

As If It Were Simply There

On Availability and the Cost of Continuity

A public transport ticket becomes more expensive.

The route has not changed. The stop is in the same place, the journey takes roughly the same time, perhaps even the bus is the same one I took yesterday. What has changed is the price. The difference is immediate and easy to understand: I am being asked to pay more for something that, from where I stand, appears unchanged.

The irritation is reasonable. If I pay more, I want to know what I am paying for.

There is something peculiar about paying for continuity. When we buy an object, the exchange has a visible result. Money leaves and something new enters our possession. Other services produce changes we can recognise. Medical treatment may reduce pain, restore movement or alter the course of an illness.

Much of the infrastructure of ordinary life works differently. Its success may consist simply in allowing tomorrow to resemble today.

The train arrives. Water comes from the tap. The street is passable. Waste has disappeared. The room is ready to be used again.

Nothing remarkable has happened.

That is partly the point.

We usually encounter these things from the side of use. I enter a station because I assume that a train can take me somewhere. I turn on a light without wondering what has happened between electricity generation and the switch on the wall. I walk into a shop expecting goods to be there. I cross a street without asking who inspected the surface beneath my feet.

These expectations are not necessarily signs of indifference. They are part of what reliable systems make possible.

A world in which every condition had to be examined before we could act would hardly be usable. I cannot inspect the tracks before boarding a train. I do not verify the water supply before filling a glass. A patient cannot reconstruct the technical and organisational conditions of a hospital before accepting treatment.

Reliability releases attention.

It allows us to direct ourselves towards what we are trying to do rather than towards everything that first has to work in order for us to do it. In this sense, the withdrawal of conditions from our awareness is not simply a failure of perception.

A functioning background has to become background.

The difficulty begins when repeated provision starts to look less like provision at all.

What has to be produced again and again begins to appear as a property of the environment.

The street is clean.

The bus runs.

The building works.

The goods are there.

Language itself shortens the chain. We speak as though the system were acting on its own. The train connects two places. The hospital treats patients. The city removes waste. The network provides electricity.

None of these statements is wrong. But they compress many actions into a condition.

This compression affects how contribution becomes visible.

A cleaner may be physically visible throughout an entire working day and still disappear from our understanding of what a building is. Once the floor is clean, cleanliness belongs to the room again. A technician may spend hours maintaining a system whose successful operation will later contain no obvious evidence of that work. A driver moves through the city in full public view, yet what most passengers experience is not the work of driving but the availability of a connection.

Visibility is not the same as the visibility of contribution.

A hospital makes this distinction particularly clear. Treatment depends on many forms of knowledge and work. A physician may diagnose and decide on a course of treatment, but what becomes possible also depends on nursing, laboratories, sterilisation, cleaning, technical systems, administration, medicines and the transfer of information between them.

When treatment succeeds, however, the story of what happened can often be attached to a recognisable person. A patient may later say that a doctor treated or saved them. The statement may be entirely justified. Individual skill matters. Some abilities take years to acquire and carry unusual responsibility.

Yet the outcome also depended on a much larger field: someone noticed a change during the night, a laboratory returned the right result, equipment remained sterile, medication was available, a room could be used, a technical system did not fail.

Some contributions remain attached to a name.

Others disappear into the condition they helped to sustain.

This does not mean that all necessary work should receive the same status or reward. Necessity is not a wage scale. Skills, responsibility and the difficulty of replacing them differ. Nor can recognition be reduced to income.

The question is more basic.

What happens to our understanding of a contribution when its success is absorbed into something we experience simply as a functioning world?

A city is particularly good at producing this effect because so much of what it offers depends on distributed work. A parcel reaches a door after passing through systems that no recipient could reconstruct in full. A train journey compresses planning, electricity, tracks, maintenance, signalling, cleaning, scheduling and labour into the simple experience of going somewhere. A public square appears ready for use after previous use has already produced dirt, wear, damage and the need for repair.

Many movements produce one condition:

available.

The more reliable that condition becomes, the easier it is to begin from there.

And once we begin from there, another difficulty appears. We become highly sensitive to the cost of maintaining a condition whose benefit increasingly feels like the absence of change.

The ticket costs more, yet the bus still goes from the same place to the same destination.

A bridge requires an expensive repair, but afterwards it remains the bridge we already had.

A water network is renewed, but water continues to arrive as before.

The cost changes. The successful outcome is that the condition does not.

This creates an unusual problem of perception. Costs are events. They arrive as a bill, a fee, a tax, a higher ticket price, a construction project or a temporary closure.

Continuity is far less dramatic.

The money may have been spent precisely so that nothing dramatic happens.

A prevented failure has no opening ceremony.

A component replaced before it breaks leaves no memory of the interruption it prevented.

Reserve capacity can look unnecessary while nothing unusual is happening. Time set aside for maintenance can look unproductive while the system is still running.

What appears unused may be carrying a possibility.

That does not make every reserve necessary or every expense reasonable. Institutions can spend badly, preserve obsolete procedures or allow complexity to protect poor decisions from scrutiny. Something does not deserve to continue merely because it already exists.

