

A DAY IN THE CADILLAC

The Work of Hope in Urban Mongolia

Morten Axel Pedersen

Abstract: Based on fieldwork among Ulaanbaatar's dispossessed youth, this article explores the 'work of hope' in post-socialist Mongolia. Using anthropological writings on presentism and hope as my theoretical point of departure, I show how the concept of hope allows for the potentials of the moment to overflow the possibilities of the present. The article describes a number of fortunate—and not so fortunate—events that took place during a day spent with a group of young men cruising around the city in an old Cadillac. Hope emerges as a social method for momentarily integrating heterogeneous assemblages otherwise dispersed across the post-socialist city—in this case, people's metaphysical capacities and their economic assets—into chains of creditors and debtors, which are only barely holding together within an overarching context of failure.

Keywords: fortune, future, hope, Mongolia, post-socialism, presentism, socio-economic networks

In 2004, there were supposedly only two Cadillacs in Mongolia. One of them—a black and beautiful, if somewhat battered, 1970s model with arching curves and white leather interior—belonged to Hamid. Born in the then Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, and with a colorful career behind him, including a spell as an oil engineer in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Hamid had arrived in Ulaanbaatar in the early 1990s for business purposes and ended up settling down there. When I first met him through a common friend in 1998, he gave the impression of someone who refused to give up. Due to a number of ill-fated trading adventures, Hamid and his girlfriend were living in poor and uncertain conditions, crashing at the homes of friends (or, rather, at the homes of their friends' parents, for few young people owned a place, even if they were well into their thirties), while spending the day relentlessly pursuing new business opportunities or chasing after people who owed Hamid money.

The Cadillac itself was part of an informal socio-economic network, spread out among friends, relatives, and acquaintances, of the sort that has become so



prevalent in Mongolia following the collapse of state socialism in 1990 (Pedersen 2007; Sneath 1993). The car had first been given to Hamid as collateral for a large sum of US money owed to him by one of his acquaintances, who had asked for a loan to open a small restaurant selling Uzbek-style *shashlik* (kebab) on of Ulaanbaatar's busy shopping streets. Unfortunately, the *shashlik* adventure turned out to be unsuccessful, and all the money was lost. So when I met Hamid in 2004, he had become stuck with the Cadillac. And when I say 'stuck', this should be understood quite literally, for the car was not complete: it was missing some vital parts of the engine that the unfortunate Uzbek restaurant owner had originally given as collateral to another of his creditors. Since Hamid had not been able to raise enough cash to retrieve the necessary engine parts, he had, in fact, never used the Cadillac during the several years it had been in his possession. Instead, it was being stored on the gritty premises of a used car salesman somewhere in Ulaanbaatar's industrial wasteland. On Sundays, Hamid would regularly invite his friends for an excursion, a sort of urban picnic, which would involve dusting, washing, cleaning, and polishing the car while expressing, with never wavering enthusiasm, hopes of future prosperity and dreams of beautiful women galore.

The case of Hamid and his friends is far from unique. Around the turn of the millennium, when most of the events described here took place, most people in in post-socialist Mongolia could not be sure that they would have a job the next day. They had no idea what their salary would allow them to buy a year from now or, indeed, whether their meager savings would be available the next day. And while the hardships of the so-called half-Russians (mixed Mongolians and Russians), including several of Hamid's friends, are for various reasons particularly profound (Pedersen and Højer 2008), the life of many Ulaanbaatar citizens in the post-socialist 'age of the market' (*zah zeeliin üye*) involves a daily scramble to secure food, water, and fuel (Bruun and Odgaard 1996; Rossabi 2005).

All this sounds very familiar to the student of the post-socialist and indeed post-colonial world, but only up to a point. For instead of expressing the pervasive uncertainty reported from so many post-socialist contexts (Buyandelger 2007; Lindquist 2006; Nazpary 2002), Hamid and his friends come across as surprisingly hopeful. They are, in Zigon's (2009: 261) words, "very interesting if not a bit over optimistic." Their repeated experiences of failure—of lucky days turning sour, of loans to trustworthy people that are never repaid—does not make them reach what at first glance is the only logical conclusion, namely, that there is nothing they can do about this state of affairs (short of bringing about radical political change). Far from accepting that the best they can aim for is to muddle pragmatically through the hardships of the so-called transition from state socialism to market capitalism or to indulge fatalistically in passive daydreaming of a better life, my friends continue to act as if tomorrow will be a better day by stubbornly making new debts and entering into new trading adventures.

It is against this backdrop of apparently irrational optimism that local concepts of hope (*naidah*)—as opposed to, say, fortune (*hishig*)—take center stage in the present article. As I intend to show, for Hamid and his friends, hope thus amounts

to a distinct form of work (*ajil*) in its own right. In order to make this argument, I shall bring together anthropological writings on people who ‘live for the moment’ (Bourdieu 2000; Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999) and recent publications on hope and the future as objects of anthropological analysis (Hodges 2008; Miyazaki 2004, 2006; Zigon 2009). But first, let me offer an example of this apparently irrational optimism by recalling a series of lucky—and eventually not so lucky—events that took place in the course of a single day that I spent in the Cadillac together with Hamid and his (mostly male) friends during the summer of 2005.¹ As we are about to see, what transpired that day in and around the car may be boiled down to a key activity: hope as a distinct form of work.

