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The Future of Urban Social Movements in a Telepathic, Mobilized World

Three great socio-technical trends are transforming the nature of human settlement in the 21st century. Economic globalization has upset the global balance of urban and rural economies, resulting in massive migration to megacity regions at the nexus of international trade networks. The unprecedented rate of motorization in the developing world is driving a mobility explosion on the ground and in the air. The mobile telephone, the most successful consumer electronic device in history, acts as a catalyst and coagulant, preventing the whole fast-changing mess from flying apart at the seams. I call these places “telepathic megacities”, where the fundamental choreography of urban life is shifting from synchronization based on clocks to synchronization based on instantly transmitted desire.

Historically, massive, rapid, technology-intensive urbanization has been an engine for innovation in radical philosophies - fascism, communism and anarchism to name a few. This paper will speculate about the possibilities for new, disruptive social philosophies to emerge in the telepathic megacities of the 21st century, drawing upon examples from the developing world, science fiction and the Institute for the Future’s 50-year scan of science and technology conducted in 2005–2006.

Anthony TOWNSEND has been researching the implications of new technology on cities and public institutions for over a decade. As Research Director at the Institute for the Future (IFTF) in Palo Alto, California, Anthony's work focuses on several interrelated topics: pervasive computing, the urban environment, economics and demographics, public and nonprofit organizations, and the media industry. Prior to joining IFTF, Anthony enjoyed a brief but productive academic career at New York University, where he directed research sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the Department of Homeland Security. Anthony is active in international futures research networks, and received a Fulbright scholarship in 2004 to study the social impacts of broadband in South Korea. He was one of the original founders of NYCwireless, a pioneer in the municipal wireless movement. Anthony received his Ph.D. in urban and regional planning from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003. E-mail: ATownsend@iftf.org.

