ANDREAS BANDAK AND PAUL ANDERSON

Urgency and Imminence
The Politics of the Very Near Future

Abstract: From pre-emptive military strikes, humanitarian campaigns and precarious financial bubbles, to the climate change emergency and public health measures undertaken in response to COVID-19, we live in an era increasingly marked by discourses of imminence that bring a future close while also leaving it hard to imagine or inhabit. Claims of urgency – ‘act now before it is too late!’ – conduct the affective charge of these sometimes abject and often partially unimaginable futures. Yet urgency is rarely self-evident, but a claim in which the distribution of rights and resources, and particular forms of knowledge and expertise, are at stake. Which social actors are most invested in urgency and why? What possibilities does formatting a situation as ‘urgent’ foreclose and what questions does it make impossible to ask? What happens to claims of urgency when they become protracted and routinised? Alternatively, under what conditions might claims of urgency presage new openings?

Keywords: affect, future, discernment, historicity, presentism, temporality, urgency

In the twenty-first century, discourses and affects of urgency seem to be everywhere. Political claims increasingly take shape around the need to respond to financial crises (Dundon and Vokes 2020), terrorism, pandemics and other things figured as existential threats (Lakoff 2017; Masco 2014). At the same time, urgency is not only located at the level of discourse and claim-making; urgency can be a more diffuse feeling or atmosphere. Elaine Scarry (2011) has suggested that in post-liberal states in the West, states of emergency can become routinised through everyday affects rather than through formal legislative changes. Similarly, Ben Anderson has characterised a twenty-first-century politics of emergency as one in which the everyday is no longer an unmarked time of habit and routine but rather ‘contains within itself’ the possibility of emergency (2016:177). This introduction asks what kind of critical purchase ethnography and anthropology can offer to make sense of settings, particularly in Europe and North America, in which claims and affects of urgency appear to be doing such important political work.

Anthropology has been no stranger to the temporal turn. In a sense, anthropological work has always been inscribed in an ordering of various temporalities (Fabian 1983). Much early ethno graphical work has been formed within a paradigm of what could be called urgent anthropology – the work towards salvag-
ing cultural difference for posterity (Lévi-Strauss 1992 [1955]). However, critical work has in the vein of Edmund Leach (2021[1959]), and more recently Nancy Munn (1992) and Alfred Gell (1992), addressed the various ways time can be sequenced, experienced and constructed in ethnographic encounters as well as in the anthropological elucidation of the specific time-models and time-maps that undergird specific social and cultural conceptions of temporality. Following this, the last decade has witnessed a burgeoning anthropological interest in various forms of temporality – for example, rupture (Cherstich et al 2019; Robbins 2004), revolution (Armbrust 2019; Scott 2014), hope (Hage 2003; Miyazaki 2004), waiting (Janeja and Bandak 2018; Khosrawi 2017), crisis (Roitman 2013; Vigh 2008), acceleration (Eriksen 2001; Stein 2017), planning (Abrams and Weszkalnys 2013) and the future (Appadurai 2013; Bryant and Knight 2019; Guyer 2007) – one key element pertinent to all these seems both undertheorised and ethnographically underexplored, namely urgency.

**Religious Temporalities and the Urgency of Salvation**

One of the domains where urgency classically has been asserted is in religious life. In Islam and Christianity, certain strands have focused intensively on the afterlife and have used this as a way to form subjectivities in the present. Fear of damnation and hell have been formative for the devout in these religions, as have the hopes of entering heaven and being counted among the blessed. The cultivation of fear has accordingly entailed a whole ornamentation of the fires and torments suffered by those not deemed worthy to enter heaven. Take Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, where sections devoted to hell and purgatory take up more space than the last part on heaven, where the protagonist finally gets his Beatrice. Particularly for the medieval age in Europe, historians have explored the wide role of the afterlife as well as what Jacques Le Goff (1986) has described as the invention of purgatory. Purgatory was here not to be seen as a way merely to do away with hell but a significant extension of the time souls deemed worthy for heaven would have to endure post mortem to make amends for wrongs committed in life. Hell and purgatory in this sense spoke to a vivid imagination, which by no means detracted from the urgency of working on one’s own salvation as well as that of kin and family, whom one would want to alleviate from torments in the afterlife (Pasulka 2014; Willis 2008). Atonement, penance and indulgences accordingly played an important part in fomenting a particular time consciousness inhabited by various forms of urgencies. Time consciousness in this context is also a consciousness of sovereignty; to contemplate the contingency and brevity of human life and the urgency of Judgement is also to acknowledge the divine power as sovereign over the secular temporal order.