A Day in the Cadillac

As Hamid, Kolya, Andrei, and Erdenbold met that Tuesday morning, there was a sense that this was going to be a special—even a lucky—day. For one thing, there was a feeling in the air that Erdenbold would finally manage to retrieve the large sum of money owed to him by a wealthy Ulaanbaatar businessman. This expectation was the result of a series of promising verdicts reached by a Buddhist diviner (*zurhaich*), whom Erdenbold had consulted the previous day. Based on well-established astrological techniques, the *zurhaich* had ‘calculated’ Erdenbold’s ‘fate’ (*huv’ n’ zayag tootsohdoo*) and predicted that, on this particular day, he stood a good chance of getting his money back as his ‘luck’ (*hiimor*) and ‘magnificence’ (*süld*) were both at exceptionally high levels. As I have explained in more detail elsewhere (Pedersen and Højer 2008), *süld* denotes a relative, rather than an absolute, property of the self. Instead of being something that one either has or does not have, it is a proportional measure of one’s agency, which vibrates with varying intensity over time. The same goes for *hiimor*, which, although often translated as ‘luck’, is considered by my Ulaanbaatar friends to be synonymous with *süld*.

Another, more prosaic reason that this was likely to be a ‘good day’ (*sain ödör*) was that Hamid had that very morning pulled some strings with some so-called bosses and other influential people in Ulaanbaatar’s shady market for private loans and security services (in order to apply new pressure on his own debtors) and had thus secured funds to obtain the missing engine parts. Suddenly, for the first time in years, the Cadillac was working, and the five of us set out on a journey through Ulaanbaatar and its suburbs that was to last well into the night.

Although everyone was in high spirits, and although Hamid made it clear that the many treats and pleasures of the coming hours were to be incurred at his expense alone, this was by no means considered to be a frivolous event, like the aforementioned Sunday outings. On the contrary, there was a sense that, by combining our respective *süld* and *hiimor* into a common pool, we were about to accomplish a day of hard but also profitable work (*ajil*). The following 10 hours were spent driving around the city of Ulaanbaatar, interspersed with numerous stops of varying length and purpose, typically, to meet with someone who was

supposed to be there and whose help, services, or money was required. I often found myself seated alone with Andrei in the back of the car, while Kolya and Hamid were outside ‘working’ (*ajil hiideh*), laughing and swearing into their fancy cell phones. Sometimes, a car would materialize as the outcome of these conversations—a vehicle that typically held a new group of friends, another assemblage of ‘souls’ and ‘luck’ as well as a different constellation of expectations and hopes. On these occasions, countless cigarettes and more than a few beers were consumed in a mock-serious but seldom tense atmosphere while the two sides complained about their ‘businesses’, trying to extract money and favors from one another or, alternatively, making joint plans about how to make money out of what, from my point of view, seemed to be nothing. On this and all other days, that is what they were hoping for: the magical manifestation of ‘profit’ (*ashig*) out of half-broken chains of persons that did not, from an outside perspective, contain much potential for new economic value.

The bulk of the day was spent visiting a series of bars, cafés, and restaurants in pursuit of Erdenbold’s rich debtor, who controls a large amount of real estate in the city. However, despite the fact that a considerable amount of time was spent tracking the man down, we never managed to locate his whereabouts. The closest Erdenbold got was a phone conversation with him, which only confirmed our suspicions that he was deliberately withholding the money. As he lowered the cell phone from his ear, Erdenbold mumbled: “This guy has no intention whatsoever of returning the money. But he cannot tell me this. If he simply were to say no, then he knows I would begin using other means to put maximum pressure on him. This is why he keeps saying to me ‘I will give the money back to you, I will.’ He is just making excuses. ‘Come again tomorrow,’ he says, and then disappears so I can’t find him for weeks.”

The thing to notice from this all-too-common story is that although the game of hide-and-seek had at this point been taking place for weeks, Erdenbold’s expectations about getting his money back did not appear to have decreased at all. Throughout that day, as well as on the several other occasions that I spoke to him about the affair, he expressed utter conviction that “one day the loan will be returned”—even as he was being presented with what seemed to be mounting evidence to the contrary. What *was* subject to constant change, however, was his idea of how he was going to get the money back, as if one certainty about the future could simply be substituted with a new such certainty, rather than (as one might expect) each failure leading to more uncertainty up to a tipping point where hope reverses into hopelessness.

At some point around sunset, things took an unfortunate turn. It was not just that Erdenbold was finally confirmed in his suspicions that this was, sadly, not turning out to be as ‘good’ (*sain*) a day as originally predicted. Paradoxically, this confirmation was made by the same *zurhaich*, who, in response to Erdenbold’s desperate phone calls, performed yet another divination on his behalf that revealed numerous new ‘obstacles’ (*saadtai*) in relation to retrieving his money. While the *zurhaich* herself did not find it necessary to answer my questions as to why her first predictions had proved wrong when I confronted her with them some days later, Erdenbold himself was happy to do so.

“Even the best diviners can only be about 80 percent right,” he explained, as the five of us sat down at the usual table in the Russian bar, “and I want you to know that this diviner is one of the best ones I have ever come across!”

