

IN THE LONG RUN

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IN THE LONG RUN

The Future as a Political Idea

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For Lea

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Introduction

‘The thoughtful man lives more in the future than in the present . . . Not what is, but what will be, not existing conditions, but tendencies, determine the happiness both of individuals and of whole states.’

Karl Kautsky¹

“‘We won’t die from old age,” reads one of the signs they hoist above their heads. “We’ll die from climate change.”

*Washington Post*²

An air of finality pervades today’s world. Wherever one looks, there is a sense that time is running out. Events approach us as critical moments, promising either the chance of transition to something better, or a descent into something much worse. Climate change suddenly looks undeniable and immediate, with action needed urgently and little time for mistakes. Capitalism’s inequalities appear out of control, making each chance to tame it seem like the last. The geopolitical order looks increasingly unstable, sparking nervousness and the fear of being caught by surprise. Artificial intelligence feels ever closer at hand, to be reined in now or regretted. And the experience

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of the coronavirus pandemic continues to reverberate – a symbol of unpredictability, coupled with a reminder that opportunities for change can be short-lived. Faced with the prospect of missed chances, everything takes on a momentous feel.

This defining outlook of the twenty-first century, steeped in the crises of recent years, poses a challenge to democracy as we know it. Just as conceptions of the future are always shaped by the present, how we assess the present is often shaped by the kind of future we expect. The catastrophic prospect of global warming illustrates what this can mean politically. Long-standing concerns about man-made climate change have become more urgent in recent years, as authorities such as the United Nations have begun to suggest there are just a few years left to act on decarbonisation if the worst scenarios are to be avoided. The idea of a climate emergency evokes a limited timeframe for major policy choices and a point after which it could be too late. The idea of scarce time and non-negotiable demands raises difficult questions for how we do politics. When the future seems to be closing in, institutions organised around the idea of persistent disagreement and changing opinion start to look out of place.

Why should people accept leaders they did not vote for? Why should they endorse election results they disagree with? Losers' consent, it is often said, is founded on a recognition that victories and defeats are merely provisional – that there will always be another chance to contest the results. But if we take seriously the thought that there is no time for mistakes on some of the crucial issues, arguments of this kind break down. An air of finality spells

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problems for legitimate opposition. This is especially true when political groups of all stripes see themselves as facing emergencies, yet disagree on what they are and what counts as the right response. While some convincingly argue for radical change to stave off environmental collapse, others do all they can to prevent it, seeing the state's intrusion on their liberty and way of life as the real threat. When the present is experienced as a critical moment, decisions as make-or-break and failures as irreversible, the politics of the showdown takes hold. Accusations of stolen elections are symptomatic, along with extraordinary scenes like the storming of the US Capitol in 2021 and Brazil's presidential palace in 2023.

Democracy as we know it depends on the idea of continuation – of things not coming to a sudden end. Notions of an indefinite future have long been used by democrats to contend with democracy's flaws. Institutions and citizens are fallible, yet for many modern philosophers democracy's real-world imperfections could be addressed in time. Deficient constitutions, erroneous majorities, or under-inclusive institutions: none of these problems fatally undermines the ideal of democracy, so long as it can be conceived as an ongoing process of self-correction. Democracy works in the long run. It is, in this view, a future-oriented form, always necessarily unfinished. But what becomes of such a perspective when the challenges of the day seem so grave that there is no time for error? If the future is the place where imperfections can be ironed out, democracy is left exposed when that future no longer seems capacious.

'I don't understand why I should be in school if the

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world is burning,' a high-school student in Denver was reported as saying in September 2019. 'What's the point of working on my education if we don't deal with this first?'³ Just as they shape the legitimacy of institutions, ideas of the future shape our willingness to engage. It is easy to see how those people convinced that societies are on the brink may regard things that take time as futile. Why devote oneself to long-term projects if there may be no long-term future to accommodate them? These sentiments are characteristic of today's age of emergencies. They are anything but fatalist, of course – indeed, there is something heartening about them. Expressed politically, they indicate how a sense of urgency can lead to a willingness to seek transformations in the near term. But the question is how, and with whom. A politics of long-term commitment – arguably what is required to grapple with the problems of the age – will struggle to gain traction if time is seen to be running out. An emergency mentality demands tangible short-term results – stabilisation, the removal of threats, the hitting of targets. It offers little reason to join a cause that takes time to realise, or to stick with one when its advance is uncertain. At its worst it is a recipe for disillusionment.

The sense of a future closing in on the present is hardly unique to the current moment. Historians have described the 'temporal claustrophobia' that characterised early-twentieth-century statesmen on the verge of war, 'a sense that time was running out, that in an environment where assets were waning and threats were growing, any delay was sure to bring severe penalties.'⁴ Today, though, that sense of time pressure has multiple sources and is experienced

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with particular intensity. It has moved beyond the realm of foreign policy to become part of the backdrop of day-to-day politics.

