Trampling over paradoxical trends and visions of European walkability

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'Pepper is butter in someone else's arse'
(Portuguese proverb)

1. Introduction

The present text is primarily concerned with the background onto which envisioning better walkability for European cities takes place. The notion of walkability refers to an essentially qualitative level of mental and physical infrastructures present in every human surrounding allowing the efficient use of a blood-powered mobility mode that dispenses external biological or mechanical aids. As it is a qualitative category, reasoning about its character, purpose and meaning involves the acceptance of a degree of "inexactitude" in the analysis, and the adoption of a sufficiently broad heuristic and epistemological confinement. Its understanding clearly requires an interdisciplinary approach, which is or should be equivalent to a humble posture from each specific disciplinary viewpoint.

As an anthropologist, I tend to deal with visions that are simultaneously more intermittent and more spatially based than is the case with other social scientists. Because the anthropologist is inherently and by faith a cultural comparativist, and because his/her object matter is to a great extent the collective mental representations of different societies and communities, he/she is locked in a transitional topological field at the intersection of divergent cultural representations, which he/she feels compelled to interpret and rationalize. For the better and for the worst, this situation results in some categorical relativism coupled with a self-preserving tendency to rely on a cynical stance towards every cultural framework, including his/her own.

Having for the past eleven years carried out much of my fieldwork research in the highly rural and pastoral and lightly urbanized settings of northern Ethiopia, my visions concerning what "walkability" is naturally means repeated shuttling between very divergent physical and mental realities. So, just as my urban and "European" background is a persistent reminder of my externality in Ethiopia, my "Ethiopian" perceptions, memories and visions offer a sort of

cultural vanishing point to my daily experience as a dweller, activist and researcher based in Lisbon, Portugal.[1]

Ethiopians walk a lot, in long distances and for long periods. They routinely travel with heavy burdens through mountain tracks to reach far-off village markets, or to fetch water and wood for their hamlets. They rarely are obese or suffer heart diseases, their staple diet being based on leguminous vegetables, non-fat meat and a particularly rich endogenous grain called *t'ef* (lat. *Eragrostis abyssinica*). Ethiopian roads and tracks bustle with people in continuous social interaction, many opting to walk together and keep each other company. Even though cheap plastic shoes are growingly available, it's a common feature of the countryside to see man, women and children wrapped in their *gabi* (cotton blankets) or *netela* (light gauze shawls) walking barefoot on rocky trails.

They are not doing *randonnées*, they are not escaping the tensions and pollution of city life, and most surely their cholesterol levels do not worry them. They are merely practicing a widely available, and frequently the sole, mobility mode sanctioned by their traditional rural setting. Given the opportunity, one would tend to think that they would relinquish their high level of walkability and adopt other modes to circulate in a vast and rugged landscape. I'm pressed to walk a lot in Ethiopia, just as I'm urged to sit incessantly (writing this text, for instance) in my country. In Portugal, I long for Ethiopian walks, and when there I crave the moment when I can sit at the computer to write down what I saw, heard and made up from that intermittent experience. And I know, deeply down in my consciousness and in spite of my militant requirements for better mobility in urban Europe, that I cannot afford to take sides, to choose here what I have there and vice-versa.

In the present context, I'm summoned to reflect upon visions for the future of walking in Europe. Since my professional and existential background directs me to doubt the necessary conviction for advocate anything based on the extra-contextual meaning of any vision, and since I'm required to pinpoint and analyse divergent cultural trends – which involves accepting that they often collide against each other, and that at least some societies don't actually cherish any definite visions of the future – I will presently muster a number of arguments that may, or again may not, help confer functionality to the analytical and political use of "visions" for future European walkability.

[1] Lisbon, Portugal's capital is a city that in spite of, or thanks to, its dysfunctional administration, the chronic shortage of rationality of its urbanism, and its unsolvable traffic discrepancies, has in 2010 paradoxically earned the prize of best "European Destiny" in a poll promoted by the *European Consumers Choice*, a Brussel's based non-governmental agency that analyses the innovative trends of the European industry, including tourism. See: http://www.europeanconsumerschoice.org/winners-2010/best-destination-lisboa/ (accessed in 25 March 2010).