In Protestant readings following the Reformation, purgatory was deemed altogether unreal. The reformation accordingly did away with indulgences and
the idea of a meantime as envisioned with purgatory. Rather, what was stipulated was an idea of an already-not yet, an idea of salvation already having happened once and for all with the vicarious death of Christ but that the time of the now still is of utmost importance as a not yet consummation. In Reinhart Koselleck’s conception, early modernity took hold in Europe when ideas of damnation receded and the urgency of human action in the present for its own sake materialised (2004 [1979]; see also Kermode 2000 [1966]). The time between Christ’s first and second coming was hence a time of vigilant work on one’s own salvation (see also Janeja and Bandak 2018).

Where Koselleck’s narrative reads as a classic modernist version, where religious worldviews are overruled by secular ones, ethnographies have also in recent years described the role the afterlife still has for certain religious communities. Take as one prominent example the work of Charles Hirschkind. In his important *The Ethical Soundscape*, Hirschkind (2006) delves into the role of cassette sermons in Egypt and their role in fashioning Muslim life and thought. Here the role of imams and their preaching is critical in fashioning the right Islamic sentiments of fear, humility and religious devotion. Preachers are assessed for their abilities to make the listeners feel the importance of the hereafter, or indeed in the felicitous phrasing of Hirschkind eschatology is now (2006: 181), and it is through the active absorption and attention to sermons that ‘listeners seek to adjust and attune themselves to the presentness of this eschatological world through the fashioning of a sensorium that renders that world perceptible’ (2006: 184). Death and the imagination of oneself as dead are laboured carefully upon, through proleptic moves into the future, where impending judgement awaits, to cultivate a focus on the urgency of moral reform in the present.

In strands of contemporary Christianity, such engagement with the afterlife similarly continues to have prevalence (Apolito 1998; Csordas 1994; Robbins 2004; Webster 2013). However, the heightened awareness of the present, of the now, may not only be tied to apocalyptic visions of the afterlife. In varieties of charismatic Christianity, ideas of God’s agency are tied to the importance of actual decisions in the present. We find one significant example of such concern in Simon Coleman’s engagement with the ‘right now’ among Swedish charismatic Christians in the Word of Life movement. In his 2011 paper, Coleman introduces the notion of ‘historiopraxy’ to capture the work charismatic Christians see themselves as doing in realising God’s plans in a way that inflects their present with poignancy. According to Coleman, this work operates in two different registers: on the one hand, the ‘small history’ of an individual’s conversion and alignment with God’s purpose; on the other hand, a much larger idea of making history is operative, as individuals insert themselves into God’s plan for the entire creation and the mobilisation of Christ’s second coming (2011: 430). Bringing together these two registers of history infuses mission work with a sense of urgency; focusing on the immediacy of the ‘right now’ may also enable participants to discern and harness divine sovereignty in the everyday (see also Bandak...
Where these religious senses of urgency hold sway, these are not merely asserted but also debated and contested (Jan Jensen, this issue). And ethnographic attention also needs to focus on the various temporal orders that coexist and where the relative urgency of, say, salvation may square with other mundane urgencies such as taking care of work, children and other quotidian interactions (see Robbins 2001b). Frequently, it is possible to have different temporal dispositions played out at the same time where their relative weight and importance may shift (cf. Hage 2018), or we may even identify what Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov has aptly described as a temporality marked by a combination of ‘urgency and delays’ (2017: 41, 61).

