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Renaissance Zones

experimenting with the intentional significance of the Damanhur community

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Introduction

This is a reflection on the experiment undertaken at Damanhur. Founded in 1977, Damanhur is an internationally renowned center for spiritual research. Situated in the Alpine foothills of northern Italy, it is a Federation of Communities and Regions (currently 44) with over 800 citizens, a social and political structure, a Constitution, 40 economic activities, its own currency, schools and university, and a network of 25,000 supporters worldwide.

The focus of this reflection is on the way in which Damanhur has chosen to make very extensive use of symbolism, notably embodied in the construction of a massive underground complex: the Temple of Mankind -- 4,000 cu. metres, carved by hand out of the rock on 5 levels, with 150 metres of corridors. The complex is rich in mosaic (350 sq. metres), glass, frescoes (400 sq. metres) and sculpture, with the largest tiffany stained glass dome in the world (100 sq. metres). In a historical period in which peoples and races are disappearing and humanity is losing its history and diversity, Damanhur has created a human group with its own artistic, philosophical and social expression -- and its own language [more].

In contrast to many spiritually inspired communities, members adopt the names of endangered species -- my guide was Anemone di Mare. The developing processes of the community are explored through a Game of Life. The community engages in experiments in time travel and has constructed time machines in its Temple. These unconventional emphases have attracted much attention from the Italian government, the Catholic Church, the media, and local authorities -- a tale beautifully recounted and documented by Jeff Merrifield (*Damanhur: the community they tried to brand a cult*, 1999) in the best tradition of appreciative inquiry.

The following reflection is inspired by the possibility of ways of thinking that are radically different from those considered both normal and necessary (or even obligatory) by mainstream thinkers and organizations. Unfortunately the latter have proven themselves totally incompetent in their efforts to manage the resources and challenges of the planet and its vulnerable populations -- other than to the advantage of certain elites. At the time of writing, as remarked by many, the war against Iraq is an exemplification of this -- and especially of a failure of imagination.

The question here is how any group is sustained in such an extraordinary alternative endeavour. Specifically the focus is on whether there is scope for time-based thinking that might prove to be a fruitful alternative to the illusions of space-based thinking. How might any initiative towards a "timeship" contrast with the heavy investment in "spaceship" design and construction -- and the escapist fantasies of travelling "elsewhere" in the galaxy away from the problems of the planet to claim further territory for the new American empire? Where is "elsewhen"?

More particularly the concern here is whether the epistemological framework required for the coherence of such a sustained endeavour might offer valuable insights to many who have been unable to benefit from the funds misused for space-based endeavours. The reflection must necessarily highlight the nature of the discontinuity at the interface between space-based thinking/action and time-based thinking/action -- as characterized by the seeming incomprehensibility of the latter. This incomprehensibility has as a consequence that those introduced to time-based thinking/action must pass through a number of levels of interpretation in order to adjust to a reality whose coherence derives from unfamiliar ways.

Conclusion

Does a timeship really fly? That would seem to depend on what "timeship", "really" and "fly" mean to you -- what "mean" means to you, and who you think "you" are? And perhaps also, why you want to know?

The concern of this paper is not whether the Damanhur beliefs about time travel are "true" for you. Arguments have been presented to demonstrate that "truth" may have other meanings -- and may be based on, or give rise to, other senses of coherence. What after all is to be understood of the truth of the 11-fold dimensionality of string space? It is not whether their belief is "true" but whether it "works" for them -- in ways from which others might benefit also. The counter-intuitive weirdness of superstring theory works well enough to attract research resources for 10,000 physicists!

What is to be made of the configurations of symbolic elements that are a key to the Damanhur time "technology"? How could they possibly "work"?

But then, a great many leading management consultants copyright their own configurations of concepts and models through which they interpret their world -- and offer training sessions at which their significance to more effective management is explained. How do recipients internalize those insights and apply them? Presumably they are believed to work, otherwise the consultants and their charts would not be viable -- although with the recent implication of major consultantcies in relationship to very severe corporate scandals, to what extent are their purported skills exercises in "smoke and mirrors"? Fads**** But the term "magic" is even used in phrases such as "management magic" [more; more]. To what do people resonate in the term "magic"? Can it be usefully described as a "transformational moment" -- as with a party that goes exceptionally well? What skills are brought to bear to ensure further, and more powerful, magical moments -- for the many rather than for the few?

Is the social construction of reality at Damanhur such as to engender vehicles that enable them to move between frameworks that they recognize? How is the question "what is the reality of such a vehicle?" to be asked and meaningfully answered.? How can Damanhur so successfully thrive despite arguments that these beliefs are meaningless (and even dangerous) examples of psyched-up self-referential thinking and groupthink? Is their "thrival" more preferable to some than the "survival" advocated for others with more "correct" perspectives? Does their approach engender and sustain a quality of life preferable to that of others?

The argument presented is that, metaphorically, the space-based assumptions of mainstream thinking have ensured that the spaceships remain effectively grounded. The possibility of a time-based emphasis has been explored inspired by the imaginative steps taken at Damanhur towards time travel. But of greater interest than this possibility is the manner in which semantic content can be symbolically encoded and embodied as a coherent whole to sustain such initiatives. It is the psycho-social operation of embodiment by a community that so strikingly contrasts with the bias towards monopolizing resources for the empowerment of spaceships of questionable design.

Damanhur has responded to the mnemonic challenge of associating the diverse cultural insights of humanity in a coherent whole to constitute a kind of semantic web through which time travel becomes a credible possibility -- to them. This embodied coherence is compared here to the elegance of spherically symmetrical organisms like *radiolaria*. Any place in the living structure is linked by a network of associative pathways to other semantic content expressed symbolically. Configured spherically these pathways reinforce one another and embody community insight -- keeping the centre empty. They are the pathways of the community's noosphere through which its insights variously flow.

The approach successfully taken at Damanhur to create a higher order of consensus, with high creative potential, suggests the need to

recognize and facilitate such esxperimental environments. It is proposed here that they should be named "Renaissance Zones" to contrast with the proprietary preoccupations of "science parks" and "free zones".

Why do you believe that you cannot travel in time?

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write,
but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."
Alvin Toffler

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