

On the Sluggishness of Cities

DAVID CRAWFORD
FAIRFIELD U, CT

By 2007 it has become axiomatic that a key feature of globalization is the “compression of time and space,” a vertiginous acceleration of economic exchange and technological innovation that is seen to have far-reaching effects. Cities (ever active and growing) represent this new world order, and the countryside (emptied of its citizens and overwhelmed by the pace of change) stands in for the quaint and doddering past.

It is widely believed, in other words, that cities are modern and fast, while the countryside is traditional and slow. In some ways this makes obvious sense. However, a short trip from Marrakech into the mountains nearby illustrates a very different view. There is an important sense in which the sensory overload of the city obscures its more stolid rhythms, while, unavailable to immediate apperception, the countryside convulses with deep and dramatic transformation.

FIELD NOTES

From Marrakech to the Village

To say cities seem sluggish is wildly counterintuitive, especially with Marrakech. Anyone who has been to the central square of this thousand-year-old city comments on its outrageous vitality. Sellers of everything imaginable cram the square day and night, beseeching audiences with shrill urgency—jugglers, acrobats, fortune tellers, snake charmers, food vendors, outdoor dentists, herbalists, pickpockets, police, beggars, dope dealers and simple lunatics.

Around the square mopeds careen at harrowing speeds, busses disgorge their bloated contents into rug shops and cafes, donkey carts fight bicyclists to see who can best terrify the visiting, sunburned pedestrians bent on seeing the famous Jemaa al-Fna with their own frightened eyes. It is mad, or as one guide book put it succinctly, “intense.”

Leaving the square in a car, exiting Marrakech, the city drops away rapidly and the road opens to a placid vista of snow-shrouded mountains. The air clears. There is a palpable tranquility. A lone man

in a field plods towards some undetectable destination; a few sheep bleat desultorily, a breeze stirs the eucalyptus beside the road.

There is a bodily sensation of having survived some sort of white water rafting trip through the human condition. You float serenely southwards towards the snowcaps at a hundred kilometers an hour, blissfully beyond the hubbub of the city.

Pulling into an agricultural village, off the main road and up some tortuous *piste*, the sensation of slowness deepens. Country folk go about their lives on foot, at human speed. Fields are irrigated, cows milked, goats shepherded past the crops up into the highland pastures. Girls carry fodder up from the fields, and boys carry manure down. The call to prayer marks mealtimes, and is sung from the mosque by the raw voice of whomever happens to be there. Crying babies and clucking chickens are about all that distracts from the burbling river.

This is how I have always seen it, and I have made the trip many times. What has recently become apparent, however, after eight years of village census taking, is that deeper currents run different courses, at different speeds, than the surface of village life suggests.

The Pulse of Life and Death

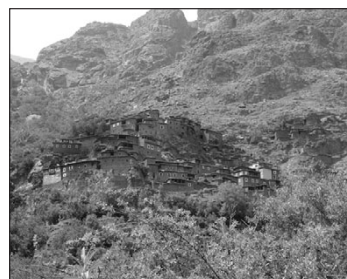
Two years ago, for instance, Aisha and I cried over her recently dead husband. “My friend,” she told me, “my friend is gone.” Now Aisha is gone too. Two years ago Omar had just lost his baby; now he has another, a new boy with the same name as the deceased. I saw Omar the day his previous son died; he did not mention the child’s passing.

Two years ago Omar’s sister Fatima gave birth to her first girl—finally somebody to help her in the kitchen, someday—but, I learned this year, the baby Salma died shortly after my last visit. Fatima is again alone in a house full of boys.

Mohammed Lukstaf is dead now, Fadma Hussein died by snakebite, Ohomo died “of old age” just before my last census. Wise old Fatima Id Bajdied the month before I arrived this time, though her blind widower, Hussein, struggles on. Mohammed Ali passed on, too, and his children returned from the city to claim their shares of his land and set up new households.

What we see, in other words, is that the deep pulse of human life and death is much accelerated in the mountains. In the city middle-class people postpone having babies, and reduce the numbers they have. In the city the children lucky enough to be born into solvent households remain children for two full decades or more, cramming themselves involuntarily with “education,” and gambling through life, most of the time with insouciant disregard for labor of their parents.

There are poor in the city, too, of course, and too many urban children fail to get any kind of educa-



parts not functioning, and medicines to cure maladies hidden within.

Recording Generational Time

In the mountains *generational time* is accelerated. Death is present, ready, waiting each moment for anyone with the briefest lacuna in her or his good luck. There is no hope of slowing the celerity of what God grants, no serious attempt to delay life’s progress. You irrigate your fields, feed your children, watch them grow and have children of their own. You probably send some down to the city to earn wages. It all goes very fast, excruciatingly fast.

Men and women weather quickly—decades before their wealthier counterparts in the city. Girls and



The village where Crawford works in the countryside (L), and the noise of the market of Marrakech (R). Left photo courtesy of Dave Crawford, right photo courtesy of Alex de Carvalho

tion, fail to have any chance for a decent job or future. But the city has a middle class, and more. At least some portion of urban parents and grandparents do not die so rapidly, do not go gently into their good nights. They rage, fight, bargain for more life, exchanging money for time. Old people live on for years in the city, patching up the broken parts, jamming any stick they can into the gears of human mortality.

In the mountains life works differently. Children work for parents rather than the other way around, and children begin working shortly after they can walk. If children go to school, they do this in addition to work, and usually this sort of education ends abruptly after the most basic literacy is achieved. Young people begin to produce their own babies shortly after nature has prepared their bodies for reproduction, and old people die quickly, suddenly, often from their first major illness and with no intervention or importuning of the awesome will of God.

Only in the cities do we find evidence of any extended, slow march of adolescence. Only in the city are inevitable deaths postponed year after creaking year, with proxies for the

boys grow up faster, have babies faster. Doves of children come into this world and depart before even gaining a name. There is a bustle of bodies built, growing, dying—a brisk business between the carpets on which people are born and the cemetery in which they too quickly arrive to rest forever. The days pass slowly in the mountains, but lives move fast.

The compression of time associated with globalization is limited to certain types of interactions, certain types of time. The general argument that time itself is being compressed is an artifact of urban experience, and the mistaken assumption that a high density of proximate interactions is the same thing as speed. Pointless things happen quickly in the city, it is true; fundamental things move quickly in the mountains. The city’s middle and upper classes drag along in slow intergenerational transfer, while in the mountains the somber business of life and death is transacted with startling, brutal rapidity. ☐

David Crawford is the author of “The Temporality of Resistance” in *Beyond Resistance: The Future of Freedom*, edited by Robert Fletcher.