**Instrumentalisations of Urgency**

In non-religiously marked contexts too, sovereignty continues to be apprehended and exercised in temporal dimensions, and notably through discourses and affects of urgency – in the ability to decide on the exception, to suspend the ordinary, and to declare when the current temporal order is coming to an end or, in the case of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, restarting. So we find it pertinent here to ponder further the role the figures of urgency and immediacy have also outside religiously marked discourses. Urgency and the sense of the world as we know being about to be fundamentally changed also frequently makes ample use of imaginary forces of the catastrophic, and of imminent threat and reasons to be fearful. Take the climate change debates, where end scenarios are typically invoked in order to make changes present not just tangible but sensible. Similarly, take humanitarian aid schemes, where funding appeals for disaster and relief work frequently invoke the suffering and misery which need alleviation now, and not later. What Lisa Malkki (2015) has described as ‘the need to help’ is an imperative, which also rests on the work of the imagination to picture and fill in how the needy and suffering subject is being met by aid (see also Besteman 2016). Practical aid is here construed as an urgent response, which is the only morally rectified one in a landscape of calamities. Our point here is not that such help cannot do ‘good’ in the world but rather to point to the logics operative in the ways the suffering subject is construed (cf. Robbins 2013) as well as in the instrumentalisation of urgency and emergency herein.

An elucidation of urgency however has to broaden the scope further and focus on the way political claims increasingly take shape around the need to respond to crises. Critical anthropological literature has pointed out how invocations of crisis and emergency have political effects (cf. Roitman 2013). Like labelling something a security concern, labelling it a ‘crisis’ is a speech act that
legitimises exceptional measures and restricts authoritative speech to specialists; it also restricts outcomes to ‘life’ or ‘death’, salvation or damnation, and moralises choices in a way that puts democratic debate off limits. Thus narratives of crisis are always an exercise of power, suggesting we should defer to leaders, repress dissent, adopt a nearby panacea without asking too much about who is selling it and why.

Anthropology has addressed related terms of emergency, such as crisis: states of affairs that suggest a turning point, in which decisive change for better or worse is imminent, and which imply a call for action (cf. Kleist and Jansen 2016; Thomassen 2012; Vigh 2008. Studies of urgency can draw on these insights. However, urgency is not only located at the level of discourse and claim making, but also at the level of affect, the visceral. Perhaps there is a distinction to be drawn here with ‘emergency’. While emergency signifies a punctual event that happens at a bounded ‘scene’ – as Ben Anderson (2016) argues – urgency can be a more diffuse feeling or atmosphere. Urgency obviously may be a matter of particular actors formatting a social situation as demanding immediate action. However, urgency may at times also arise as an affective charge (cf. Massumi 2002), which demands action on part of the involved parties to respond to challenges of, for example, injustice, the climate, capitalism or general wellbeing. Accordingly, in contexts of urgency the mobilisation of affect may come easier as compared to situations where the sense of urgency needs to be created in order to mobilise particular actions. Here, work on affect and atmospheres enables a broader look at the ways in which urgency can be instrumentalised but also how wider social energies themselves become urgent to respond to from societal leaders.

Similarly, Elaine Scarry (2011) observes that the urgent is not always over in an instant. The present is stretched and transition to the future is temporarily suspended, even as a threatening future looms. She connects this to new forms of authoritarianism, arguing that after 9/11, an ongoing state of emergency has become a normal part of liberal-democratic states. While there is no formal permanent state of emergency, the ‘war on terror’ has in the US produced an atmosphere in which life is always lived on the verge of emergency. The literature on emergency also underlines that calls for urgent action necessarily raise questions of knowledge and authority. Such calls may turn out to have been justified, if they successfully averted a threat. But action can turn out after the event to have been a knee-jerk response that was counter-productive. So there is a politics of mobilisation to explore: how the legitimacy of action is established in advance.

**Urgency, Technology and Immediacy**

Various technologies obviously have impacted the sense of time in everyday life. Computers, smart phones, the internet and fast transportation are frequently
listed to give examples of the acceleration that modernity and globalisation have engendered and the ensuing compression of space and time it is alleged to have fostered (Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991; Robertson 1992; Rosa 2013). Modernity itself has frequently been described and defined through the notion of speed (Virilio 1995). However, we would want to take one step back and inquire whether these depictions are the most significant features of the current predicament. It seems that things happening at a great pace may indeed be a feature of part of modernity. However, the pressing concern may in many people's lives not merely revolve around pace but also the ways in which importance and priorities in personal life are marked. Here rather than acceleration, we may see immediacy and urgency as prevalent frames of concern. And we may also probe how late-modern technologies such as Facebook, Instagram and Messenger are built to fashion further needs for ‘likes’, ‘sharing’ and immediate forms of affective responses (Rosa 2013). These various technologies allow for the broadcasting and rapid spread of news and affective charges, where the need to respond is asserted in novel ways.