2. Walking is good

In a controversial and myth-bashing book on models of urban renovation, Catalan anthropologist Manuel Delgado passionately reminds his readers of the overwhelming paradox that underlies the practice of commoditisation of Barcelona's central territory carried out by Catalan authorities in close conjunction with willing local urbanists and greedy multinational contractors (Delgado, 2008). His contention is that Catalonia's capital city has become a recognized international model for gentrification of urban space to be replicated by local authorities in Europe and beyond, and that the notion of "model" should be understood not only in epistemological terms but in the meaning given to it by the fashion industry – likening it to a beautiful young person trailing seductive garments on the catwalk (Delgado, 2007: 13). In his view, the Barcelona trademark has become a success in international fairs dedicated to urban development and in the juggernaut of the tourism industry's unending and feverish land grab. The enthusiasm with which the international petite bourgeoisie (Agamben, 1993: 62-63) has welcomed the consequent transformation of the city centre into a cultural funfair flooded by eager foreign consumers of high culture and low sidewalks that has turned it into a flat caricature of what its historical urban structure had been, is in Delgado's study deeply contrasted by the violence done against the organic morphology of the city centre and by the sad faith of its traditional dwellers, forced to move to uncharacteristic peripheries, where they become either heavy car users or spatially marginalized pedestrians.

Herein lies the paradox: the architectural and commercial renovation of the centre's built structures and of its public spaces has been actively destroying the historical buildings and streets of Barcelona, emptying it of its traditional low class and poor migrant population, voiding its history in the very act of advertising and selling the centre as "historical". And this is where the city's famed walkability becomes subject to a surprising scrutiny. The promotion of walking and walkers' quality needs, a featured commodity in the tourist and housing prospects that promote a highly lucrative industry, to which the international lobby of civil society militants and experts candidly adhere, has become entangled in a murky partnership that further expands the unsustainable absurdity of a regional, and indeed national economic programme based on public and private building works.

The international financial scare of the end of 2008 has helped solidifying the consistency of the argument Manuel Delgado put forward in his book published some months before. Spain, whose unbalanced economy has been rushed "upwards" by a housing boom unparalleled in Europe has since received the unglorifying award of "the sick man of Europe" by the likes of the much respected editors of the *Economist* magazine. But even the alarming deterioration of the region's economy and its rampant level of unemployment, hasn't hampered

Barcelona's downtown street walking, which remains to this day as ebullient as before, even if a little bit more violent and conflictual, or alleviated the conurbation's problems in coping with heavy urban car traffic.

A not so well advertised attribute of the Barcelonese conurbation is that it is very much like any other. The facilities that induce the city's population to walk beyond the closeted "historical centre" simply aren't there, and the depressing mix of poor quality unattractive housing blocks, congested traffic over multiple lane expressways, and heavily polluted environment of insufficiently planned suburban spread, form the actuality of Barcelonese collective life.

To try to guess what the trends and visions of walking in Europe in the next twenty/thirty years, and not-withstanding the need for a serious look into the energetic and environmental concerns that will surely shape the political discourses, social practices and cultural imaginations in the years ahead, one shouldn't shun the need to address the paradox that Manuel Delgado brings to light in Barcelona. It is also helpful to bear in mind the view advanced by architect Rem Koolhaas in his essay *The Generic City* (Koolhaas, 1995), on the limitations of the ideologies of urbanism in an era of globalization and the evidence of the sorrow conceptual state of the world's present urban sprawls. His "generic" little essay is a complementary companion to Manuel Delgado's localized analysis of the notional irrelevancy and categorical vacuity of the "historical city centre" concept today. Cities, even the ones of the "historical kind", are not what they seem, say and think they are. They are predominantly plasmatic, uncharacteristic, unordered, and unlikely to produce "culture" in any sense that's acceptable by the standards of the 19th-20th centuries European bourgeoisie. Apart from specific food tastes, divergent phonetic accents and the presence/absence of inbuilt car airbags, there is little that differentiates the livelihoods of urban dwellers in Thailand, Brasil, Nigeria or the United Kingdom.