The newly found obstacles identified by the diviner marked the beginning of a series of setbacks that reached their culmination at some late hour during the same night. Hamid’s financial situation had deteriorated to a point where it became increasingly obvious that his Cadillac was not going to remain a fully functioning vehicle for much longer. Indeed, already by the next morning, he and his wife found themselves so haunted by their own half-broken promises to creditors that they were forced to give away parts of the Cadillac’s engine as collateral for an outstanding loan of their own, whose repayment was also long overdue. And thus ended the day in the Cadillac, which, in spite of all the events that had made it a memorable day for me, had not been very different from most other days in my friends’ lives.

Hope as the Poor Man’s Fortune

How are we to analyze the ‘economy of luck’ (to borrow the term coined by the editors of these special issues) depicted above? To begin with, it may be noted that, unlike many rural Mongolian contexts (Empson 2011), the concept of fortune (*hishig*) does not loom large in my urban friends’ lives. In that sense, the case of Hamid and the others may be seen as an illustration of what happens when Inner Asian notions of fortune and luck are severed from their ‘traditional’ rural nomadic context, where these and other ‘metaphysical’ concepts of the person (Humphrey and Urgunge 1996) are still remarkably intact and, it seems, at least relatively stable over time. Unlike, for example, northern Mongolia’s Darhads, with whom I have worked extensively (Pedersen 2011), my Ulaanbaatar friends do not have recourse to any elaborate Buddhist or, for that matter, shamanic cosmological forms through which ‘portions’ (*huv*) of fortune may be distributed among them by means of a shared social mathematics.

So, while many people in urban (and indeed rural) Mongolia probably do not subscribe to any singular economy of fortune, it is fair to assume that my Ulaanbaatar friends think of their own and other’s actions as taking place against a particularly inchoate cosmological framework. As we saw in the story above, my friends, who are forced to construct their cosmologies out of scattered phone calls to various occult specialists, spend a tremendous amount of energy trying to figure out what kinds of invisible metaphysical capacities (*süld*, *hiimor*, etc.) they might be imbued with and what the relative strength of these capacities might be vis-à-vis those of other people. As the *zurhaich* later explained, this was essentially what went wrong for Erdenbold (and Hamid) that Tuesday in the Cadillac. Erdenbold started out the day with his *hiimor* and *süld* at their peak, and, as the hours ticked away, these two relative metaphysical properties of his self gradually diminished in intensity—possibly as a result of having been repeatedly put in contact with, and therefore in comparison to, the *hiimor* and *süld* of the powerful tycoon.

Thus, my friends' socio-economic activities are also imbued with a social mathematics. However, unlike what seems to be the case for the economy of fortune found in some rural contexts, this urban economy of hope does not require any pre-existing cosmology to work. As a poor man's fortune, hope is what people do when they have no firm ground, in the form of a stable economic, religious, or political cosmos, on which to build their ideas of the future. The reason why the concept of hope (*naidah*)—as opposed to the concept of fortune (*hishig*)—acquires a key role among my friends, therefore, is that it is during moments of hope, and during these moments only, that they are seen (by themselves as well as by other people) as whole persons, not unlike the way in which the Cadillac was rendered complete only on the particular day recalled above.

As I shall show in what remains of this article, we may thus think of hope as a prospective momentum or temporal attitude that gathers into fragile assemblages otherwise heterogeneous entities, dimensions, and affects pertaining to the post-socialist city. For my Ulaanbaatar friends—and it is safe to assume for many other dispossessed young people in urban Mongolia—it is the shared activity of hope (*naidah*) that momentarily calibrates otherwise disparate realms and scales of their lives by cutting overstretched socio-economic networks down to size. During the brief but recurring moments when everything adds up (as when, on that morning, all the parts of the Cadillac were put together to make a functioning car), it is the 'work of hope' (as I shall call it) that enables people to calibrate their dispersed inner capacities (souls, life forces, and luck) with their equally dispersed outer capacities (loans, credits, and collateral).

Living for the Moment

The case of Hamid and his friends calls to mind a number of anthropological studies on marginal people who have what seems to be a presentist and fatalist attitude toward life. James Woodburn (1988), Michael Stewart (1997), and Pierre Bourdieu (2000) have each explored how very different marginal groups (African hunter-gatherers, Hungarian Gypsies, and unemployed North African youth) adopt a strikingly similar presentist (some might say fatalist) attitude that sets them apart from the dominant groups surrounding them. Let me now take a closer look at Bourdieu's discussion of dispossessed people "with no future" (2000: 226), as this will serve as a good starting point for a theorization of the work of hope in urban Mongolia.

According to Bourdieu (2000: 221), it is possible to identify a certain social "category, that of the subproletarians, which [shows] what happens when life is turned into 'a game of chance.'" What is so special about such people is that they do not obey the practical sense of time (*illusio*), which, for Bourdieu, characterizes everyone else (barring, perhaps, scientists, whom he sees as trapped within an atemporal bubble). Whereas other agents "temporalize themselves" in the social world and thus gain the "capacity to anticipate, in the practical mode, forth-comings that present themselves on the structure of the game," the dispossessed North African youth of Paris's *banlieus* have

been invested with the disposition to see objective potentialities in the present structure (ibid.: 213). Essentially, Bourdieu's point seems to be that if only these marginal peoples were made conscious of the illusionary nature of their fatalist presentism, they would be liberated from its oppressive yoke and would be placed in a position where they could start determining their own lives. As he puts it (ibid.: 221):

Just as ... the annihilation of chances associated with crisis situations leads to the collapse of psychological defences, so here it leads to a kind of generalized and lasting disorganization of behaviour and thought linked to the disappearance of any coherent vision of the future ... The often disorganized and even incoherent behaviours ... by these people without a future, living at the mercy of what each day brings and condemned to oscillate between fantasy and surrender, between flight into the imaginary and fatalistic surrender to the verdicts of the given, are evidence that, below a certain threshold of objective chances, the strategic disposition itself, which presupposes practical reference to a forthcoming ... cannot be constituted.

