

Algorithms for Utopia: an xyz of Health & Wealth

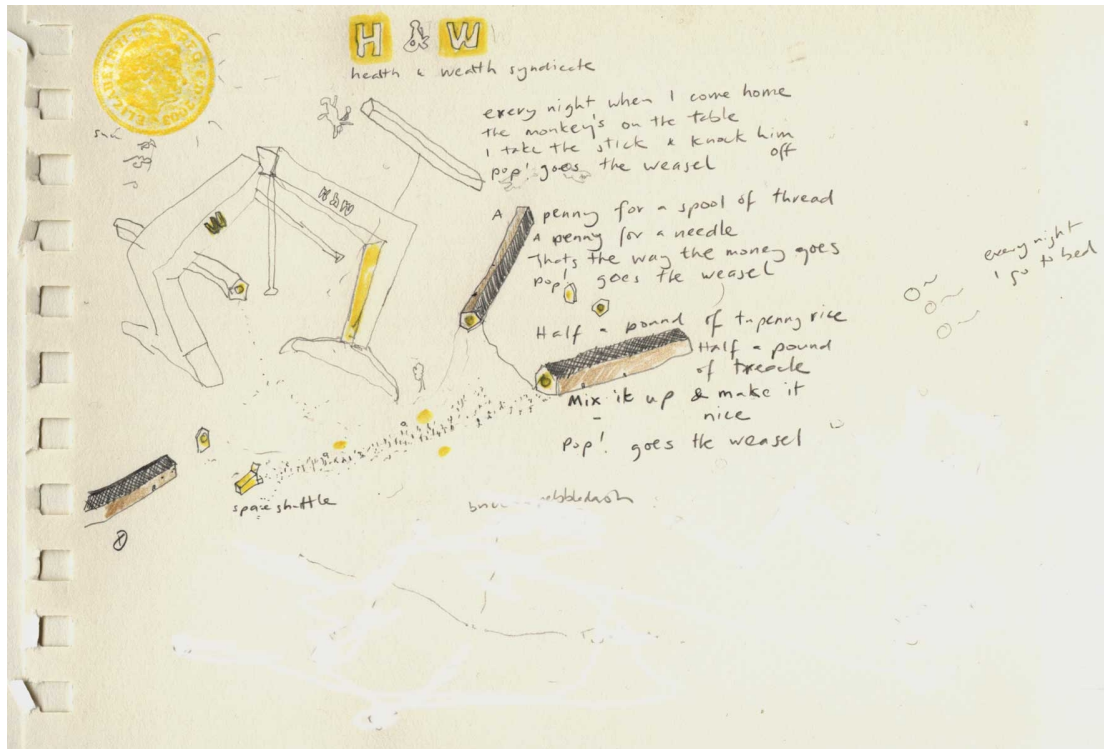
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"..it is pointless to try and decide whether Zenobia is to be classified among the happy cities or among the unhappy. It makes no sense to divide cities into those two species, but rather into a different two: those that through the years and the changes continue to give form to their desires and those in which desires either erase the city or are erased by it."
Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

A square in any city plugged in to the global economy functions as part of the territory of a 'global social system'; a territory whose essential operations are dependent on computational processes operating across geographic boundaries and time zones. The territory of global social systems described here is both metaphoric and real; it is a virtual functioning environment *within* an environment. Whilst the social management of such territory may be local, the environment itself is predicated on algorithmic processes, programmes and permutations that are subject to their own causality. Inevitably this causality, serves its own interests, its distinguishing marks becoming visible through the way it differentiates between essential operations and non-essential operations, between the human subject *per se* and the subject's social dimension, its sociability. Informational algorithms reconfigure the human subject systemically by

removing all non-social i. e. non-communicative, elements from the social dimension. What is left with little utility value is akin to what Giorgio Agamben calls *bare life*: a form in which human beings cannot be addressed socially and are thus reduced to their bodily existence. Global social systems produce bodies of bare life in large quantities by mere reason of their day-to-day operation. This is a consequence of the gulf an informational environment generates between the representation it uses and markets and the reality on the ground; these are two realities that rarely merge in outline.

In an informational environment, agency provides equivalence between human processes and computational processes; the term 'agent' may thus be substituted for the human subject in a system trying to emulate human specific values in informational space. The environment as information would disinter the subject into two attributes or values as representations of the human person. In this essay they are symbolised as Health <H> which is an attribute of the human body, a marketable value for bare life, and Wealth <W> which determines the body's sociability. The distinction between Health and Wealth is not so much the use-value or exchange value of the person but its place in new spaces of inclusion and exclusion. The new dimensions of informational space contest the traditional landscape of political economy and social relations to create its own human measures.