Contrary to Koolhaas' dark picture of present day conurbations, the imagery underpinning many a fervent discourse of the urbanists, public health doctors, mobility managers and social scientists that defend and promote urban walkability tends to favour brighter colours and to rely on the notion that "culture" emanates from the "centre". Undoubtedly, the promotion of walking is a well-intentioned therapeutic in a time of internationally expanding obesity and social autism. We walker makers (i.e., those of us who lobby for giving the "walker" a political and categorical status) generally stress not only the positive environmental, economic and health effects of this "humble" urban mobility mode, but the potency of its social integrative effect. In fact, this latter effect is the crux of the view that "walking is good", as an alternative vision to that of the classical traffic engineer entrapped in the doings of the "more-of-the-same" hegemonic car-flow system answer to urban mobility needs everywhere. Unfortunately, to make his view politically more palatable, the walker

maker tends to collude with local administrations intent on creating gentrified, walker-friendly showrooms within the limits of historical cities, in the hope that a new cultural paradigm may flow from the centre to the periphery by virtue of example, ultimately forgetful of the cultural and social vacuity of today's "centres".

The danger of such collusion is that the walker maker views are conditioned by a politically narrow concept of what the social is, and of what is implied in social interaction. Again, Manuel Delgado and his team in Barcelona have been vigorously researching the basics of walking in urban public spaces. In a series of studies in both Spain and Portugal, and more recently in Africa, they have been directing their attention to the grounding traits of what we could name anthropology of urban walking, not only as an integrative social force but also as a source of human conflict and dissention. From their standpoint, a view that doesn't tackle the categorical richness and ambiguity of what walking is and what walking is thought to be, is as much lacking in coherence as that of the demonizing of the relevance of car usage for the purposes of urban mobility. Implicit in this theoretical proposal lies a damaging critique of the walker maker's reductionist discourse on walking that is discomfortingly coincidental with that of the politician and the urbanist (because it is progressively absorbed by them): i.e., institutional views of what urban walking should be about an "integrative" social practice – at best unknowingly legitimating big brotherish panoptical desires to exert control over collective minds and bodies in urban atmospheres, born of a structural panic of sudden irruptions of communal violence and rebellion.

3. Can't you see?

In the walker maker's growingly institutional view, the promotion of walking intensifies personal interactions, which lead to better social integration in urban spaces. This notion seems to be the direct consequence of a conception of locality that is deeply contrasted with that of mobility and transitivity. In fact, as it would be absurd to challenge the capacity of motorized traffic to achieve high levels of spatial mobility and reduced temporal constraints for large numbers of urban dwellers, walking is conceived as an alternate form of social activity that values physical activity (and mental tranquillity) within realistic spatial limits – city centres being obvious experimental laboratories for this. Therefore, walking inherently summons identitarian locality, just as driving conveys globalized transitivity. This contrast would need some further clarification, since it relies in a somewhat Manichean worldview.

The notion of *non-lieu*, a neologism introduced by anthropologist Marc Augé in the early nineties to express the cultural dimensions of what he terms *surmodernité* (Augé, 1992), has been adopted well beyond the scope of the relatively inbred corpus of anthropological

literature and has since been sifting into European mainstream hypermodern pluridisciplinary and pro-hybridist essayism, and occasionally even into some political speech. Although Augé prefers to restrict the use of *non lieu* to restricted spaces such as airports and commercial centres, the notion seems an apt complementary category to help qualify the overall morphology of the "generic city" that Rem Koolhaas depicts. Indeed, both authors vie for a characterization of human spaces emptied of local identity and shared memory, lonely, hybrid, monotonous, prone to forgetfulness and transitivity. They both express, in the respective jargon of the nostalgic anthropologist and of the cynical urbanist, the same nihilistic streaks one is confronted by in J. G. Ballard's novels.

