AN IDIOTIC CATALYST: Accelerating the Slowing Down of Thinking and Action

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An anthropology of speed is an invitation to think differently about time. As epitomized by Johannes Fabian's (1983) *Time and the Other*, anthropology has long engaged with the social, historical, and cosmological construction of time and the thoroughly political production and valuation of present pasts and present futures: memory, tradition, preparedness, utopia, innovation, and so on. Against this backdrop, an anthropology of speed involves exploring time as an intensity shaping the unfolding of relations. Speed invites us to reimagine the social as a vector space, in which different bodies, human and nonhuman, are constituted through the direction, force, drive, and friction of movements and associations (Farías and Hoehne 2016). Rather than concerning itself with time, an anthropology of speed is about *timing* (see Farías 2010) and various concepts associated with it, such as rhythm, urgency, and acceleration. It is an invitation to study events, not just as instantiations of overarching logics of practice or social structures, but as constitutive of socialities, temporalities, actors, knowledges, and ontologies.

In this essay, I would like to explore what the question of speed might entail for participatory and collaborative techno-urban design processes. My starting point will be Isabelle Stengers's vindication of idiocy as a cosmopolitical virtue that, by forcing a slowing down of thought and action, enables the emergence and recognition of otherwise excluded human and nonhuman entities. I would thereby like to think about the paradoxical conditions for an acceleration of an idiotic slowing down, by exploring tensions and misunderstangings in collaboratory processes.

SLOWING DOWN

In her "Cosmopolitical Proposal," Isabelle Stengers (2005) has proposed a radical redescription of political action and decision-making dependent, to a great extent, on a politics of speed. Concerned with the role of technoscience and expert knowledge in the shaping of contemporary worlds, Stengers proposes that engaging with the radical uncertainties deriving from the entanglement of humans and nonhumans requires a slowing down of thinking and decision-making, the opening up of space-times for the cultivation of emergences and differences. Notably, Stengers returns to the figure of the idiot to think about the political consequences and challenges of slowing down thinking and decision-making.

You might remember the childlike prince that Fyodor Dostoevsky (2002) depicted in his novel *The Idiot*. Lev Myshkin does not understand the conventions, assumptions, norms, jokes, metaphors, and ultimately the shared values of the society to which he has returned after four years abroad. He is an idiot who embarrasses himself, asks ridiculous questions, minds his own business, defends strange positions, has unfounded prejudices, and so on. Just as in ancient Greece, the idiot is the one who speaks an unintelligible idiom and is not proficient in the language of the *polis*. Politics has, since then, been defined as the opposite of idiocy: with idiots one cannot talk, argue, or build a common world. Except, perhaps, in Dostoevsky's novel, wherein some characters take the idiot and his views seriously. The result is a slowing down of thought and action, and with that an opening toward the unknown, toward alternative definitions of the common world.

By featuring the idiot, Stengers's cosmopolitical proposal does not simply state specific political values or contents for a political program. Rather, it proposes a reflection on political practices and intensities, on what cannot be contained by a political program. Politics appears here as an activity directed at making present what is absent, opening up space for previously excluded actors,

and redesigning coexistence. The key, Stengers suggests, is speed: slowing down as a condition of possibility for the emergence and recognition of difference and indifference. The idiot, of course, is a conceptual persona: an intellectual device to think about such politics of timing. The idiot is not a social role that individuals could play by meeting socially stabilized sets of expectations. It is, rather, a figure of thought aimed at reflecting on the politics of existing arrangements and relationships.

But does the figure of the idiot offer guidance for every situation? Is slowing down always the best way to take into account a diversity of actors, to allow for all sorts of emergencies in all circumstances? Disasters are a case in point. How would we slow down in situations of need and despair (see Farías 2016)? How would we recommend or pursue an idiotic slowing down of recovery and reconstruction efforts, when those affected call for improving the capacity of the state to react rapidly? Disasters are not the only kind of situation inviting us to rethink our commitment to a slowing down. Another is the quite common situation in which funding constraints set the pace for the implementation of new technologies or policy schemes. The question that such situations pose is thus how to make sure that an idiotic slowing down occurs on time, that it happens quickly enough to question the premises of such policies or technologies before they are already implemented.

ACCELERATING THE IDIOTIC SLOWDOWN

Even if not formulated in these terms, accelerating the idiotic slowing down of thought and action constitutes a key challenge for experiments in public engagement and collaborative design. Mike Michael (2013) points, for example, to speculative design objects, such as an in-home device that displays second-hand advertisements from nearby areas according to the velocity and direction of the wind, as resources for easing idiotic becomings. Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes, and Yannick Barthe (2009) conceive of hybrid forums as instances in which heterogeneous actors engage in the collaborative exploration of sociotechnical issues and the making of nondefinitive decisions. While significantly different, both hybrid forums and speculative design aim to accelerate the slowing down of thinking and action.

Inspired by such approaches, a team of colleagues and I are currently organizing citizen-participation and cocreation processes in a Horizon 2020 innovation project called "Smarter Together," which is aimed at the integrated implementation and large-scale demonstration of new infrastructural (and market)

arrangements for low-energy buildings and districts, sustainable urban mobility, and urban services based on information and communication technologies. We are part of a consortium including three central European cities and twenty-eight research and industry partners. One of the main challenges of the project is to develop so-called smart solutions for the everyday lives of city dwellers, with an emphasis on their cocreation. The project team is responsible for giving cities recommendations on cocreation processes and, in particular, the implementation of such processes in the German city of Munich. Much can be said about how collaboration with citizens and concerned actors involves accelerating the slowing down of thought and action. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this work has involved not what we are supposed to do, namely, to organize cocreation processes, but the misunderstandings and tensions that have emerged along the way.