One of the settings where the flow of ordinary life has been moved to prominence is with the surge of cameras and lenses to capture and present life. Susan Sontag eloquently pointed to this feature in her magnificent *On Photography* (1977). Here the urge to seize moments or to arrest time’s flow through the photograph is regarded as a critical feature, or in her formulation, ‘The urge to take photographs is in principle an indiscriminate one, for the practice of photography is now identified with the idea that everything in the world could be made interesting through the camera’ (1977: 111). Not just any moment but particularly moments of social misery in Sontag’s reading lend themselves to the eye of the photographer, who heroically can present the lives of others to a wider audience. Hereby Sontag places the photographer alongside anthropologists (1977: 42) bringing back home what is exotic and unfamiliar.

Moments of great importance needs to be photographed. However, one could also argue that taking a photo may make something a moment of such importance. This ranges from the familiar and even private contexts, where family events are documented and circulated (Barthes 1982 [1980]; Spyer and Steedly 2013). Even more so in recent times, political events are inconceivable without photos. The Syrian tragedy is not really able to be thought of without the assiduous work by locals in capturing and disseminating footage of what really took place (see Bandak 2015; Della Ratta 2018; Wedeen 2019). The violence is captured, the photos of wrecked houses, killed and mutilated bodies all were – and to some extent still are – circulated to heighten the awareness in Syria and beyond of what is and was happening. Cruelty and the responsive or dismissive gaze is hence a particular arena for urgency (cf. Linfield 2010). Capturing what is going on with the lens of the camera and putting it out in the open may here be seen as an emic imperative even if the world may not respond, or may be caught by what Richard Sennett (2002) has described as compassion fatigue.
Urgency, Economy and Late Modern Management Theory

The elucidation of the underpinnings of urgency may also instructively be read in relation to economy, capitalism and late modern management theory. In this section, we therefore turn to the various ways in which urgency is used and cultivated as a particular orientation not to the distant but the imminent future. A significant anthropological contribution here is Jane Guyer’s work and comparison between Pentecostal prophecy and macroeconomic political intervention. Her analysis of the resonances between macroeconomic theory and evangelical time opened new avenues for enquiry about the ways in which various ‘temporal philosophies’ become ‘culturally plausible’. On her important reading, the ‘near future’ has been evacuated, leaving only the present and the distant future as central concerns. What is lost sight of, in both economic theory and evangelical time, is the near and impending future. Her assertion that the near is being lost necessitates us to explore the conceptual horizons in play, as well as to invoke ‘material and political urgencies as well as time-space schema’ (2007: 410). In sum, Guyer suggests that ‘anthropology has the means, but not yet the concerted conversation, to develop an ethnography of the near future of the 21st century’ (2007: 410).

We also assert such a need for an ethnography of the near future, but even more so also for what we see as a different variation, namely ethnographies of the very near future. Hereby we stress the role the sense of urgency is given as a vector for mobilising action in the present and obliterating deferral of decisions or positions of waiting and patience. The very near future accordingly is different from the near future, as is it temporalises as of utmost importance whatever may follow from the present. Perhaps one could even say that the urgent implies the future invading or collapsing the present, making the neat separation between these varied categories dissipate, so that everything hinges on the ‘now’. In this sense, we may read back also through earlier forms of feverish searches for oil or gold, and bitcoins and similar cryptocurrencies, green solutions in order to make it big – all seen as particular temporal engagements with a yet to come dependent on current action. The temporal orientation of the very near future stresses neither the present nor the future as such, but the very interval of encroaching possibility decided now. The very near future accordingly prescribes certain forms of actions, ‘demands’ particular forms of responsivity and occludes other forms of action, or indeed a space for reflection.