There is, however, one not-so-minor glitch in this unbecoming dystopian picture that, one should note, otherwise vividly portrays the post-postmodern negativist sentiments of today's Western intellectuality. To make sense of his *non-lieu* category, Marc Augé necessarily has had to hollow it out of its antonymic mould, that of the *lieu*, much in the same way Koolhas erases the functionality of the cultural-historical city centre. But what anthropological thought has recurrently conceived as the *lieu* is something that needs careful attention and even more cautious handling. *Lieu*, has already been suggested, is where "culture" and "identity" thrive, and where "tradition", "integration" and "exclusivism" are given function and meaning. Just as the "centre" in the urbanist's, and indeed the sociologist's view, is an idealised metaphor that drives much of their discourse, the belief in the *lieu* is a tool as essential to the self-endorsement of the heuristics of the anthropologist as is his claims to the usefulness of the comparativist method or the actuality of participant observation. The anthropological *lieu*, in fact, is a self-referential imaginary construction where the supposed capacity of the model to adhere to "observed" reality relies in endowing it with – let's not be afraid of the word – magical powers. As Edmund Leach has aptly noted in a now sadly forgotten essay, the researching anthropologist believes that his static models can accurately represent dynamic cultural realities, unaware that the way he/she uses his concepts have a humpty-dumptyan self-righteousness quality to it: in Leach's own words, "such expressions (…) *mean* just what the anthropologist says they mean, neither more nor less. Consequently structural systems as described by anthropologists are always static systems" (Leach, 1954: 103) – a paraphrase of Lewis Carrol's subtle inspection of verbal meaning in *Alice behind the Looking Glass*, where in chapter sixth, Humpty Dumpty scornfully retorts to Alice's objections: "When I use a word (…) it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less").

What, then, is implied in the notion of *lieu*? Simply, the rather uncritical acceptance of the core set of creeds that has shaped anthropological thought throughout much of the 20th century, firstly compounded by Émile Durkheim: that, in contrast to "our" organic, dynamic, hierarchical, classificatory, individualist mind, the "other's" forms of social solidarity and integration are ridden with mechanistic, egalitarianism, and collectivistic modes of thought

and practice. Thus, culture, tradition and identity, as studied by the anthropologist, are enmeshed in models that cannot but to imply resistance to change and incapacity to rationalize differences. *Lieu* subsumes this heritage and Marc Augé advances it as the safe haven to the negativity of urbanization to condemn the tragedy of today's unforgiving loss of that nostalgic era where mobility, hybridizing, anonymity and *angst* were not the main features of human groupings but residual side effects or controllable pests.

To a certain extent at least, Augé's notion of *non-lieu* is a convenient metaphor to convey the author's dislike of the "now", a Zeitgeist that he perceives as what we could refer to as *non-temps*, or a time of "loss" – when the yesteryear practices are but nostalgic remembrances, when the fixedness of cultural tradition has melted, when the stability of physical and mental frontiers have been shattered, and also when the art of painting rosy pictures for the future of mankind applies no more. He is, of course, not alone in decrying our *non-temps*, our "end of history" and our "generic cities". Augé's conception of the *non-lieu* is just one small drop of a massive negativist wave that has been for almost twenty years percolating into the collective Western subconscious through a wide range of intellectual and emotional forms. The Zeitgeist's sentiments of loss of an ordered past before a discredited present have swept away all faith in the brightness of the future.

We don't have to accept, as Ulrich Beck seems to do (Beck, 1992), that it was the trauma of the Chernobyl reactor's meltdown that set off the paradigmatic transformations that shaped the way Western ideologies of the early 21st century wryly refrain to develop any positive visions of the future and seethes in apocalyptical scares of different colours. But it is useful to recognise that such trend does exist, does expand, and does form an immense variety of cultural expressions, intellectual discussions and economical decisions, at least in Europe and in North America. The panic of the unknown future sells, instability mongering sells, the apocalypse sells. Be it with the risk of climate warming, carbon depleting, sunlight dimming, yellow peril coming, or Islamic terrorism expanding, the West seems to gorge itself in fear only to readily, and also uncritically, accept the palliative remedies propagandists wave at national and international audiences. We produce rubbish in growing quantities but busy ourselves meticulously separating biodegradables from perennials; we exponentially consume all available energy sources but cycle our way to self-forgiveness; we decry the terrorists we terrorize and welcome the self-imposed limitations to the same freedom we force on others. Popular support for renewable energy sources, for rewriting mobility management rules, to impose strict environmental sustainability targets, to limit civil rights in the name of the fight against terrorism, or to conceive protectionist tactics against cheaper foreign produces, has in recent years increased exponentially, from a modicum start a few years ago to a massive ideological trend justified by the hopes that potential new industrial

setups gather enough leverage to revive whole economies, and muster the necessary survival means to contested and discredited political elites.