But that does not remove the underlying problem. We often have to decide what continuity is worth before the alternative has become visible.

How much should we pay for a service that does not noticeably improve but remains dependable?

How often should a bus run? How quickly must something be repaired? What level of cleanliness do we expect in a public place? How much disruption should a system be able to absorb without failing?

Infrastructure contains no natural answer to these questions. They are partly technical, but they are also decisions about the level of availability we want to share and the resources we are prepared to commit to it.

The difficulty is that yesterday's achievement easily becomes today's starting point.

A connection that once felt unusually fast becomes normal. A more frequent service becomes the timetable around which people organise their lives. A standard of cleanliness becomes the expected condition of a street. Once a new level of reliability has existed long enough, its history withdraws. The improvement stops being experienced as an improvement.

It becomes what should be there.

We inherit more than physical structures.

We inherit expectations.

These expectations matter. They are not merely consumer demands. People build real lives around reliable conditions. Someone accepts a job because a train makes the journey possible. A family chooses a neighbourhood because a school can be reached. A person without a car may depend on a bus not as a convenience but as part of the practical structure of everyday life.

Reliability creates legitimate claims because people make decisions in response to it.

Yet a legitimate expectation can become detached from an understanding of what fulfilling it continues to require.

Perhaps the difficulty begins when the right to rely on something becomes confused with the belief that what we rely on no longer has to be produced.

Availability always has another side.

For something to be available to me, people, knowledge, materials, energy, time and capacity have to be available elsewhere. Their availability is not experienced in the same way as mine.

I encounter a train when I need to travel. Someone else has to be there when the train is scheduled to run.

I encounter a clean street when I walk through it. Someone else's working time has already entered the condition I experience.

I receive a parcel when it reaches my door. The movements that made that moment possible may have been divided between people who never saw one another and systems spread across several places.

One person experiences availability as convenience. Another experiences it as readiness, obligation or responsibility.

No fixed group occupies only one side. The driver becomes a patient. The doctor becomes a passenger. The cleaner depends on electricity maintained by people they will never meet. We continually move between being supported by systems and contributing to them.

But we do not occupy every position in the same way.

A society may depend absolutely on a function while no particular individual within it is indispensable. Another necessary function may depend on knowledge that takes many years to acquire and cannot quickly be replaced. The necessity of a service and the replaceability of the people providing it are different questions.

A resilient system often has to survive the absence of particular individuals. It would be dangerous if a city's water supply depended permanently on one technician or a hospital could function only while one doctor was present.

But operational replaceability should not be confused with human insignificance.

It means that continuity has been organised collectively.

We become most aware of this organisation when it is interrupted.

A strike by waste collectors changes the city quickly. Bags remain where they would normally disappear. Containers fill. A condition previously experienced as ordinary becomes visibly dependent on work.

At first this seems to solve the problem of recognition. The absence of the service reveals its importance.

But visibility through failure is ambiguous.

The worker who was previously absorbed into the functioning system may now appear as the person preventing it from functioning.

The waste is still here.

The train is cancelled.

The service is unavailable.

The interruption makes dependence visible, but it does not decide what meaning we give that dependence. It can produce recognition. It can also produce anger.

Even maintenance itself often enters our attention first as inconvenience. The road has to be closed because it is being repaired. A platform cannot be used because work is being done to preserve its future use. Something intended to sustain a shared possibility temporarily removes that possibility from the individual.

I have to wait.

My route is blocked.

The ticket costs more.

These reactions cannot simply be dismissed as selfishness. Time and money are real. A missed train may mean a missed appointment. Higher prices affect people differently. A badly managed repair remains badly managed even if maintenance in general is necessary.

What failure reveals is therefore not an easy moral lesson.

It reveals a relationship.

Something I had been able to treat as part of the world turns out to depend on decisions, resources and other people's actions.

For a moment, a condition becomes a question again.

That moment interests me more than the demand that everything behind ordinary life should remain visible all the time.

Permanent visibility would solve very little. We cannot move through the world reconstructing every chain of labour behind every object, service and route. Nor would constant attention automatically produce fairer institutions or wiser spending. Something can be visible and still misunderstood. A person can be praised while the conditions of their work remain unchanged.

The background needs to remain background much of the time.

What matters is whether it can return.

Not only when a system fails, but when decisions about its future have to be made.

What does this reliability require?

Whose knowledge does it depend on?

Which forms of work disappear most easily into the result?

What are we willing to pay to maintain it?

What level of availability have we learned to expect?

And does the present form of the system still deserve to be preserved?

The last question matters because recognising that a condition has been produced should not turn into an argument for preserving everything that already exists. A system may function reliably and still serve the wrong purpose. A form inherited from an earlier decision may continue long after the conditions that justified it have changed.

To recognise something as made is also to recognise that it could be made differently.

Perhaps this is what distinguishes reliance from belief.

We need a world stable enough to act within. We need to enter a station without inspecting its signalling system, a hospital without understanding every technical dependency, a street without reconstructing who prepared it for use. Shared life would become impossible if every condition remained permanently uncertain.

For much of the day, we may need to live as if it were simply there.

We do not have to believe that it is.