short a time as fifty years concerted global action will flatten out the tremendous disparities between north and south that facilitate this exodus, or will current trends continue, leaving Europe and North America as islands of advanced technological prosperity adrift in a rising sea of impoverished and enraged ‘others’? (cf smuggled in bombs, above)

None of this even begins to address less cosmic, more local concerns. Let’s suppose the (admittedly utterly unlikely) proposition that none of these global or continental axes shift dramatically, and that things stay more or less the same, so that a visitor to 2050 would find no more (though no less) of a shocking shift than a traveler from 1950 to 2000 would have, i.e. they would discover a basically recognizable city. What subtler shifts might have taken place by then?

Between the incessant combat between our capitalist and socialist inheritances – those that concentrate on accumulation and the rights and entitlements of property, and those that focus on social justice and the rights and entitlements of citizens – where will the balance lie then? Might

the social democratic city of 1950 have gained a new lease on life in 2050, with an expansion and enhancement of public access to housing, medical care, education, job security, and political power? Or might another half century bring further predominance of private over public concerns, and an ever deeper penetration of society by market relations? Will the sunshine/shadow levels of economic and social inequality have been ever further exacerbated, or been somewhat mitigated? If we still have poverty – one of the safer assumptions – will we have patched our safety net, or left the “lazy and uneducated buggers” to stew in their own juices, penned in to their own heavily patrolled Bantustans of the poor, so they don’t work out their animosities and desperation through crime. Will we still have homeless and hungry New Yorkers? Will the percentage of unionized workers – assuming unions haven’t been outlawed by then – have declined further, or experienced a revival?

If we continue to have public schools, will we have managed to lower class sizes? Or will ‘distance learning’ have eliminated classes altogether? Will we have so miniaturized information technology (and distributed it equitably, rather than primarily to those with the most money), that we will all be personally hardwired into centralized information banks – and to each other?

How will the auto have fared? And with it the suburb? Will we have reversed the last half century which witnessed the automobilization (and sprawlification) of the city – and developed instead a new and superior grid of mass transit? Or will we still be gridlocked on version 8.0 of the Long Island Expressway? Will we have managed a one seat train to the plane by then? What will have happened to aviation itself by then?

What will be doing with our garbage? Shipping it south through the new cross harbor freight tunnel? Shooting it off into outer space? Dumping it back in the ocean in a post-environmentalist era?

Will our source of energy supply have changed significantly? Will we have transcended oil, and have windmills perched on skyscrapers (a nice return to our Dutch roots), and will our homes be powered by solar, our vehicles (whatever they are) by fuel cells?

Will our eating habits and practices have changed? How will food arrive in the city, and be distributed? Will we have constructed yet another expansion of the watershed to feed the Third (and Fourth?) water tunnel? Or figured out ways to desalinate the sea?

How about racial and ethnic relations: a recrudescence of traditional conflicts? A smoothening of cultural conflict via interaction and intermarriage? Or a redrawing of the culturo-political map, replete with new alliances and enmities.

Are the overall political boundaries of the city itself likely to remain as they are? Might federal intervention create a more metropolitan or regional form of governance? Will we continue to be a creature of New York State, or will growing urban influence and rural decline lead to a redrawing of the constitutional ground rules that govern the local polity, winning greater local autonomy?

How about the overall demographic situation – will we have figured out a macroeconomic base capable of sustaining our current eight million, or will a post imperial city no longer be capable of supporting such a populace, and parts of town been given back to ‘nature’. Will the demographic center of gravity have shifted yet again? What of the relative balance between the boroughs – assuming we’ll still be organized on a borough basis by then. Will Staten Island still be with us?

How about familial arrangements? Consider the tremendous shift in household structures in the previous fifty years – will we have been forced by 2050 back into traditional molds, or will we have devised an ever greater range of habitation and child rearing practices, with attendant social supports (possibly including novel and supportive child care arrangements?)

Will we remember our past in 2050? How much of 2000 New York will have been razed, how much recreated, how much preserved? And what will be our dreams of the future, the content around which symposia on NYC 2100 will revolve?

As you can see, an impossible exercise, this crystal ball gazing. There may, however, be a subterranean usefulness inherent in the exercise. Picking a

target date far enough away prevents us from simply assuming it will be a totally recognizable world. (Though even this assessment is up for grabs, depending as it does on the assumption that the *pace* of change is relatively constant, an axiom which comparative futurology might challenge. Perhaps the changes between 1850-1900 were more (or less) profound and variegated than those of 1900-1950 or 1950-2000?) Still, 2050 seems far enough ahead so that pondering its possibilities might just force us to stretch our too-tight brain muscles a bit, allowing us to conjure up scenarios (nightmarish or utopian), and to reflect on how we might now, in the present, better navigate the currents of history towards the future we desire.