4. As it was

We walker makers tend to routinely use a set of arguments that gain sense within a more general rhetoric trend of tapping into mass scare as a means to trade in palliative measures. In this, our overall temporal scheme is but a variant of an age-old pattern that we could ultimately recognize as specific to the Western interpretation of the Judeo-Christian theological framework. In the biblical and post-biblical scheme, historical time comes up as apparently linear, but its circuitry is mounted on a circular or mirrored construction: the fall of Man from Eden corresponds to the loss of a time (and space) where differences were inexistent or irrelevant; the resulting sinful degradation is reversed by the paradoxical birth and death of a Man-God in a world of differences and hierarchies of diverse kinds; Judgement Day, in the end of times, will bring the reestablishment of the original condition of Man, relinquishing distinctions and disparities in favour of the return to a state of total equality. The biblical idea that the end restores the commencement as a device to define the differences of the present against two ultimately absurd poles of equality has been, as we know, appropriated and reshaped in a multitude of ways by Western utopian ideologies throughout many centuries, not least in the Marxist dialectic models. This inheritance can be shaped into more of less positive figures, since not all visions of what is to come share the same set of variables: thus, the future can be, and has been, variously painted in bright colours with tangs of social rationality and technological prowess, or in dark dystopic tones with hints of political tyranny or environmental disaster – in which case the subset of a pastoral return to a common cause with nature (or, in James Kunstler's words, to a "world made by hands") tends to be activated in a palliative form. Today's visible stress on this latter view in Western intellectual productions of the high and low qualities (be it in philosophical essayism, novel writing, plastic art, or in blockbuster films, fantasy video gaming and daily news broadcasts) nonetheless signals an unremitting categorical entrapment within the limits of a specific conceptual approach to place mankind in the axe of time.

The mindset behind many a walking promotion discourse dangles in this general visionary assumption: that the future of "our" doomed cities can be salvaged if it reshaped in such way as to at least reflect some elements of a social therapy to the present and envisioned future evils, and that the diagnosis will one day, sooner rather than later, gain broad political acceptance. Such prophylactic attitude involves both a degree of metaphoric depiction of the present urban realities – as ever expanding organisms, overridden by acrimonious pollution,

prone to anomic anonymity and solitude, entrapped by a dromologic phenomenology (Virilio, 1984) blathering forth special and mental distinctions and contrasts – and a self-induced leap of faith in the efficacy of the prescribed quasi-homeopathic healing process, which includes the said return to hygienic gymnastics, village-like localism, mobile and social equality. It should not be a wonder, then, that in the flowering production of books, reports, leaflets, powerpoint presentations and docudramas through which we walker makers expose the results of our analysis, we tend to use the motif of the "childhood-days-when-it-was-possible-to-ride-our-bikes-and-play-games-in-the-middle-of-the-road" as a key persuasive tool. Our vision for the future of urban life is carved by an optic game where the present "reality" is conceived as the mirrored negative to past memorabilia; when a filtered image of the past is activated in starch contrast to a "reality" that threatens to pervade times not yet lived, it becomes a soothing alternative to at least some coming negativity. This rhetorical game of socializing our diagnoses and prescriptions frequently implies touching upon a set of emotional chords that festers on nostalgia for days long gone, deplores contemporary and coming depression, and yearns for hopefulness.

Conclusion and recommendations: would you follow me?

If the terms of the analysis are accepted, a number of hard questions arise: is this the best way to convey our "message"? Is it the only way to proceed? Or isn't de-construction a needless paralysing device? After all, people need visions because people like to "see", to be convinced not by rational arguments alone (or at all) but by strong, telling images. And isn't visioning a prime convincing tool of the politician to whom we talk, or against whom we act? Shouldn't we just accept that this is the name of the game, and that we're either in it or formidably out? What are we to do?

There is a certain level of schizophrenia that needs to be involved in all this. We needn't of course advocate that we develop sickening forms of split personality, or that we simply give in and give up our convictions or, more important still, our findings. But a degree of cynicism, of the kind sagely recommended by Diogenes of Laerces, could well be worth considering. Did he stop searching for that one virtuous man and blew out his candle just because it was broad daylight?