Democracy hits trouble when the short term predominates and time is felt to be scarce. 'In the long run we are all dead,' wrote the economist John Maynard Keynes in the 1920s, parodying a tendency to counsel patience in the midst of a crisis.⁵ Do not take false comfort, he implied, from the notion that things will work themselves out in the end. It was a sound warning of the perilous appeal of the far future. Yet today our impulses are different. The future is increasingly distrusted. The fear of many is that we will be dead in the short run, and not just as individuals but as a civilisation or species.

Expectations matter, whether or not they are fulfilled. If there are reasons to keep sight of the long term, it is not just for the sake of the world we will leave behind. Those who urge politicians to be less short-termist – to invest in social infrastructure and the management of risks – often do so on behalf of the young and the unborn. The suggestion is that we should care about the future so as to support those who will live in it. But confidence in the future also matters for politics in the present. Disputed elections, impatience with political procedure, and a preference for spontaneous protest over effective organisation are some of the correlates of a diminished outlook on what lies ahead. The sense of finality that fills today's world is central to its volatility. To understand the implications and how we got to this point, it is worth stepping back to explore the wider story of how expectations about the future leave their mark on democracy.

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When individuals contemplate times to come, their focus is often personal. The child dreams of growing up. The adult looks forward to expected life milestones. They may have hopes of marriage or having children, of emigrating or returning home; they may reflect with anxiety on illness and death. There is an idiosyncratic streak to how anyone thinks of the future, as well as psychological variation in the extent to which they do.⁶ But what presents itself as personal can have a political slant. In every person's outlook there are factors that are shared and shaped. The future has long been a political reference point, contested for its social implications.

Whether the world-to-come will be better or worse than the present, whether it will be makeable by ordinary people or immune to their influence – these notions have for centuries encouraged or obstructed people's involvement in politics. When futuristic utopian fiction first became popular in early modern Europe, many hoped it would galvanise change: ideas of the future could be 'a means of gripping and stirring imaginations and hastening the progress of humanity', since fiction was 'that much more powerful than the finest displays of theoretical systems'.⁷ The revival of democracy as an ideal in the eighteenth century coincided with changing ideas about historical time. It paired with an emerging expectation that the future would be different from the present and was potentially susceptible to influence.

This notion of an open future spurred mass political participation in the nineteenth century, as movements of the left promoted doctrines of transformation – ideologies,

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as they would come to be known. The future was the place of ideals, and 'isms' such as socialism and liberalism would be the signposts of how to get there. Cultivating the sense they had time on their side, these movements could afford to think big, and to absorb the setbacks they encountered along the way.

But the future has never been the preserve of democrats alone. Others have used it to defend self-interest and popular suffering, in the spirit of Keynes' objection. Projecting prosperity, peace and justice into the future, authorities can seek acceptance of their absence in the present. For the proponents of unpopular policies, one route to legitimacy lies in highlighting the benefits that will follow short-term distress, or the dangers to be avoided by caution and prudence. The future can be used to pacify the public, and keep power out of its hands.

Modern democracy emerged in a world of commerce, and, as the role of capital and industry grew stronger into the twentieth century, so did ideas of the future as an object of calculation, best placed in the hands of experts. Whether to entrepreneurs in the market or technocrats in government, wider participation can be something to avoid. Elitist claims on the future bolster elitist modes of rule. In turn, a rationalist emphasis on prediction and control can spur reactionary movements that define themselves against it. Fascism, the most striking example of the last century, was about the embrace of unpredictability and creative destruction. Taking aim at a world of bookkeepers and bureaucratic inertia, its adherents were drawn to a politics of violence and charisma. By disrupting consolidated institutions, they sought to disorganise the

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public so as better to manipulate it. An impulsive embrace of the future, sparked by the sense it was under threat, set fascism against democratic ideals.

The second half of the twentieth century saw new challenges emerge to democracy's hold on the future. Wariness of the masses took on new forms, as Cold War officials sought to insulate the state further from the unpredictability of public opinion. Military forecasters would pioneer a model of government marked by secrecy, to better confront their opponents abroad and to control their populations at home. Here was an idea of the future not just as the domain of experts but as something to be withheld from public knowledge – the future as classified, as competitive advantage. Could it still be a source of social integration? As states close their doors on the democratic public, people are left to shift their hopes elsewhere. Ideas of collective well-being give way to an emphasis on personal advance. In the late-twentieth-century world of the privatised future, consumers were sold images of personal betterment, and an economy centred on debt served to individualise their circumstances. Whereas democracy depends on a sense of the shared future, here was a story of fragmentation.

Futures open and closed, near and far, imagined and calculated, rational and impulsive, public and secret, shared and apart: these are some of the dichotomies we shall meet in this book. Each highlights an important difference of outlook, as well as a tension characteristic of a certain time and place. As we shall see, ideas of the future have been a key terrain of conflict, contested over the years by currents as diverse as republicanism, socialism, liberalism,

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fascism, militarism and neoliberalism. Rather than determined by culture or psychology, how the future is seen is moulded by politics. In the chapters that follow, a picture emerges of how ideas of the future have interacted with democracy, and how this carries into the present. Life in today's age of emergencies is shaped by how these outlooks on the future intersect; the concern is that they do so in ways that make democracy seem irresponsible, irrelevant or unworkable.

