

Introduction

The Future Taken Seriously

Humans are unique in the realm of living beings in knowing there is a future. If people experience worry and hope, it is because they realize the future exists, that it can be better or worse, and that the outcome depends to some extent on them. But having this knowledge does not imply that they know what to do with it. People often repress their awareness of the future because thinking about it distorts the comfort of the now, which tends to be more powerful than the future because it is present and because it is certain. The future, on the other hand, must be imagined in advance and, for that very reason, is always uncertain. Getting along with the future is not an easy task, nor is it one in which instinct prevents us from blunders. That is why we so often have a poor relationship with the future and are either more fearful than we need to be or allow ourselves to hope against all evidence; we worry excessively or not enough; we fail to predict the future or to shape it as much as we are able.

Something similar happens to societies. They too need to develop the capacity to see beyond the present moment, and their ability to do so varies as well. Much of our discomfort and our limited collective rationality stems from the fact that democratic societies do not enjoy a good working relationship with the future. In the first place, this is because the whole political system and the culture in general are devoted to the immediate present and because our relationship with the collective future is not based on hope and planning, but on precaution and improvisation. The future became a part of our agenda in the 1970s, but less as a possibility to be shaped than as a problematic reality: limits to growth and dismal environmental

developments demanded attention, risk factors were weighed, the whole idea of progress was found to be in crisis. People tend to respond skeptically when they are pushed to achieve difficult, distant goals, and politicians make the expedient choice of allowing their constituents to take the lead in these matters. We react in numerous ways that place the future in social jeopardy, and we end up performing a true act of temporal expropriation against coming generations.

It is obvious that we are no longer in the era of triumphant modernity that disciplined the future through technological innovations, the methodical investigation of nature, and the codification of laws and bureaucratically organized institutions. At present, the techniques that were designed by modern societies to manage the future seem useless. It is not that the future used to be better, as Karl Valentin noted ironically, but it was certainly clearer. There are many factors explaining why the old certainties regarding the future have been lost. The experience of accelerated change creates discomfort, but greater discomfort stems from knowing that that very acceleration makes our capacity to meaningfully shape the future even more problematic. Our relationship with the future is now more complex, less naïve. A risk society needs other means of prediction to stop the future from slipping irremediably from our hands.

The goal of this book is to contribute to a new theory of the most salient aspects of social time: how does society relate to its future, and how does it predict, determine, and configure it? From there, we will draw a series of conclusions that will help us reassess how we conceive of and carry out political action. Evaluating the use that societies make of the future is key to developing a critical theory of society. All social theory today should be a theory of time, particularly of the way we employ the future, because our current political crisis corresponds to a crisis of the future and its growing indecipherability. The transformation that democratic societies require will come hand in hand with a willingness to consider the future as their most interesting sphere of influence. This will be true if we establish appropriate methods of freeing ourselves from the tyranny of the short term and open ourselves toward the more ambitious horizon of the long term. That was the task Max Weber assigned to politics: it must manage and take responsibility for the future. Doing so requires us to incorporate ways of thinking that allow for a reasonable consideration of the long term, beyond simple projections or implausible scenarios.

Ultimately, our current challenge is nothing less than a restructuring of time in an age of globalization. The principal task for democratic political systems is to reach an agreement among past legacies, present priorities, and the challenges of the future. It is no coincidence that the crisis of democracy is taking place at a time when its ability to carry out this rapprochement is more uncertain. Time, devoid of all organizational criteria, parades past us, and we take our place within it with cynical opportunism or gloomy acceptance, compensating our lack of effectiveness with superficial uprisings, replacing hope with the useless evocation of that which is completely *other*.

Contemporary societies must work with time because, in order to secure their own survival and well-being, they must increasingly include the future in their calculations. But designs for the future are scarce. The future has poor advocates in the present, and it suffers from chronic weakness. The problem with our democracies is that our political antagonisms are bound to the present. We live at the expense of the future; our relationship to it is completely irresponsible. The logic of the short term and of “just in time” is revealed through very diverse phenomena: we see the hegemony of financial market strategies being imposed on other areas of the economy; we see the pressure exerted by media deadlines and the political system’s troubling inability to challenge these time frames; we see the sensationalism that prioritizes spectacular or catastrophic events over the measured support of long-term developments; we find the instantaneist conception of democracy manifest in the fact that political decisions are tied to electoral time frames. The logic of the urgent undermines our relationship with time, which is always dependent on the present moment.

This is the context in which we inscribe our societies’ lack of collective ambition, the exhaustion of desire, our widespread fear, our retreat on the question of individual interests, and our lack of perspective. One could say that process has triumphed over planning and that we favor an outlook that is *post-* (postmodern, post-expressionist . . .) rather than *pro-* (proactive, project-oriented . . .). Anticipatory behaviors seem to favor prevention and precaution rather than planning and preparation. That temporal shortsightedness is affecting our ability to represent the future. It is not that urgency stands in the way of elaborating long-term plans, but our absence of plans subjugates us to the tyranny of the present. Contemporary activity and the endless adaptation to change that is required of us are

experienced through a prism of survival, not of hope. Since, as it is said, the “grand narratives” have died out, their place has been filled by a defense of “acquired rights.” The opening that was meant to accommodate the visualization of the future has been overrun by concern about our current moment. When one does not prepare for the future, the political system is reduced to managing the present.