Let me finalize this text by offering some informative elements relating to my research and civil rights practices, not in Ethiopia, but in Portugal, where I am daily confronted with the sort of "hard questions" mentioned above. As coordinator of an interdisciplinary post-graduate studies programme in risk and trauma, I lead research on what could be called (and is called by our partner researchers of the team headed by Manuel Delgado at the University of

Barcelona) an “anthropology of street walking”. The compared fate of pedestrians in Portuguese, Spanish and some African urban settings, the damages done to their safety and quality needs, and the consideration of their social status and mental perceptions, forms a large part of the I&D studies promoted in the academic environment where I’m imbedded. Concurrently, I take an active part in the politics of walking as a “walker maker”, as member of the *Associação de Cidadãos Auto-Mobilizados* (ACA-M), one of the very few Portuguese NGOs that have been consistently battling for better structural safety for pedestrians and more recognizable public policies towards the improvement of an urban life-style that at least doesn’t violate what this association sees as the inherent set of rights attached to walking. This engagement has actually led me in 2007 to become, albeit for a short period, an elected councillor in Lisbon’s local administration, where I directed my action towards the approval, by the Council, of a number of norms and practices that would defend and favour pedestrian mobility and dignity. My stint as a city councillor was marked by what I would term a deep cognitive gap with most of my interlocutors at the city’s executive body. Councillors would leave the room in order to even having to vote my proposals, the mayor would alternatively scorn, cherish and whinge at my interventions that were commonly read as irrelevant, obstructing or deleterious. The traffic department would later react stressfully or patronizingly to the decisions that I managed to filter through the hostile city council, and my feeling was that the Lisbon population in general was basically unresponsive to the issues I was shielding. So, after one year of enduring endless meetings in a sit position and quixotically battling the windmills of no-change, I packed my baggage and returned to the Ethiopian highlands and to my academic duties.

At the time of writing this text, ACA-M has become involved in a judicial case to charge the Portuguese General Secretary of Internal Affairs, who crashed his official car in Lisbon’s main avenue (Avenida da Liberdade) against the car of the president of the Portuguese Parliament while allegedly driving at more than 130 km/h in rush hour running a series of red signs, and has acted legally against Lisbon’s mayor, who has decided to shelve an earlier approved council decision to alter the times of green for pedestrians so that they comply with a national law designed to protect persons with reduced mobility, in accordance to European directives. Lisbon’s pedestrian crossings have not been dully painted for more than ten years, to this day hardly anyone touches the feedback buttons in traffic lights to require crossing since a ten year-old boy was electrocuted in one in 1997. Lisbon’s praised limestone sidewalks are locally conceived as an important patrimonial feature but the council recurrently neglects its maintenance, to the extent that they have become major hindering factors for efficient and safe walking in the city’s public space. Police authorities majestically turn their blind eye to the widely accepted practice of parking one’s car everywhere and anyway, from sidewalks to pedestrian crossings. Killing of pedestrians is still on the rise,

against a backdrop of otherwise general reduction of road kills since 1996, and medium car speed in unobstructed streets floats around 70 to 90 km/h (a little higher during nighttimes and weekends), a situation favoured by the centrally controlled traffic light software system introduced in Lisbon in the early eighties, which concentrate in motorized traffic fluidity, creating long periods of green for cars (which the Council calls “green waves”), and too short periods of green for pedestrians, with no nocturnal or weekend alterations to meet these contextual changes. Conflict levels between pedestrians and car users are frequent; appropriative tensions in the public space are customarily high; road code infraction is rampant and sanctioned by police passivity. The general perception is one of fatality and resilience, intertwined with an almost affectionate relationship with the unremitting category of “crisis” that encompasses widespread ethical, economical and political negative evaluations of the nation’s life since the democratic regime was established in 1974.

As I learned the hard way in Lisbon’s council, there is little room for “visions” in some conjunctures, especially since they tend to be seen as rich countries’ luxuries. If one is allowed to talk of “hope” in such context, I’d say that only the quitter mentality with which EU directives tend to be incorporated in national practices at many levels can serve as a guide – not so much for promoting shared grand “visions” but to spur “trends” of higher walkability in Portugal.

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