In the environment of the global system, the variables <H> and <W> which personify the subject require 2 other forms or classes of variables to carry out its functions as illustrated as follows by <M> and <P>:

<M> as the memory bank, the virtual environment for informational processes akin to the physical environment for an agent's operations, its social environment or civil society.

<M> is embodied by the sum of collective narratives and associations that drive a society.

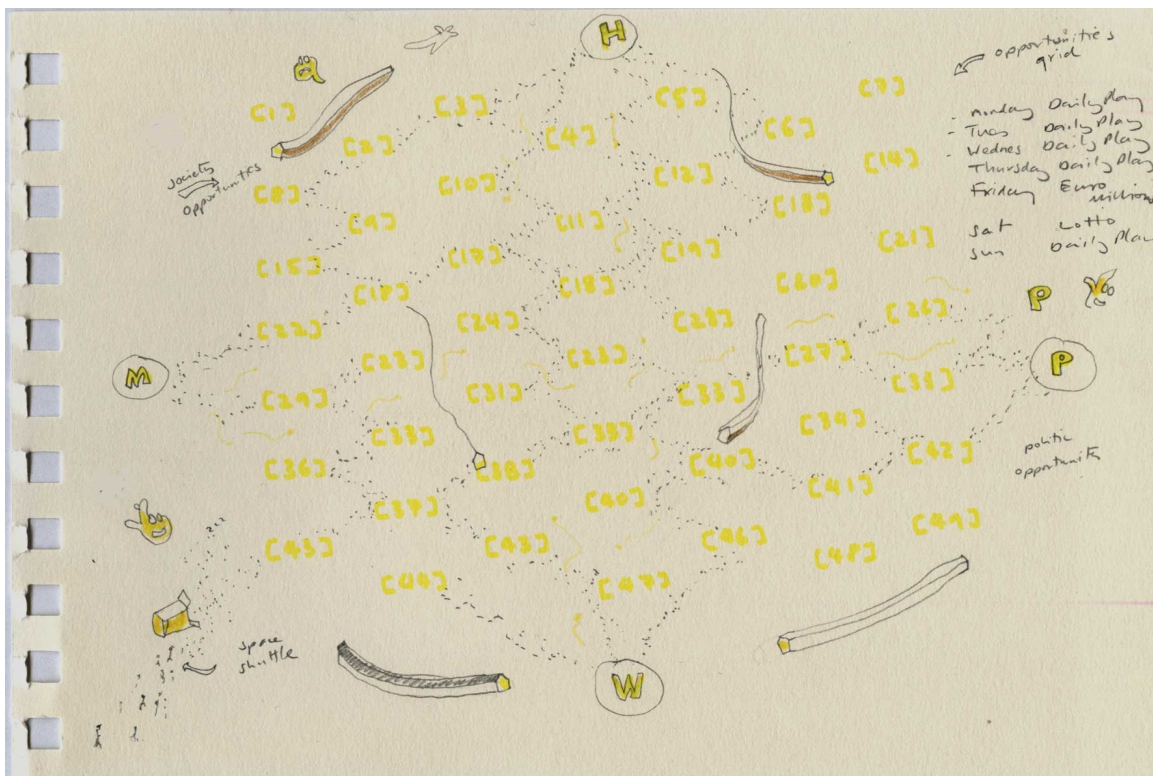
<P> as the procedures that execute the instructions of the system, its corollary being the political apparatus and processes that execute functions to order a society.

<M> and <P>, <H> and <W> define the total environment for bare life

The intersection of <M> and <P> with <H> and <W> is enacted through a set of social laws which provide the operational matrix or grid. The system's structure is based on permutations that synchronize activities across social groupings and time zones to maximise efficiency and minimise conflict. Useful laws not only avoid inter-agent conflict but also minimize the use of energy, time, and other resources.