There is little doubt about how Bourdieu would have responded to the story concerning Hamid and the others. For Bourdieu, what took place that day in the Cadillac would have been nothing less than a suspension of the practical sense by which ordinary people create realistic prospects about the future by strategically hedging their 'objective chances'. Instead of making 'strategic dispositions' in relation to the distribution of possibilities in post-socialist society, my friends conjured up ever more unrealistic hopes based on the 'fantasies' of millenarian capitalism. Seen in this way, Hamid's dogged optimism emerges as a phantasmic escape from the realities of post-socialist transition. During that day in the Cadillac, as on many other days, Hamid acted "as if, when nothing was possible, everything became possible, as if all discourses about the future—prophecies, divinations, predictions, millenarian announcements—had no other purpose than to fill what is no doubt one of the most painful of wants: the lack of a future" (Bourdieu 2000: 226).

Yet as much as the lives of my Ulaanbaatar friends at first glance seem to correspond to this gloomy picture, there is also something that does not add up. For one thing, it was not exactly the case that 'nothing was possible' for Hamid and the others: there were in fact plenty of low-paid jobs available in Ulaanbaatar around the turn of the millennium, however unattractive these may have been. The fact is that there were (and are) 'real demands' for unemployed young men in urban Mongolia; it is only that my friends did (and do) not want to accept that these (admittedly limited) 'objective chances' were their only 'subjective chances'. More generally, it seems to me that—no matter how controversial this may sound, being reminiscent of Oscar Lewis's (1968) much-criticized 'culture of poverty' thesis—the possibility has to be considered that my Ulaanbaatar friends do not want to be practical, or rather, that they do not want to be practical in the *practice-theoretical* sense. Could not the apparently irrational optimism of my friends hinge on a different perception of time, whereby the feeling that everything is possible does not result from a misconceived assessment of one's

objective potentials, but is instead based on a deliberate and entirely logical temporal orientation that involves a qualitatively different pragmatics than the one theorized by Bourdieu?

According to the editors of the excellent but overlooked collection *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People Who Live for the Moment* (Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999), a category of people may be identified across very different social and cultural contexts who “share the effort to live in the present, with little thought for the future and little interest in the past” (ibid.: 2). But precisely what does living ‘in the present’ mean? For Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart, “the present ... refer[s] very generally both to the short term ... and to a ritual transcendental moment outside durational time altogether ... that celebrate[s] the evanescent nature of accomplishments” (ibid.). Here, then, the presentist attitude characteristic of many marginal peoples is not the product of a suppressed practical sense (as Bourdieu would have it). Instead, ‘living for the present’—or ‘living for the moment’, as Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart also call it—is a distinct (cultural) temporal attitude. By reversing Bloch’s (1977) ritual model, so to speak, it renders ‘duration’ (the short term) into a transcendent value. Thus, “[t]he pleasure of the markets in Hungary, Madagascar, London, and Poland, and of moving through the town in Brazil, the elevated spirits of Greek and Gypsy conviviality, and the happiness of the Huaorani siesta are all existential properties of the present. This achievement depends on displacing the present from its organic link to past and future within durational time. Through disconnecting the short from the long term, an ‘atemporal’ present is constructed” (Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999: 21).

Valuable as it is, Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart’s theory of presentism suffers from an ambiguous use of temporal concepts, which holds back a full realization of the novelty of their argument. For one thing, and as already alluded to above, they appear to conflate ‘living in the present’ with ‘living for the moment’. Of course, nothing really forces them to do otherwise, but this seems to be a lost opportunity for establishing a more fine-tuned conceptual distinction between what might be different forms or modalities of presentism. For another thing, Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart use the concept of duration to denote a linear progression of time (see also Gell 1992). While there is again nothing inherently wrong with doing so, it flies in the face of the concept of *la durée* (usually translated into English as ‘duration’) developed by Henri Bergson ([1908] 1990) and later expanded by Gilles Deleuze (1990, 1994). This is not the place to enter into a lengthy discussion of this concept and the temporal ontology built into it (see Ansell Pearson 1999; Grosz 1999), let alone its possible anthropological purchase (see Gell 1992; Hodges 2008; Nielsen 2011; Pedersen and Nielsen, forthcoming), but note that, in this non-chronological or un-linear (i.e., more than linear) ontology of time, what occurs in ‘the moment’ is not restricted to what occurs in ‘the present’, as Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart seem to imply. Rather, each moment (insofar as it contains all pasts and all futures as virtual potentialities) will always overflow the present by comprising and at times exposing “cracks” that “com[e] from the future as a sign of the future” (Ansell Pearson 1999: 120).

