

The World Does Not Continue by Itself

During a period in which my own life had lost much of its order, the city outside continued.

Trains arrived. Shops opened. Waste disappeared. Lights changed. People went to work. Nothing in the movement around me seemed to register that, for me, something fundamental had come apart.

At first, this continuity felt almost indifferent. The world did not need me in order to continue.

Only later did the observation begin to mean something else. The world may not depend on any one of us. But neither does it continue by itself.

Someone had opened the station. Someone had driven the train, stocked the shelves, checked the signals, cleaned the floor, repaired a fault, prepared a meal, answered a call. Behind every ordinary movement stood another movement that had already taken place.

I began to notice this while photographing cities. Not as a hidden truth waiting to be exposed, but as a recurring difficulty of attention. I often arrived at places where the work had already withdrawn into its result. The road was open. The platform was ready. The lights were on. A door responded when approached. Goods appeared where they were expected.

The more reliably something functioned, the less it seemed to require an explanation.

A completed world conceals the work of its completion.

This concealment has become easier in a world increasingly organised through interfaces. I touch a screen and a route appears. I make a payment without handling money. I place an order and a parcel reaches my door. I enter a question and receive a formulated answer within seconds.

The distance between a wish and its apparent fulfilment becomes very small.

The actual distance may be growing.

A delivery that feels immediate can depend on warehouses, roads, software, energy, packaging, vehicles and people moving through several countries. A digital payment requires devices, networks, institutions and trust. Artificial intelligence can produce a text, an image or a recommendation without displaying the familiar signs of effort. Yet it depends on data centres, electricity, cooling systems, semiconductors, specialised labour and long material supply chains.

The interface shortens the experience of provision. It does not necessarily shorten what provision requires.

Technological transformation is real. Digital systems change work, knowledge, communication and access. They remove some forms of physical effort and make services available across distances that once made them impossible. Artificial intelligence will alter many tasks and may eliminate some. It will also create possibilities that cannot yet be fully anticipated.

But transformation does not free us from dependence.

It reorganises it.

We still need food, water, shelter, energy, movement, care, knowledge, safety and time. The ways in which these needs are met continue to change. Work moves elsewhere. Machines

assume part of it. Responsibility is divided across institutions, platforms and supply chains. The person receiving a service may never see the person who made it possible.

Something still has to be grown, generated, carried, taught, maintained or renewed.

This matters when we speak about prosperity.

Prosperity is often imagined as a quantity already present: something to be accumulated, protected, inherited or distributed. Distribution matters. It shapes whose needs are met, whose abilities can develop and who remains excluded from possibilities that formally exist.

Yet prosperity is not only a stock waiting to be divided. It is also the capacity of a society to keep producing the conditions in which people can live and act.

Food must be grown and transported. Buildings must be designed, constructed and repaired. Energy must be generated and delivered. Knowledge must be developed, preserved and taught. Services must be organised. People invest time, accept uncertainty, coordinate others and attempt solutions whose outcomes are not guaranteed.

No individual creates these conditions alone.

An entrepreneur does not create the roads, legal systems, general education, public health, electrical grids or accumulated knowledge on which an enterprise depends. A skilled worker did not invent the language, tools and institutions through which that skill could be learned. Even an apparently solitary creative act takes place within material and intellectual conditions inherited from others.

Prosperity is therefore neither a public possession that appears without production nor the private achievement of isolated individuals.

It is a social capacity.

Markets contribute to it. So do public institutions, households, associations and forms of cooperation that rarely appear in conventional accounts of production. Pipes and cables, transport, health, education and care are not secondary to economic life. They form part of the ground on which it becomes possible.[1]

Once this is acknowledged, the meaning of productive work begins to shift.

Some work creates a new object, a service or a measurable increase in output. Other work maintains the conditions under which production and ordinary life can continue at all.

A machine is serviced. A child is taught. A patient is washed. A room is cleaned. A road is repaired. A person is listened to long enough to remain capable of continuing.

The first kind of work often leaves an identifiable result.

The second may succeed by preventing an event.

Nothing breaks down. No one is left unattended. The waste does not remain. The room is ready. The connection holds.