One significant example of such an urgency demand is found in John P. Kotter and his A Sense of Urgency, published by Harvard Business Press. Kotter blatantly asserts the asset of urgency for ‘winners’. Where religious preachers may use urgency as inscribed in a particular worldview, be that Muslim or Christian, Kotter here presents urgency as the key to form successful leaders and organisations no matter what their ideology, products or values might be. Kotter is refreshingly candid in that he himself admits to the fact that ‘A big reason that
true urgency is rare is that it’s not a natural state of affairs. It has to be created and recreated’ (2009: 15). There it is. Urgency has continuously to be made salient for keeping an organisation on its toes. In order to accomplish this task, Kotter formulates eight rather crude pieces of advice, which in equal measure seem to underpin and inform certain forms of late modern leadership. Here the advice, for instance, underlines the importance of not just urgency, but also what is called ‘high-urgency’. The latter appears to be an oxymoron – can something be more than urgent? Even so, it attests to the charge Kotter prescribes in all of his eight pieces of advice, which revolve around, for example, the key role of fostering ‘a true sense of urgency’, to make the search for critical opportunities now incumbent even if ‘the team members may already be overworked and overcommitted’, and similarly that urgency needs to be communicated continuously in order ‘to generate still more urgency in their organization’, and conclusively that efforts in ‘never letting up’ and ‘making change stick’ are asserted as an ubiquity not to fall back to complacency (2009: 14–15).

It may be that some leaders prevail by subscribing to books such as Kotter’s. It also looks as if similar urgencies are increasingly being inscribed as the mandate for the support of public universities, for teaching and research, where green research initiatives or human impact are to be used instrumentally to solve strategic interests (e.g. Strathern 2000). Where many of these initiatives may indeed be important, it is important that such urgency is not added to the senses of crisis and emergency, which also proliferate, as this shortens the time-span of human action and planning.

**Ethnographic Approaches to Urgency**

The recent interest in temporalities across the humanities and social sciences has arguably grown out of wider scholarly trends. Historians of temporality have identified the contemporary moment as a post-modernist era in which a loss of faith in the myth of progress has given way to an era of ‘presentism’ (Fritzsche 2004; Hartog 2015 [2003]). In such an era, the future and past are sucked into an all-consuming present; the future, no longer apprehended as a horizon of new possibilities, instead looms as a threat of catastrophe already diffused into the present. For François Hartog, one feature of this presentist time is that discourses of urgency are increasingly prevalent in daily life. This assertion Hartog makes as part of his unravelling of current and past forms of ‘regimes of historicity’ in his work by the same title (2015 [2003]). A ‘regime of historicity’ Hartog presents as a tool, which can ‘help us examine our relations to time historically’ (2015 [2003]: 16). This conceptualisation may help us explore the varieties of urgency in order to understand what, so to speak, is urgent about urgency. Converging with this diagnosis of an all-consuming present, critical analyses of late capitalism have identified the time of the commodity as a ‘presentist’ one: by occluding labour
relations, the commodity obscures its past. As Burges and Elias write, ‘within capitalism, if all things become, really, one thing (the commodity), then all times become, really, only one time: the present, the time of consumption’ (2016: 8).

What can ethnography contribute to the questions and perspectives opened up by these critical perspectives? Scholars have used detailed ethnographic analysis to address how individuals experience and negotiate multiple temporal layers and configurations (cf. Burges and Elias 2016). They have highlighted that social discourses about time are not only plural and contested, but also apprehended by individuals through several subject positions – as citizens subject to notions of national ascendency or decline, kin members invested in generational transmission, religious or secular subjects entertaining particular cosmologies, workers disciplined by bureaucratic routines, consumers excited by and bound to the future by the logics of credit and debt, and so on. Ethnographic perspectives have also highlighted the role that institutions play in structuring the relationship between these different temporal frameworks. Because temporalities are always plural, analysis should pay attention to the institutional forms of power that mediate between them and order them hierarchically (Bear 2014). These approaches ask, for example, what were the colonial processes through which temporalities of progress, implicit in notions of civilisation, were able to be superimposed over local ways of reckoning time (Jordheim and Wigen 2018).

The attention to institutions has also highlighted how power relations structure the way that time is represented, regulated and experienced. Individuals are positioned in differentiated ways in relation to dominant representations of time. Some scholars have suggested that arguments about historical shifts from an era of ‘progress’ to an era of ‘crisis’ obscure the fact that crisis, precarity and uncertain futures have long been a familiar experience to those less advantageously positioned in society (Anderson 2016). Temporality can be a dimension through which to study institutional power, as Melissa Gatter has shown in her analysis of the ways in which urgencies are recognised or left unrecognised in refugee camps administered by NGOs in Jordan, where the routinisation of human emergency and their translation into the bureaucratic frameworks of ‘nine-to-five’ working hours rendered urgency into a kind of forcedwaithood (Gatter 2021).