In the global social system, agents are free players within the parameters of the social laws, which are designed to maximise circulation. Circulation is produced through a 'multi-agent system' whereby coordinated social activity emerges out of a fluid chain of negotiated social contracts between multiple agents; equally with the formulation of social laws, the system serves as a 'non-deterministic social system' - non-deterministic

because the system creates 'families' of probability distributions that describe the expected behaviours of the agent subjects and probable outcomes of all computable actions. The system acts counter-intuitively; outcomes are never guaranteed but based on probability factors and expected distribution of goals and behaviour. However, social laws themselves should not be mistaken for programmes or algorithms. Just as traffic laws in real space do not provide directions from A to B but simply legislate appropriate behaviour for particular situations, social laws maintain the constraints that in turn simplify the production of algorithms that in turn create the laws. Within the system, the defining processes are rationality, reasoning, goals, learning and adaptation but the social laws project narratives in social space, the drivers being emulations of personal desires - defining aspirations, projecting wishes, promising happiness. The system becomes a cipher for representations of fulfilment whereby new indexes appear, theories and national indicators of subjective well-being, new measurements of happiness and goal inventories.



Algorithms applied to social spaces strive for an utopian idealisation. This is not new conceptually. Modernity, as Manfredo Tafuri describes, itself may be seen as the outcome of the project of the social construction of utopia, the progressive convergence of utopianism and realism. It too involved the reorganisation of production, distribution and consumption at all levels in the social order. Modernity as such was a utopia extractable from and implicit in realisable facts. The project of Modernity sought to construct its utopia rationally, to *realise* its facts on the ground. In the virtual environment

of the global social systems, utopia is extractable from and implicit in realisable data. Data now precedes facts through the laws of algorithmic permutations; this mutates the realpolitics of the current social order. As such, political functions <P> can amount to no more than control of the data traffic that governs all aspects of life. As political representation becomes more abstract, civil society and its mythic dimension <M> with its narrative-based value, becomes a more decisive theatre of political operations. This is why cultural control and administration are more important than economic operations in the new systemic social order. Indeed, economic operations cannot effectively function unless they are preceded by cultural administration. Thus <M> and <P> aspire to total administration and integration: a meshing of political structures and civil society through permutational data. The development of total integration produces a culture industry as a mechanism for total(itarian) administration. <M> and <P> define new forms of instrumental environments, new classes of relational functions, within an economy of the culture industry. Here, through valorised forms of labour the very idea of the transgressing the environment is absorbed into the fabric and marketing of culture. Parallel to the mass production of bare life in the global systems is the mass production of an oppositional culture, invariably evoking of obsolescent forms of subjecthood. Whilst bare life is parsed and managed, its representation remains the unified humanist subject: the romantic object of subjective fulfilment with destiny in the one's own hands, not the permutational consequence of non-deterministic informational systems. This contradiction between means and ends is as prolifically productive and wasteful of human hopes, ambitions and anxieties as it is of the production of bare life.



As symbols Health & Wealth are actors in this negative topography and a play on negative dialectics in the city beyond a city that shapes our hopes and desires. <H> and <W> figurate the coordinates of the city that creates bare life. The topography is immaterial but orchestrating and extractive - of real lives and real spaces. Its coordinates enfold into the spaces we live and work in, they configure and reconfigure our cityscapes and squares in multiple dialects of the local and global. The parent language though is the same, as in its manifest symptoms:

the relentless creation of possibilities, and saturation of desires through ready-made narratives sustained by a vast integrated culture industry; the endless production of bare life - contingent subjects outside the valorised circuits of economic and cultural production, the new armies of extra-cultural bodies.

The governing structure of this environment is a pyramid based on permutational processes that always produce a surplus: perversely as much in hope and subjectivity, in the demographics of bare life. There is no ecology to this environment. The challenge though is to articulate new dimensions of ecology, ecologies that apply to the virtual topographies to redeem the ecology of the physical environment. Protocols can be reversed in a virtual environment; whilst the processes of permutation engineered to narrow goals are not sustainable, the tools and paradigms of social management they have evolved will not disappear. The cultural agenda is how to use the virtual environments in the unravelling, the unworking of embedded social paradigms and logic that marks our relationship to each other and the environment. These paradigms are mirrored by the languages of computational processes. The virtual processes symbolised by Health and Wealth are as much within us as they are in the global social system. A virtual space so provides the field for a new inner and outer anthropology, it is a space to hypothesize the processes that constitute us: as contingent subjects and constitutive subjects. The variables <H>, <W>, <M> and <P> here form a toolkit for the multi-dimensional nature of social space today. As representations they do not disinter the person as bare life or valorise it as an utopian object; rather they create a process of engagement, a means of convening, configuring and embodying the human subject in a new social order. The algorithms that symbolise the global social system are not an endgame; Health and Wealth is no autopsy of the human subject but rather the opposite.

[This essay is written as a way of formulating the outlines of the software programme to structure the operations of the Health & Wealth syndicate]

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