To better understand how and why each moment can contain “the thought of the future” (Deleuze 1994: 8) by transcending the present as a “sign which creates itself out of the future” (Maurer 2002: 18, citing Brian Rotman), it must be remembered that *la durée* is defined, not as an external spatio-temporal container within which events chronologically happen (i.e., as linear time), but as a dynamic field of potential relations without beginning or end, from which the present is actualized, or, as Hodges (2008) expressed it, pumped out in the manner of a pulsating heart. This is why, according to Rebecca Coleman (2008: 94), “[a]t the centre of [Bergson’s model] of remembering is ... the necessity for the past to be entered or ‘jumped’ into. For a particular memory to be sought, ‘the past’ must be jumped into. To re-experience the past ... is not to remain in the present and recollect or recount the past but to ‘leap’ into the past, to remember the past and experience its intensive temporality again.”

Essentially, what I am suggesting here is that a similar temporal ‘jumping’ or ‘trampolining’ (Pedersen 2007) may be identified in Ulaanbaatar, but with respect to the future. Like a sort of urban trampoliner, Hamid is constantly leaping into new futures, ‘pre-experiencing’ what has not yet happened (and will per definition never happen). Crucially, in doing so, he does not form any clear image or elaborate map of this future, for how can he (or anyone else) form an image of the unknown? Clearly, a ‘proper’ durational future cannot be planned or anticipated, for planning and anticipation are properties of an extensive temporal ontology, which takes the future to be an intentional protension (in its phenomenological, Husserlian sense) of the present into a thinkable forthcoming, delineating a processual field of dynamic possibilities with associated tactics and strategies, in Bourdieu’s sense.² So, to apply Elizabeth Grosz’s (1999: 28) phrasing in this context, Hamid “refuses to tie [the future] to the realization of possibilities (the following of a plan), linking it instead to the unpredictable, uncertain actualization of virtualities ... [which] proceeds not by continuous growth, smooth unfolding, or accretion, but through division, bifurcation, dissociation ... through sudden and unexpected change or eruption.” Indeed, as Grosz (*ibid.*: 26–27) further elaborates on the problem of the possible:

The possible is both more and less than the real. It is more, insofar as the real selects from a number of coexisting possibles, limiting their ramifying effects. But it is also less, insofar as the possible is the real minus existence ... By contrast, the virtual cannot be opposed to the real: it is real. It is through its reality that existence is produced. Instead of an impoverished real (the possible), the virtual can be considered more a superabundant real that induces actualization ... [W]hile the possible is regarded as a mode of anticipatory resemblance of the real, the virtual never resembles the real that it actualizes ... It is only actualization that engenders the new.

Living for the moment, I therefore suggest, is not necessarily the same as living in the present “with little thought for the future and little interest in the past” (Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999: 2). For where the latter characterization may possibly be ascribed to the most deprived inhabitants of certain cities in sub-Saharan Africa, America, and Europe, it does not seem to apply

when it comes to marginal peoples like my Ulaanbaatar friends, for whom the more a person is able to live for each and every moment, the more he or she is also able to escape from the present in its presentist, fatalist, and millenarian sense. In fact, I would suggest that, far from representing a sort of atemporal negation of time (as the editors of *Lilies of the Field* would have it), the apparent presentism that is so celebrated by different marginal peoples across the world may often be described instead as a hyper-temporal or multi-temporal attitude. Rather than demonstrating a lack of interest in the future, living for the moment involves an *exalted* awareness of the virtual potentials in the present—the tiny but innumerable cracks through which the promise of another world shines.

The Work of Hope

This brings us back to the theme of hope—in particular, its more ‘unrealistic’ versions, lamented by Bourdieu and many others. According to Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004, 2006), who, along with Vincent Crapanzano (2003), has spearheaded the emerging anthropology of hope, hope is essentially a modality, or more precisely a method, of knowledge. Discussing the aspirations of Tada, a senior Japanese trader of financial securities, in terms of his prospects for future retirement, Miyazaki makes a subtle but important theoretical move. Instead of focusing his attention on the inevitable gaps between Tada’s plans for the future and what actually happens, Miyazaki (2006: 157) explores how Tada’s failed aspirations come to have real effects on his and his colleagues’ lives. Here, hope is not a practical sensibility that produces (more or less realistic) scenarios of the future by “accumulat[ing] multiple instances of the present” (ibid.), as in Bourdieu’s theory of protension as well as many anthropological analyses of time management and planning (Gell 1992). Instead, hope is “a method of radical temporal reorientation of knowledge” (Miyazaki 2004: 5), which, so to speak, reverses the normal order between what comes before and what comes after by appropriating the future as a “model for actions in a present moment” (Miyazaki 2006: 157).

