Distant time: A response

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Abstract:

This response appreciates the commentators for engaging so generously with the concept of distant time. Each of these commentaries address different aspects of the paper and also raise very important questions about the wider applicability of distant time across spaces, technologies, territories and people. I will first start with Rose's critique of the concept as an authorial gesture and therefore suggest a more expansive idea of technology that is ubiquitous in both colonial Shimla and its proposed smart future (Rose 2024). Seen this way, the notion of distant time is also a topological intervention on the grid (Sabhlok 2024) producing an affective technology of governance (Ghertner 2024) that recalibrates the parameters of temporal justice (Addie 2024). Finally I will chart out a framework of temporal tactics and techniques (Kitchin 2024) that unpack further the notion of distant time in the postcolony.

Keywords: Distant time, topology, temporal tactics and techniques, smart cities, technologies

Distant time as a metaphor and a technological apparatus

Gillian Rose in her commentary 'awkward time', questions whether the concept of distant time is potentially an authorial gesture rather than what emerges from the ground (Rose 2024). Distant time can seem like an authorial gesture; however, it also emerges from a deeper understanding of how Shimla residents experience and live with the dust of empire. Shimla's contoured urbanism stretches and challenges time-space relationship in the most fundamental ways. In Shimla, contoured distances significantly shape the cultural, social, material geographies of everyday life, in very distinct ways from the plains. Time is often a synonym for distance as metric distances are largely meaningless as an experience of movement in the hills. Distance is a terrain of everyday struggles as residents need to traverse contoured distances that are physically more strenuous and time intensive. As Ghertner also articulates through a Bollywood vignette

(Ghertner 2024), distance in the hills is an affective way of living through ecological temporalities – snow, monsoons, mist and landslides, as well as the temporal power of the state in determining who is kept close or at a distance and under what conditions. Distance then is time, and time is an expression of the positionality of the subject. It is a framework through which residents in Shimla live, work and struggle with the future imaginations of Smart Shimla and orient themselves geographically and temporally.

Rose further questions how the imaginations of ubiquitous technology in future smart Shimla can be connected to the colonial imaginaries of sanitation, order and racial erasure. While my article (Datta 2024) did not explicitly define technology, it nevertheless positioned technology beyond digital or smart prototypes. Here I followed Heidegger who notes 'The essence of technology is by no means anything technological' (Heidegger 1996). In my article, I operationalised the idea of 'everyday technology' (Arnold 2015) as an intricate system of techniques and apparatuses of governance that are embedded in advancements in building materials, construction methods, highways, bridges, roads and communication systems – the vastness of which made Indian modernity. Technology in this expansive sense works as what Agamben calls an 'apparatus' that is "literally anything that has in some way [has] the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings." Indeed, technology since colonial urbanisation in Shimla has worked as "a machine of governance" (Agamben 2009) that have regulated, restricted and excluded its Muslim, Dalit and migrant populations from reaching the top of the hill.

My article (Datta 2024) intended to examine how an expansive understanding of the colonial technology of governance reveals the imagination of future Smart Shimla. Current scholarship on technology in a digital era are concerned with smart cities, dashboards, artificial intelligences and algorithms (Amoore 2020; Cugurullo et al. 2023; Kitchin, Lauriault, and McArdle 2015). My article instead was intended to extend the understanding of technology as an apparatus of power linking a colonial past to an aspirational smart future. Technology as apparatus is seen in the coding, categorising and listing the meticulous details of building planning applications by the colonial government in Shimla, as well as in the ways that building technologies provided its marginal citizens a space of negotiation with the top of the hill. This expansive understanding of technology can enable us to see how colonial racial and caste-based forms of classification are entangled with the erasure of working-class settlements through the nomenclature of a 'slum' to make way for a smart city.

Shimla's distant time asks us to consider its spectrum of technological shifts that started in colonial India and sit awkwardly next to its aspirational smart technologies. Development is the dust of technology – it settles as time passes, and it is raked up as new technologies emerge to take the place of what came before. Technology as an

apparatus of distant time is used to keep the 'other' simultaneously at a distance and nearby (Ghertner 2024) in order to verify the viability and legitimacy of governing at a distance.