But by the same token, an ethnographic perspective on urgency can also be a lens onto the contradictions and limits of institutional power: its incompleteness, internal tensions, fractures, resistances and points of exhaustion. Such is the approach which we discern in this Special Issue. We recognise that the way urgency has moved to the centre stage of political and cultural life may be connected to a broader regime of historicity that it makes sense to think about as ‘presentist’. In such a vein one might argue that the urgent imperative – ‘act now before it is too late’ – familiar from domains ranging from climate activism to pandemic management – is made culturally plausible by late capitalism’s logic of over-production and debt-fuelled consumption (‘buy now pay later’) which defines the eternal present of the commodity. Alternatively, one might argue that
in a presentist era defined by a collective loss of faith in progress, a permanent sense of crisis calls for a sensibility of constant low-level urgency to be mustered in everyday life in order to apprehend looming threats.

Yet we also wish to read urgency as a diagnostic of the fractures and limits of institutional power, and of the extensions and contradictions of institutional logics. Attention to temporality reveals resistances to, and tensions in, the project of European economic and political integration in the contributions by Joe Webster and Daniel Knight. Webster’s account of the cosmology of the Protestant Orange Order in Scotland details the imperative of maintaining a stance of ‘eternal vigilance against the menace of Rome’. Adherents to Orange cosmology discern this threat both in the influence of contemporary European political institutions and in the effects of Scottish nationalism which would jeopardise the Union. Far from being the recent product of a presentist era, the urgency of vigilance against neo-Papist supremacy expresses a sectarian historical consciousness cultivated over generations. In his contribution, Knight reflects on the disorienting ‘vertiginous’ sense of dislocation from both past and future engendered in Greece by the economic crisis since 2009/10. For those subjected to ‘defeated temporal expectations’ who felt as if they were ‘falling back through time’ to a period before the 1967–74 dictatorship, Europe itself was in question. Faced with the unrelenting demands of international creditors, his interlocutors asked whether they were still part of the same time-space as northern Europe.

Jan Jensen analyses the institutional strategy of an evangelical church in the Faroe Islands. In a secular European society accustomed to less radical forms of Christian preaching, the message of hell and the afterlife does not spread easily. The evangelistic logic – of communicating the urgent but hard message for which the church exists – confronts an institutional logic – of appealing to wider audiences, thereby ensuring the relevance and social reproduction of the organisation. At first sight, the two logics appear to diverge. However, Jensen argues that adopting a ‘strategic’ stance of patient urgency reconciles the two logics at the level of the institution. Such a strategy creates institutional legitimacy for the belief that appealing to wider audiences will in time serve the evangelistic purpose. Here, the analysis of urgency reveals tensions within institutional logics and their extension into wider society.

Charlotte Al-Khalili unravels the notion of destiny in the context of the Syrian uprisings of 2011 and their dire aftermath; different urgent temporalities inhabit the same predestined vortex, a time where apocalypse and history coincide. She writes about a context in which the institution of the nation-state, first imposed under European mandate ninety years earlier, has violently fragmented and its imaginary has lost traction. For those who fight to institute a new order, notions of a revolutionary future are as much informed by Islamic notions of apocalypse as by an overriding idea of a national future. The meanings of revolution are reshaped and subsumed within a discourse of apocalyptic destiny. On a personal
URGENCY AND IMMINENCE

level, such a discourse provides a moral framework for thinking about recklessness, suicide and loss that might otherwise be left outside collective frames or meaning, or be framed in nationalist terms as cowardice and heroism. On a collective level, such a discourse arguably marks the point of exhaustion of the imaginary of the nation-state.