This, I suggest, is precisely what Hamid and the others were doing that day in the Cadillac—they were practicing hope. More precisely, the stubborn optimism of my friends, and their seemingly presentist attitude toward life more generally, can be seen as a distinctly Mongolian (or perhaps distinctly post-socialist) variation of the method of hope theorized by Miyazaki. Inspired, on the one hand, by Miyazaki’s account of hope and, on the other, by the Bergsonian/Deleuzian concept of durational time, I thus suggest that hope works by continually invoking “after-effect[s] of the future in the present” (Cooper 1998: 116). If, within the non-chronological temporal ontology of *la durée*, “what comes after [is] also the condition under which anything can come to be in the first place” (ibid.), and if, by tapping into the unique temporal attitude known as hope, one is made able to “reimagin[e] the present from the perspective of the end” (Miyazaki 2006: 157), the apparently irrational optimism of my friends emerges as quite logical, after all. Instead of amounting to one mistaken attempt at anticipating the future

after another, with no lessons learned, the repeated failure of things to work out as planned for my Ulaanbaatar friends emerges as the result of a sustained and quite sensible temporal orientation and social practice, which I call the work of hope. In this model, planning does not necessarily involve the formulation of realizable goals subject to gradual modification in accordance to what happens along the path toward their fulfillment. Rather, plans amount to deliberately unrealizable endpoints whose purpose is the (re)production of social momentum as such. Indeed, it would be quite unrealistic, if not downright irrational, for Hamid and his friends to try to be practical in the practice-theoretical sense. For were they to acquire ‘realistic hopes’ by translating their ‘wishful thinking’ into ‘credible thoughts’ (Appadurai 2004), they would curtail the work of hope’s capacity for exposing the virtual potentials of the moment and would risk being imprisoned by the present.

What is the ethnographic basis of this theory of hope? Wherein does the ‘work’ of my friends’ hope lie? We may broadly distinguish between two different conceptions of hope among my Ulaanbaatar friends and very possibly in other Mongolian contexts as well: one can be associated with Kolya, Hamid, and Erdenbold in the above story, and the other may be associated with his brother Andrei (and, indeed, with myself). The latter concept of hope is captured by the term *mörööldöl*, which denotes daydreams that have no real stake in the world in the sense that they are not necessarily shared with anyone and therefore cannot be contested by others. This passive, introspective, and essentially individualistic form of hope is what Andrei and (at times) I were indulging in on the backseat of the Cadillac, while the others were busy ‘working’—essentially, shouting into their cell phones or meeting with people outside the car. As hinted at earlier, this ‘work’ is closely associated with another concept of hope, namely, the more active, intersubjective, and therefore inherently social variety of hope that is often referred to as *naidah*.³ In this other form—which was practiced by Erdenbold in his relentless pursuit of the tycoon creditor and other business opportunities—hope always involves some sort of action in the world. This action invariably is undertaken with—and through—other people, and in that sense it may be described as irreducibly social (indeed, *naidah* may also be translated as ‘to rely on’, just as the nouns *naidlaga* and *naidvar* mean ‘trust’ and ‘confidence’, respectively). This, however, does not imply that hope is automatically a part of the world. Rather, hope (in the form of *naidah*, at least) clearly is something that must continually be put into the world through a concerted and collective effort.

Here, a subtle but significant difference seems to exist between Miyazaki’s account of hope and mine, one that may arise from our diverging ethnographic material. For Miyazaki and his interlocutor, the Tokyo financier Tada, hope seems to be a cognitive and thus individual activity. In Tada’s case, hope amounts to a particular and novel epistemological practice that involves transforming in a new way the knowledge that a person has in one’s head with respect to the future.⁴ Conversely, among my Mongolian friends, epistemological questions in their pursuit of hope do not rank above other questions: those involving profit, and even more frequently women, are just as important. Nor

is hope a private cognitive activity for the people of Ulaanbaatar, at least, not in their variety of *naidah*. For them, *naidah* seems to be a vital property—a necessary substance, even—of the world, one that for the same reason is too important to be tucked away inside the insulated and introspective dreamscapes of a single, individual mind.

So when I say that hope amounts to a kind of work in Ulaanbaatar, it is not meant just as a good metaphor to describe the presentist attitude of my friends. On the contrary, I argue that work is what hope *is* in Ulaanbaatar—a distinct and quite respectable form of labor. The work of *naidah*, due to its ongoing creation of social trust, is necessary for the reproduction of socio-economic networks in post-socialist Mongolia. For Hamid and his friends, then, to work really is to hope—or, we could say, to hope really is to work—for only through the collective activity of *naidah* is it at all possible to maintain the idea (or the illusion, as some might suggest) that people in the city are connected and trust one other. In that sense, we may say that the surplus produced by hope is the continual existence of the social network as such. Without hope, it would not be possible to imagine a chain of friends and business partners from which one might, on a ‘good day’, carve out a ‘profit’. Yet, as I have demonstrated, such chains exist predominantly as dormant futures. They have no reality outside sudden instances of hope, as we experienced that day in the Cadillac—when everything for a moment was felt to add up.

Conclusion

A famous short story by the Danish Nobel laureate Karen Blixen tells about a lady, who, finding herself unable to sleep one night, decides to take a stroll in the moonlit gardens of her estate. Following a series of seemingly random stops at different places in the gardens—stopping points that are selected according to no overarching plan but instead reflect the whimsical sensibilities of the woman at this stage of her life—she returns to the empty house. At this point, a sudden inclination induces her to sit down at the dressing table and draw a map of her recent journey, and, behold—out of a seemingly random network of points emerges the noble shape of a stork. The lady’s nocturnal journey—and, by implication, her life—had meaning after all.