Its achievement is the absence of a visible crisis.

Reliability gradually becomes expectation. What is repeatedly provided begins to appear naturally available. The sequence of decisions and actions behind it fades from view.

We notice the lift when it stops.

We notice the cleaner when the room is not clean.

We notice the care system when no one can take responsibility.

We notice the road when it closes.

Breakdown interrupts more than a service. It also interrupts the illusion that the service had no author.

Research on maintenance and repair has shown how failure brings systems and labour into view. What functions quietly recedes from attention. Once it fails, its connections become briefly legible.[2]

There is a strange consequence to this kind of visibility. When maintenance finally appears, it often appears as obstruction.

A construction site blocks the usual route. A repair closes a platform. A software update interrupts a service. Work intended to preserve a shared possibility is first experienced as the removal of an individual one.

I have to wait.

I cannot pass.

My time is being taken.

The frustration may be justified. Not every delay is necessary. Not every project is well planned. Systems can conceal incompetence behind complexity, and years of neglect can later be presented as an unavoidable emergency.

Still, a more difficult question remains.

How fast is fast enough?

The more reliably a developed society functions, the higher the standard becomes against which every interruption is judged. Yesterday's improvement becomes today's minimum. Speed ceases to be experienced as an achievement and becomes the normal condition from which any delay appears to be a failure.

Time matters. A missed train can mean a lost appointment, unpaid work or a chain of further difficulties. Delays do not affect everyone equally.

But skilled labour, materials, money, attention and human energy cannot be made infinitely available by increasing our expectations of them.

A system designed only for visible efficiency removes what appears unnecessary: spare capacity, time buffers, alternative routes and preventive maintenance. Under ordinary conditions, their absence may look like success. When something unexpected happens, the lack of reserves becomes the system's defining feature.

Redundancy costs money even when it is not used. Maintenance competes with new construction. Long-term resilience is difficult to display. A prevented failure produces no image of success.

Perhaps this is one reason our culture remains dependent on performance while directing so much of its recognition towards visible results.

A person can work with great care and produce no spectacular outcome. Another may become closely associated with a success made possible by hundreds of people. Achievement can be real in both cases, but recognition does not follow contribution in any transparent way.

Nor do functional importance, income, security, visibility and influence reliably coincide.

The people nearest to the material conditions of a system may have the least power to shape it.

A cleaner keeps a building usable but does not decide how it is managed. A delivery worker makes immediacy possible while being measured by time they do not control. A carer carries responsibility for another person within schedules and budgets set elsewhere. A technician may know exactly where a system is fragile and still have little influence over the investment that would prevent its failure.

Some people encounter the transformed city mainly through the services it provides.

Others encounter it through the effort required to keep those services available.

The distinction is never complete. The same person can be a worker in one system and a user in another. We all move between dependence and contribution. But our distance from the material world is unevenly distributed.

So are the possibilities the city creates.

Cities bring jobs, schools, hospitals, markets, culture and other people within reach. Their density makes forms of development possible that would be difficult in isolation. A transport network is not only a technical system. It connects a person to possible work, knowledge, care and relationships.

But the presence of an opportunity is not the same as the ability to use it.

A job may exist but remain unreachable within the time available. A school may be open but inaccessible to a particular body. A digital service may be efficient for someone who possesses the necessary device, language and confidence, and almost closed to someone who does not.

Infrastructure cannot be judged only by its existence or technical performance. The more revealing question is what differently placed people are actually able to do with it.[3]

What is distributed through a society is therefore more than money or property. Time, health, mobility, education, housing, safety and access shape the range of actions available to a person. They determine whether a formal possibility can become a lived one.

Creation and distribution are not opposing movements. Access can enable new creation. Creation can finance new access. Maintenance preserves the ground on which both remain possible.

None of this guarantees fairness.

A highly productive society can distribute its possibilities narrowly. A well-maintained system can preserve exclusion. An efficient city can move goods quickly while leaving some people with very little control over their own time.

Maintenance is not good in itself.

Something can function exactly as intended and still need to change.