Limor Samimiam-Darash describes how government and corporate institutions in Israel and the US engaged in scenario planning exercises in relation to pandemic outbreaks, in 2005–6 and in 2019. The purpose of such exercises is to envisage a range of plausible scenarios, and to generate a habitus of preparedness and routinised responses which would diffuse the sense of urgency once a pandemic does actually break out, rendering it less acute and destabilising. In practice, however, such exercises were easily misunderstood and misrepresented in parts of the media as based on risk-based predictions of possible outcomes (rather than simply a range of plausible scenarios). Once the COVID-19 pandemic was reported in 2020, this misrepresentation led to frenzied urgent speculation about the imminent likelihood of 65 million deaths. This reaction demonstrated the contradictory effects of institutional power; preparations whose purpose was to diffuse and routinise urgency in fact intensified it and made it more acute.

Mikkel Bille and Mikkel Thelle also address the ways in which the urgent temporality of the pandemic was a function not only of political discourses of ‘emergency’ but also of mass mediated experiences of the everyday. They analyse the shifts in urban experiences of the everyday wrought by the pandemic in Denmark. As the government legitimised its suspension of ordinary life by reference to the ‘urgency’ of the situation, a disconnect developed in which, for most people, things were happening very quickly on the television news but very slowly in their own lives. With social interactions cut off, and unable to plan, people were left suspended in an indefinite ‘in-between’ time, deprived of their usual connections to past and future. A future mediated by news reports but to which people felt little personal connection filled up the expanded and suspended present. This enabled citydwellers to keep urgency at arm’s length by disconnecting from the news. Yet amid the new monotony of life at home, many also became attuned to unforeseen ruptures in the everyday as they moved around the city, anticipating unpredictable and potentially hazardous encounters with unknown others.

The injunction urged on citizens during the pandemic to ‘hurry up and wait’ is, for Laurence McFalls and Mariella Pandolfi, not a temporary emergency pending a return to normality but an ominous suspension of political rights. It engenders something akin to the loss of selfhood or ‘crisis of presence’ suffered by de Martino’s (2012) madman. Tracing the roots of this crisis of presence, they observe in the global management of the COVID-19 pandemic the full expression of a form of governmental power which they term ‘therapeutic domination’. They discern the appearance of this governmentality during interventions by a NATO-led ‘international community’ in the Balkans in the 1990s. This so-called
‘humanitarian war’ and its aftermath saw the convergence of humanitarian and military interventions which ‘reduced life to the (medical) management of bodies’, stripping formerly Yugoslav citizens of their legal, political and social rights. Such interventions are, they argue, premised on the declaration of a state of emergency, and typically proceed by the dissolution of social ties. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a globalisation of this form of power; while the surrendering of rights to the therapeutic authorities appears to be temporary, in reality it is likely to become permanent. Temporality here is an expression of power: the ability to invoke all-subsuming urgency is a prerogative of the sovereign. But it is also a political technique: power works not only by suspending everyday life but also by eliciting compliant subjects who acquiesce in officially sanctioned urgency.

Ethnographic accounts show us that those who confront claims or atmospheres of urgency may also seek a critical distance from them, in which there is room to cultivate and exercise discernment: to ask, what kind of time is it that we are living in? Critical perspectives on temporality offered by scholars – whether ‘regimes of historicity’ or ethnographic analyses of the politics of imminence – afford the same possibility. Under what conditions do claims, idioms and affects of urgency emerge; what alternative orientations to the present and the future may be obscured in the process; how can we discern and decide what is indeed urgent? Claims and demands of urgency are all around us, not least in styles of organisational leadership whose only answer is to insist on more and more urgency to keep us on our toes. It is our contention that ‘urgency’ calls not just for action but for discernment, and for the possibility of a conversation in which there is room for different voices to be heard and different stakes to be claimed. Ethnography may be the start of one such conversation – offering alternative registers for reading the present and discerning the signs of the times.