Distant time as a topological grid

If distant time emerges in the context of contoured urbanism, Sabhlok (2024) questions how this can be applied to other contexts, particularly in a city of high modernity such as Chandigarh that literally erased what came before to make way for a grid. As I have argued elsewhere (Datta 2015), Chandigarh, Bhubaneswar, Dholera and all the other new cities that emerged from the rubble of what came before them are symptomatic of keeping the 'other' at a distance in space and time. The grid is a system of organisation par excellence that is connected to the history of categorisation, coding and ordering of the built environment. So distant time also works as a technological apparatus in the cartesian grid of modernist planning. It is no surprise then that smart city technologies always seek to inscribe themselves onto modernist cities. Organically built cities, informal neighbourhoods and slums present a technological problem for smart cities in the same way that these were problems for infrastructure planning in the modernist city. In Shimla distant time in contoured, in Chandigarh it is flattened.

Sabhlok eloquently illustrates how distant time can enable us to rethink the nature of exclusion in modernist cities, where the 'thick time'(Kentridge and Galison 2011) of working class women's experiences are subject to the technological time of distanciation and abstraction. Sabhlok's provocation about the connections between distant time in Shimla and 'thick time', the latter which I have examined in the context of working class community podcasts (Datta 2022) are indeed worth examining. In community podcasts, thick time works as an affective apparatus; in Shimla, distant time is a regulatory apparatus – a 'state-effect' (Mitchell 1999). In both cases, they regulate the lives of those most marginalised across time and space.

As an apparatus, distant time is also a topological time of modernity as Addie (2024) suggests. Topology as mathematical calculations of connectivity of surfaces have been used as a metaphor for relationality of spaces and objects among critical geographers (Allen 2016; Hoffman and Thatcher 2019; Ghertner 2017). Topological thinking enables us to understand how the grid of the plains could be stretched to make Shimla fit within its boundaries. Through the calculability of smart city futures, topology determines how spaces on the urban peripheries (in Shimla or Chandigarh), establish relations with networks of power and governance elsewhere.

Distant time is a topological struggle in as much as temporal power can be stretched across contours and grids. However, to answer Addie's (2024, 3) question, 'how does distant time become a collective political struggle?' distant time is not always a means to an end. Distant time is diffused and fragmented, subjecting and directing people and

their relationships to past, present and futures through the technologies and geographies of marginalisation. Pasts are useable for different political ends by both the state and diversity of citizens, but there is no linearity of direction in the useability of pasts or futures. Simmering tensions continue to this day beneath the dust of development – citizens use temporal arbitrage not just against the state but also across caste, religion and class affiliations, to gain access to temporal power, and to a space that will provide them with a better future. In this context, collective bargaining is often unrealistic, albeit potentially always possible.

Typologies of temporal techniques and strategies

Kitchin (2024) rightly observes the multiscalar nature of smart cities initiatives. In my examination of the smart cities programme in India (Datta 2015), I have noted that the practice of policy scaling up in order to scale down, operationalises digitalisation in India. In other words, while the smart technology imperative might be implemented at the scale of the city, the contours of this initiative is directed from the national scale. Indeed smart cities innovation has now moved onto the space of 'digitalising states' (Datta 2023) and global tech companies aspiring to enact algorithmic governance at the scale of the city (Cugurullo et al. 2023).

Kitchin suggests to further explore the relations between the smart and subaltern city through a typology of temporal techniques and tactics. In my article I have argued that the smart and subaltern city together co-construct and reproduce the contours of distant time that often makes them indistinguishable from each other. A lens of distant time enables us to perceive 'the state' and 'the subaltern' as entangled formations in the cyclical 'rituals of state-building' (Jones 2002) and incremental house building.

The following table follows Kitchin's suggestion to create a typology of temporal techniques from the subaltern city. Here I have taken the features of distant time – topologies, arbitrage, stalling and the untimely. These are organised around temporal tactics that refer to broader strategies of managing time, and temporal techniques that refer to the tools and methods of executing temporal strategies. This list is far from complete, but they suggest a way to understand how temporal power unfolds over landscapes and people through generations.

Distant time	**Temporal tactics (strategies)**	**Temporal techniques (tools, methods)**
Topology	stretching space and time across grids and contours.	incremental building, colonial maps as the basis of the smart city, relational advantages of time and space

Arbitrage	Seizing opportunities during the changing fate of the future smart city.	Building close relations with elected officials, strengthening community networks, bargaining and negotiation, infrastructural advantages of the smart city,
Stalling	Intentionally delaying the development of the smart city	Gathering information about options, accessing legal options, refusing to cooperate with formal processes, raising disputes and challenges.
Untimely	Events that could not be predicted in exact time and space, but were inevitable.	Securing homes against ecological disasters, planning beyond demolition of homes, seeking to bridge the distant time of a secure future.

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