It is easy to praise the people who keep things running. It is harder to ask what should continue to run.

Which systems deserve repair?

Which forms of work should be made safer rather than merely faster?

Which inherited structures still create possibilities, and which survive because the cost of changing them is borne by people with little influence?

Transformation is necessary partly because the existing world is not enough.

Technology can reduce dangerous labour, expand access and make knowledge available to people previously excluded from it. Social change can redefine whose needs count and which lives institutions are expected to support. Industrial change can create new wealth while making older forms of production obsolete.

Every transformation, however, creates its own dependencies.

Artificial intelligence makes this unusually visible because its results can appear detached from labour and matter. A text, image or recommendation arrives without the ordinary signs of production. Yet the system does not stand outside the world. It draws energy, infrastructure, capital, training data and human judgement from it.

Current research indicates that generative AI is more likely to transform tasks within many occupations than to make most occupations disappear in their entirety. At the same time, the physical infrastructure behind AI is becoming an increasingly significant question of electricity supply, grid capacity and investment.[4]

AI changes what must be done by a particular person.

It does not remove the need to decide what should be done, who benefits, who carries the consequences and which material conditions make a result useful.

A generated plan may shorten part of a building process. It still has to meet materials, labour, regulation, weather and the people who will inhabit what is built. A technical system may improve a diagnosis, but care does not end with diagnosis. An answer can be made available almost immediately.

The ability to judge it cannot.

Perhaps this is why the question of my own place returned differently.

The world continued without me. That remained true. It continues without almost any single person.

But I had confused two things: not controlling the whole and having no effect within it.

Complex societies distribute power unevenly. Some decisions alter the lives of thousands; others barely reach beyond a room. It would be dishonest to pretend that every person possesses the same capacity to act.

Still, limited agency is not the same as powerlessness.

Someone teaches a child. Someone decides whether to repair or postpone. Someone hires under one set of conditions rather than another. Someone opens a door, interprets a rule, shares knowledge, takes responsibility or refuses it.

No single act explains the city. The city nevertheless accumulates such acts until they become streets, habits, institutions and expectations.

We inherit a world shaped by decisions we did not make. We then make decisions within it that others will inherit.

This offers a different kind of orientation from the demand that everyone must become exceptional.

To matter is not the same as being indispensable.

A meaningful contribution does not require the world to stop in one's absence. It requires that something within one's actual reach becomes different because one was there.

That difference may be small. It may depend on conditions one did not create and on people one will never meet.

This does not diminish it.

It places it.

The city I began to photograph had existed before me. It will continue after me. Its roads, thresholds, routines and systems do not contain a single meaning. They do not point towards one political conclusion.

But they changed the question I ask when something appears self-evident.

Who made this possible?

Who keeps it available?

Who can use it?

Who can change it?

And what disappears from view when the answer arrives too quickly?

The future will not need every form of work that exists today. It will not need human beings in exactly the same ways. That is not necessarily a loss.

The more difficult question is what every transformed society will continue to require: material limits it cannot negotiate away, forms of care it cannot reduce to output, infrastructures that must be maintained, and people capable of judging what should be carried forward.

The world does not depend on any one of us.

But it does not continue by itself.

Notes

[1] The Foundational Economy Collective, *Foundational Economy: The Infrastructure of Everyday Life*, Manchester University Press, 2018. See also Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, Pluto Press, 2017.

[2] Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, “Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2007, pp. 1–25. DOI: 10.1177/0263276407075954.

[3] Karel Martens, “A People-Centred Approach to Accessibility,” International Transport Forum Discussion Papers, No. 2020/24, OECD Publishing, 2020. DOI: 10.1787/0c667ccc-en. See also Ingrid Robeyns, “The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey,” *Journal of Human Development*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2005, pp. 93–117. DOI: 10.1080/146498805200034266.

[4] Paweł Gmyrek et al., *Generative AI and Jobs: A Refined Global Index of Occupational Exposure*, ILO Working Paper 140, International Labour Organization, 2025. DOI: 10.54394/HETP0387. See also International Energy Agency, *Energy and AI*, 2025, and *Key Questions on Energy and AI*, 2026.