Acknowledgements

This special issue grew out of conversations between the editors starting years back. The formal start took its place in Cambridge at Café Nero during January 2020, which led to an online workshop on 28 August 2020 with a great line-up of people, many of which also feature in this special issue of Social Anthropology. We are grateful for the engagement from all contributors as well as editor Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov as well as other good people involved with the journal. In particular, we want to thank reviewers, contributors as well as other friends, who have commented on this piece including Simon Coleman, Christine Crone, Melissa Gatter, and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup. Andreas Bandak wants to acknowledge the generous funding from the Independent Research Fund Denmark for the support for his collaborative project Archiving the future: re-collections of Syria in War and Peace (ref. 9062-00014B).
PAUL ANDERSON (psa27@cam.ac.uk; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5375-8040) is the Prince Alwaleed Associate Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge, the Acting Director of the University’s Prince Alwaleed Centre of Islamic Studies, and a Fellow of Darwin College, Cambridge. Dr Anderson is a social anthropologist interested in the articulation of economic, moral and religious life. He is the author of “Exchange Ideologies: Commerce, Language and Patriarchy in Pre-Conflict Aleppo” (Cornell University Press, 2023). His research has a particular focus on Islam, value, moral personhood and the sociality of trade. He is currently part of an AHRC-funded research project studying the urban heritage and cosmopolitanism of Muslim Asia.

ANDREAS BANDAK (bandak@hum.ku.dk; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3162-5313) is Associate Professor at the Department for Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen, where he is the Director of the Center for Comparative Culture Studies. He specialises in Syrian Christianity, temporality, the anthropology of religion and the power of examples. He has co-edited a number of books, such as The Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East (Brill, 2013), Qualitative Analysis in the Making (Routledge, 2014), The Power of Example (Wiley, 2015) and Ethnographies of Waiting (Bloomsbury, 2018). He is also the author of Exemplary Life: Modeling Sainthood in Christian Syria (Toronto University Press, 2022).

References


Robbins, J. 2001b. ‘Secrecy and the sense of an ending: narrative, time, and everyday mille-
narianism in Papua New Guinea and in Christian fundamentalism’, Comparative Studies
Robbins, J. 2013. ‘Beyond the suffering subject: toward an anthropology of the good’, Journal
Press.
Samimian-Darash, L. 2022. ‘Scenarios in a time of urgency: shifting temporality and technol-
sity Press.
Spyer, P. and M. M. Steedly 2013. Images that move. Santa Fe, NM: School of Advanced
Research Press.
London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
Strathern, M. 2000. Audit cultures: anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the
Thomassen, B. 2012. ‘Notes toward an anthropology of political revolutions’, Comparative
Vigh, H. 2008. ‘Crisis and chronicity: anthropological perspectives on continuous conflict and
Webster, J. 2013. The anthropology of Protestantism: faith and crisis among Scottish fishermen.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Webster, J. 2022. ‘From Scottish Independence, to Brexit, and back again: Orange Order
ethno-religion and the awkward urgency of British Unionism’, Social Anthropology 30(4):
18–36.
Wedeen, L. 2019. Authoritarian apprehensions: ideology, judgment and mourning in Syria. Chi-
cago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Willis, E. 2008. ‘The invention of purgatory: contributions to abstract time in capitalism’,

Urgence et imminence : la politique du futur très proche

Qu’il s’agisse de frappes militaires préventives, de campagnes humanitaires, de bulles fi-
cières précaires, de l’urgence du changement climatique ou des mesures de santé publique
prises en réponse au coronavirus, nous vivons dans une ère de plus en plus marquée par des
discours d’imminence. Ceux-ci rendent l’avenir proche tout en le laissant difficile à imagi-
ner ou à habiter. Les revendications d’urgence — “agissez maintenant avant qu’il ne soit trop tard!” — conduisent la charge affective de ces futurs parfois abjects et souvent partiellement inimaginables. Pourtant, l’urgence est rarement une évidence, mais une revendication dans laquelle la distribution des droits et des ressources, ainsi que des formes particulières de connaissances et d’expertise, sont en jeu. Cette introduction explore la dynamique et les effets de ces processus et de leurs politiques. Quels acteurs sociaux sont les plus investis dans des logiques d’urgence ou de report et pourquoi ? Quelles possibilités le fait de caractériser une situation comme “urgente” exclut-il et quelles questions rend-il impossible à poser ? Qu’adviennent des revendications d’urgence lorsqu’elles se prolongent et deviennent routinières ? Par ailleurs, dans quelles conditions les affects d’imminence et les revendications d’urgence peuvent-ils présager de nouvelles ouvertures ? Avec cette introduction, nous rendons compte des conditions sociales, technologiques et existentielles dans lesquelles il devient naturel d’appréhender le futur comme imminent et d’expérimenter le social à travers l’urgence.

**Mots clés :** affect, avenir, discernement, historicité, présentisme, temporalité, urgence