In recounting this well-known (some might say exemplary) existentialist tale, I do not intend to posit an analogy to my own account of Hamid and his friends; instead, I wish to highlight what seems to be the profound difference between these two temporal orientations. Although the day that I spent in the Cadillac with my friends also came across as a string of unconnected events, with its random stops, sudden beginnings, and unexpected turns, as well as rash decisions, things did *not* turn out to be meaningful in the end. Instead of being established retrospectively, as in Blixen’s reassuring moral, meaning was here pushed ahead (without ever quite being established) by a future-oriented attitude, which, as we have seen, can be understood as a continual colonization and expansion of the present by the moment. By engaging with events of

the future as if they have already happened, my friends are firmly committed to what is yet to come. However, this is an ‘impossible’ (unrealizable) future that is subject to inherent destruction, transformation, and renewal; it is not, as the day in the Cadillac illustrated, a purported ‘practical logic’ by which Hamid and his friends projected realistic protentions from the present.

Because it looks so circumstantial, accidental, and even irrational, the defiant optimism of my Ulaanbaatar friends thus resists conventional social analysis (as represented, for instance, by the work of Bourdieu). The problem is not only that Hamid and the others seem to jump between new ideas and projects, as opposed to pursuing long-term strategic plans, or at least a coherent series of tactical moves. It is also that all sorts of disparate events and unconnected circumstances render their lives intrinsically irregular. Yet, and crucially, precisely because of this context of radical change, the work of hope emerges as a sensible response to the challenges of the post-socialist ‘age of the market’. It allows my friends to deal with novelty, not by trying to anticipate, predict, and neutralize it, but by accepting the inherently unpredictable nature of the transition from socialism to capitalism via a systematic unwillingness to plan, which calls to mind the proclivity of hunter-gatherers and other marginal peoples to engage in living for the moment (Pedersen and Højer 2008).

This could explain why people like Hamid never give up, despite the fact that they seem to be going from one failure to the next. Instead of being overwhelmed by the uncertainties of living in a post-socialist society—an experience that could easily develop into a violent combination of passive resignation and aggressive nostalgia, or, perhaps, into a cynical attitude of reckless fatalism—the work of hope makes my friends ‘radically certain’ about what is to come next. Crucially, this radical certainty—which, it should be emphasized, has nothing to do with an ability to predict the future, and everything to do with the ability to deliberately abstain from even trying to do so—does not involve plotting a possible path from the present into the future, for there is no terrain, not even an imagined one, on which to conduct any such ‘social navigation’ (Vigh 2006). Nor is hope here a question of living in the present, without any thought of either the future or the past, in Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart’s sense. Far from being engaged in a fatalistic celebration of absolute chance, as Bourdieu would have it, or, for that matter, a ritualized negation of time, as suggested by the authors of *Lilies of the Field*, my Ulaanbaatar friends are trampolining from one moment to the next, erratically jumping into each situation from an unknown vantage that lies ahead of them and that always disappears at the moment of takeoff. Instead of neurotically trying to plan ahead or, conversely, breezily taking things as they come, Hamid and the others are, so to speak, falling into the present from a deferred future, like raindrops from a clear sky.

Acknowledgments

Fieldwork in Ulaanbaatar was conducted during the summers of 1995, 1996, and 1998, as well as from January to February 2001, June to August 2003, February to October 2004, and June to September 2009. I thank the Danish Research Council of the Humanities and the Danish Research Council of Social Sciences for funding this research. This article has benefited greatly from the questions and comments received at presentations of previous versions at the “Economies of Fortune and Luck” conference at King’s College, Cambridge; the Department of Anthropology at Cornell University; the Harriman Institute at Columbia University; the Department of Anthropology at Brunel University; and the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. I also thank Martin Holbraad, Inge Langkilde Larsen, Jesper Poulsen-Hansen, Stine Krøyer, Mette My Madsen, Ida Sofie Matzen, Morten Nielsen, David Sausdal, Henrik Vigh, and the students of my Anthropology of the Future and Advanced Anthropological Theory classes in the Department of Anthropology at Copenhagen University for their important inputs. Finally, I would like to thank the editors of this issue as well as two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful advice and constructive suggestions.

Morten Axel Pedersen is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen. His publications include the recent monograph *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia* (2011), and he has co-edited *Inner Asian Perspectivism* (a special issue of the journal *Inner Asia*, 2007), *Technologies of the Imagination* (a special issue of the journal *Ethnos*, 2009), and *Comparative Relativism* (a special issue of the journal *Common Knowledge*, 2011). He is also the co-editor, with Martin Holbraad, of a forthcoming title in the Routledge Studies in Anthropology series, *Times of Security: Ethnographies of Fear, Protest, and the Future* (2013).

Notes

1. While the present article has a significant male bias, many of the social, cultural, and economic forms that are described could also be found among female representatives of Mongolia’s ‘lost generation’ around the turn of the millennium (Empson 2006; Pedersen 2006, 2007).
2. As Hodges (2008) points out, many of the concepts used by anthropologists to denote temporal phenomena and dynamics—such as the concept of ‘process’—are deeply undertheorized and, for the same reason, liable to critique and improvement. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the problems with using terms such as ‘map’ and ‘navigation’ when it comes to describing people’s ideas about and engagements with the future is that “metaphor[s] based on space” are used “to explain a process that takes place in time” (Maurer 2002: 27, citing Joan Robinson).
3. To some degree, this theorization of hope is reminiscent of Zigon’s (2009) recent account of hope among urban Russian artists, which also distinguishes between two forms of

hope—one that is predominantly passive and individual, and another that is more active and social. On the one hand, hope, according to Zigon, is thus “an existential stance of being-in-the-world. In this way hope can be thought of as the temporal structure of the background attitude that allows one to keep going or persevere through one’s life. This aspect of hope can be seen as similar to what is often characterized as the passive nature of hope. On the other hand, hope is the temporal orientation of conscious and intentional action in ... those moments when social and moral life is reflectively and consciously called into question and posed as a problem. This aspect of hope is similar to what is often called the active nature of hope” (ibid.: 258).