Who then should be exposed as enemies of the future? It is worth noting that the future’s enemies must first be uncovered among those who would seem to be its most fervent supporters. They are found anywhere the future is trivialized and amid those who promote unproductive accelerations with no concern for the costs of modernization. Attacks on the future are launched from the most diverse trenches, and counterattacks come from unsuspected authorities.

A good deal of the rhetoric of innovation, for example, constitutes a trivialization of the future when it is not inserted into a meaningful social context. The future is discussed pervasively, with an extensive range of meanings, including instances where what is being referenced is actually the precise opposite of future: attempts are made to invoke the future as a clear and insistent force to which we must yield. The fact is that if there is true future, we should be confronting something unknown and surprising, but this does not seem to be the case with a certain rhetoric of innovation that makes use of the language of necessity. This expansionistic use of the term “future” derives from the fact that the technical and commercial meanings of the word have taken over. There is the sense that future planning is only realized nowadays through technological promises or forecasts of economic growth. If modernist utopias regarded the future fundamentally in terms of social innovation, our current rhetoric about the future seems to have restricted it to the areas of technological innovation or expansive marketplaces.

The future is frequently associated with acceleration. Seen thus, a late arrival on the merry-go-round of competition implies an immediate lack of future. The psychological and social complexity of human time has been enormously simplified in this way. It is immediately apparent that this point of view confronts us with a choice between acceleration and deceleration, considerably reducing our true options. Acceleration does not constitute a “catching-up” to the future but is, instead, one of its principal enemies. In addition to the choice between acceleration and deceleration,

tion, there is the choice between true and false motion, which suggests that sometimes an increase in speed can be a sign of confusion, while reflection may lay the groundwork for more profound change. The future must also always be distinguished from its mere appearance. Only in that way can we explain, for example, the paradox that highly destructive technologies can be presented as bearers of the future, while environmentally friendly strategies, which serve to assure the future, may appear to be conservative in nature. This explains the widespread sensation that the acceleration of social time is not truly significant since it merely constitutes a false mobility. It is simply forward motion that conceals an incapacity to confront needed reforms and to shape our collective future. For that reason, confronting false motion is one of our most important critical tasks.

The future's worst enemies also include those who insist on neutralizing its open and unpredictable nature at all costs. The best cognitive and practical strategies in recent years have been specifically articulated in models that respect the opaque and inaccessible nature of the future. Concepts such as resilience, risk, emergency, or governance have been suggested in response to the failure of deterministic planning, but the goal of finding an intelligent and responsible way of managing the future has not been renounced. It is a question of rethinking the future as a place of liberty, a hypothesis, or a promise, not as a decisive reality. The best evidence we have of this is the fact that the past is full of futures that were never realized. We need only examine the futurology that was practiced at any time in the past to confirm that the majority of its predictions and promises were unsuccessful. The fact that reality disappoints us in this way is what makes it susceptible to human configuring. From this perspective, the future's current enemies would not be the people who try to stop us from advancing toward a particular future that dogmatic progressivism helps us envision clearly. Instead, the enemies of the future are the people who conceive of it without taking its complexity seriously, those who handle it thoughtlessly (either because they view it as a mere continuation or because they mortgage it recklessly), those who plan it without respecting its opacity, but also those who comfortably accept the supposed natural progression of things.

If that is true, then we should reformulate the political antagonism that has, since the beginning of the modern era, been fixed into a right-left duality defined on the basis of the perceived progress of history.

Progressives and conservatives exist along the entire length of the political spectrum, and reactionaries on both ends often form coalitions to defend themselves against the unknown. Moreover, champions of the right and left sometimes compromise in order to embrace the future without excessive concern about eliminating its least manageable aspects. What is ideologically crucial at the present time is not whether one defines oneself in terms of progress or status quo, but in terms of the contrast between movement toward the future and movement that is not going anywhere. The future is no longer forged by a struggle against those who defend the past, but against those who appear to be on one's side and who defend the future, but do so poorly. Nowadays, progressivism is found wherever processes are put into effect to shape the unknown future and whenever uncertainty is managed responsibly. There are, however, new disparities that give way to ideological divides that go beyond the labels currently in use; these are not the comfortable distinctions of traditional parliamentary topography or the geostrategic labels of the cold war. They serve only to perpetuate current models of government and its critics.

The following pages defend a politics of optimism and hope at a time when confidence in the malleability of the future has been undermined. They were written in opposition to the belief that the world is beyond understanding or configuration. What we need is a political system that makes the future its fundamental task, determined to keep actions from becoming insignificant reactions and plans from degenerating into utopian idealism.

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