One of those misunderstandings has involved the name that the project team first proposed for the collaborative space that we have set up in Munich: the Stadtkatalysator, or city catalyst. The space was proposed to facilitate the constitution of design collectives, which would include government officials, technical experts, engaged technicians, concerned publics, and so on. The figure of the catalyst was meant to stress the generative and transformative interactions of the component parts. Interestingly, though, our partners welcomed the idea of the Stadtkatalsyator for slightly different reasons; they imagined it as a space in which we could develop design solutions with the public in a faster and more effective way than with traditional citizen-participation methods.

While the project team certainly shares the conviction that we do not need more citizen participation as we currently know it, we reached this conclusion for fundamentally different reasons than our partners did. If, for our partners, traditional citizen participation was not the right approach to cocreation, this was because it involved too many workarounds and reframings of the envisioned projects. Hence, they looked forward to a catalytic space or process that could rapidly yield useful results. For us, the problem with citizen participation was not that it is too vague, but, quite on the contrary, that citizen-participation initiatives are often strongly framed by expert problematizations. Accordingly, what we wanted to create was a space in which new interactions might take place and displacements of what counts as expertise could occur. This was, at least on our end, a very productive misunderstanding, as it confronted us with demands for acting quickly, forcing us to think about our task in terms of accelerating the slowing down of expertise.

Partly as a result of this misunderstanding, we decided to change the name of the Stadtkatalysator to Stadtteillabor, the city district lab. This, in turn, brought to light another misunderstanding; the testing of intelligent lamp posts on short stretches of city streets was being described by some of our partners as a *Reallabor*, or living lab. The partial homonymy with the city district lab invited us and the partners involved to reflect on and discuss what a living lab entails with respect to participation and experimentation.

A different kind of misunderstanding concerning timing and speed became apparent in a project meeting intended to synchronize the various smart-infrastructure interventions planned in Munich. In December 2015, as "Smarter Together" was about to start, all project partners met to assess interdependencies among the timelines of their subprojects, which included the retrofitting of housing, intelligent lamp posts, a virtual power plant, multimodal e-mobility stations, and more. Interestingly, all of the timelines depicted the quickest possible implementation time, even for projects with what looked to be an incredibly optimistic completion date. This, of course, is not specific to "Smarter Together," but is a common way in which project timelines are constructed and used: not as representations of how events are likely to unfold, but as powerful devices made to operate in the present, exerting pressure on the present with the aim of accelerating processes as much as possible. This amounts to a specific politics of speed, where quickness allows for certain practices and not for others. Indeed, what quickness does is invoke a certain type of knowledge, one assumed to be straightforward, based on best practices and on mastering whatever needs to be done. Accordingly, the depiction of projects as advancing at an amazingly quick pace, even quicker than what can be realistically expected, forecloses collateral explorations and diversions that then occur anyway, as circumstances kick and speak back in all sorts of ways (Hyysalo and Hakkarainen 2014). In that meeting, over a year ago, we presented the slowest timeline possible for the codesign process, one that required at least one year to come to proposals for any single project.

Was this a fruitful intervention? If we consider the processes that we have organized for the codesign of e-mobility stations and intelligent lamp posts, which involved four to six meetings in no more than two months, and if we consider that one piece of feedback we received was that our work was too slow, one might say that we have not been able to achieve much of a slowdown. But interesting challenges to what counts as expertise have occurred in these short periods of time. On the one hand, by bringing together different administrative

experts, we opened up a space for expert critique of expertise. Instead of a monolithic expert voice, we managed to make apparent the wide range of contradicting views, assessments, and opinions. On the other hand, our own role as citizen-participation experts was radically challenged, as we were forced to leave the neutral position of a facilitator and to adopt a more engaged and committed position, intervening, setting up priorities, and pushing certain problematizations and not others.

As this account makes apparent, we have not just accessed a site of power shaped by knowledge production and technical expertise regarding urban infrastructures and citizen-participation processes, but we have done so as full-blown collaborators in charge of critical aspects of a collective endeavor. The situation thus resembles the *co-laboratory* practices described by Jörg Niewöhner (2016) as joint, but separate epistemic work with the potential for generating ecologies of idiocy, but with two fundamental differences. The first is that this joint, but separate work has a shared goal, the cocreation of so-called smart solutions, even as this goal is fundamentally differently understood. The second is that idiocy is not a possible ecological emergence, but a sought contribution. We are doing what is possible to catalyze idiocy, and to avoid any expectation among our partners that we are just as smart and quick as they are. But this effect does not just happen; it has to be actively pursued.

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHANGING GEARS

Coming back to the anthropology of speed, it seems that the crucial issue would be to pay attention to the articulation of different speeds in specific settings of practice. In the case discussed above, constantly changing gears, accelerating and slowing down, becomes fundamental to addressing the challenge of technical democracy (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2009). While far from realizing such a promise, our idiotic catalyst has triggered these reflections and further, iterative adjustments in our approach to the timing of collaborative interventions.

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