4. This practice involving hope seems to be different in Miyazaki’s other field site of Fiji (see Miyazaki 2004).

References

- Ansell Pearson, Keith. 1999. *Geminal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze*. London: Routledge.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 2004. “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition.” Pp. 59–84 in *Culture and Public Action*, ed. Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bergson, Henri. [1908] 1990. *Matter and Memory*. 5th ed. Trans. Nancy M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: Zone Books.
- Bloch, Maurice. 1977. “The Past and the Present in the Present.” *Man* (n.s.) 12, no. 2: 278–292.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Trans. Richard Nice. London: Polity Press.
- Bruun, Ole, and Ole Odgaard, eds. 1996. *Mongolia in Transition: Old Patterns, New Challenges*. Surrey: Curzon.
- Buyandelger, Manduhai. 2007. “Dealing with Uncertainty: Shamans, Marginal Capitalism, and the Remaking of History in Postsocialist Mongolia.” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1: 127–147.
- Coleman, Rebecca. 2008. “‘Things That Stay’: Feminist Theory, Duration and the Future.” *Time & Society* 17, no. 1: 85–102.
- Cooper, Robert. 1998. “Assemblage Notes.” Pp. 100–119 in *Organized Worlds: Explorations in Technology and Organization with Robert Cooper*, ed. Robert C. H. Chia. London: Routledge.
- Crapanzano, Vincent. 2003. “Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis.” *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 1: 3–32.
- Day, Sophie, Euthymios Papataxiarchis, and Michael Stewart, eds. 1999. *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People Who Live for the Moment*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1990. *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. London: Athlone Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. London: Athlone Press.
- Empson, Rebecca, ed. 2006. *Time, Causality and Prophecy in the Mongolian Cultural Region: Visions of the Future*. Kent: Global Oriental.
- Empson, Rebecca. 2011. *Harnessing Fortune: Personhood, Memory and Place in Mongolia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gell, Alfred. 1992. *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*. Oxford: Berg.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1999. “Thinking the New: Of Futures Yet Unthought.” Pp. 15–28 in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures*, ed. Elizabeth Grosz. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Hodges, Matt. 2008. “Rethinking Time’s Arrow: Bergson, Deleuze and the Anthropology of Time.” *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 4: 399–429.

- Lewis, Oscar. 1968. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*. 2nd ed. New York: Knopf.
- Lindquist, Galina. 2006. *Conjuring Hope: Healing and Magic in Contemporary Russia*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Maurer, Bill. 2002. "Repressed Futures: Financial Derivatives' Theological Unconscious." *Economy and Society* 31, no. 1: 15–36.
- Miyazaki, Hirokazu. 2004. *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Miyazaki, Hirokazu. 2006. "Economy of Dreams: Hope in Global Capitalism and Its Critiques." *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 2: 147–172.
- Nazpary, Joma. 2002. *Post-Soviet Chaos: Violence and Dispossession in Kazakhstan*. London: Pluto Press.
- Nielsen, Morten. 2011. "Futures Within: Reversible Time and House-Building in Maputo, Mozambique." *Anthropological Theory* 11, no. 4: 397–423.
- Pedersen, Morten A. 2006. "Where Is the Centre? The Spatial Distribution of Power in Post-socialist Rural Mongolia." Pp. 82–109 in *Mongolia from Country to City: Floating Boundaries, Pastoralism and City Life in the Mongol Lands*, ed. Ole Bruun and Li Narango. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.
- Pedersen, Morten A. 2007. "From 'Public' to 'Private' Markets in Postsocialist Mongolia." *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 25, no. 1: 64–71.
- Pedersen, Morten A. 2011. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Words and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Pedersen, Morten A., and Lars Højer. 2008. "Lost in Transition: Fuzzy Property and Leaky Selves in Ulaanbaatar." *Ethnos* 73, no. 1: 73–96. Special issue on "Crisis and Chronicity," ed. Henrik Vigh.
- Pedersen, Morten A., and Morten Nielsen. Forthcoming. "Trans-temporal Hinges: On Comparing Chinese Investments in Mozambique and Mongolia." *Social Analysis* 57, no. 1.
- Rossabi, Morris. 2005. *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sneath, David. 1993. "Social Relations, Networks and Social Organisation in Post-socialist Rural Mongolia." *Nomadic Peoples* 33: 193–207.
- Stewart, Michael. 1997. *The Time of the Gypsies*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Vigh, Henrik. 2006. *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Woodburn, James C. 1988. "African Hunter-Gatherer Organization: Is It Best Understood as a Product of Encapsulation?" Pp. 31–64 in *Hunters and Gatherers*. Vol. 1: *History, Evolution and Social Change*, ed. Tim Ingold, David Riches, and James Woodburn. Oxford: Berg.
- Zigon, Jarrett. 2009. "Hope Dies Last: Two Aspects of Hope in Contemporary Moscow." *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 3: 253–271.