One of the hopes widely attached to a crisis is that it marks the possibility of change. From the financial crash of 2008 to the dislocations caused by Covid-19, shocks are welcomed by some as opportunities to reopen the future. The world looks malleable once more, yet it is by no means clear that any change will be democratic. Challenges are seen as emergencies because publics feel largely powerless before them, while authorities have lowered ambitions. Emergency management frames policymaking as responding to necessity and warding off the worst. In place of the democratic imagination it promotes the reduction of uncertainty with measurable goals – a future of targets, dates and deadlines. In turn, these efforts to tame the future incite the return of their opposite – rebellions that seek to confound expectations, revelling in the prospect of chaos to come.

One of the great weaknesses of electoral politics is the rarity of opportunities to influence what happens. Electoral cycles based on the occasional vote look increasingly lethargic in an age of accelerated change and heightened stakes, while the defeats they yield can feel increasingly unacceptable – the demoralising experience of a future

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promised and cancelled. To begin to address this requires us to rethink how democracy looks. It is when politics leaves citizens as spectators, with little influence over the course of events, that the ticking of the clock becomes hardest to bear.

What becomes clear as one surveys the past is the importance of political ties for building confidence in the future. From the movements and unions of the nineteenth century to the political parties of the twentieth, collectives have provided not just a vision of change but the organised power to promote it. As continuing arrangements intended to last, such associations can also give depth to the future, allowing individuals to identify with a cause that can outlive them. One of the problems of the present is that associations of this kind are weaker – less organised, less accessible, or less radical in the cause they promote. More empowering forms of democracy will need stronger collectives and the forward gaze they permit.

Ultimately, as this book will argue, there are good reasons to contest the sense of finality that pervades current affairs. By looking at how the future was negotiated in the past, one gains perspective on how to deal with the anxieties of the present. Despite today's emphasis on last chances, politics is not about to take its leave anytime soon. Even where things dwindle or collapse, there will be choices to be made concerning how this happens and what follows. Equally, to dwell on the prospect of a successful transition – beyond the carbon economy, or even beyond capitalism itself – risks overlooking the fact that even significant gains will need to be defended. These are struggles that will continue or give rise to new ones.

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Democratic politics today needs to recapture a feel for the depth of the shared future, even as so much crowds in on the present.

While the politics of the future will be our focus, it is worth noting at the outset a caveat. There are contexts where the dominant horizon is elsewhere. As the British-Ghanaian author Kodwo Eshun has argued, in an illuminating discussion of the politics of time, there are those for whom the defining reference point lies in the past. For many of African heritage, for instance, the historical trauma of slavery remains to the fore.⁸ In this context and others, a preoccupation with things to come can seem a diversion from historical justice. Looking to the future can imply disengaging with the crimes of the past. Politics is never just about what lies ahead, and those attempting to make it so can do great harm.

Yet those who neglect the future cede important political terrain to others who can use it against them. A backward gaze leaves the future in the hands of those who do engage with it – often the most powerful, who project on to it their agendas and fears. This was another of Eshun's key points. Those at the margins – minorities in the global North, majorities in the global South – are left to feature in doomsday scenarios to do with economic breakdown, extreme weather, disease, migration and war, with the risk of self-fulfilling prophecies. Such movements as Afrofuturism are efforts to imagine futures that reflect the interests of the less powerful.⁹

Class is relevant in similar ways. Any type of conscious engagement with the future presupposes the time and

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capacity for reflection. Those living in insecure conditions typically lack the resources and inclination to turn their eyes to the future.¹⁰ But while such engagement may be patchy and inconsistent among those living day-to-day, that does not diminish its importance. Democratic participation requires the capacity to see the present from the perspective of an imagined future in which grievances are addressed. Political equality requires that this capacity be evenly distributed, such that upper- and middle-class demands do not systematically prevail over those of the disadvantaged. Whatever their cultural and economic position, all groups have reason to engage with the future. That its image tends to be shaped by the elites of the existing order makes democratising that process an urgent task.

This book is about the future as a political idea. It examines how, in contexts past and present, outlooks on the world-to-come have shaped how democracy is practised, justified, restrained or discarded. Sometimes these views are explicit, in the form of narratives, ideologies or philosophical accounts. Sometimes they are implied by practices and technologies, and the assumptions that go unsaid. Historians have shown how outlooks have varied, from the confident projections of the Enlightenment through to post-modern scepticism.¹¹ Less studied are the political implications – how the future is used and abused in politics, and what the views of the twenty-first century may contribute to democracy today.¹²

It can be tempting to discount the ideas about the future that people held in the past. Many fears and desires can look parochial in retrospect, and many expectations turn out to be misplaced. Moreover, in some ways we rely

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on them missing their mark. Today's world would look very different if yesterday's imagined possibilities had come to pass. We are drawn to seeing history as inevitable because accepting that things could have been otherwise means accepting that we as individuals could have looked very different, or indeed might not have existed at all. But if the plausibility of alternative futures is one thing, another is the implications of their being considered. Expectations of the future provide a lens through which the present is seen. While such outlooks do not determine how people act in the world, they exert a filtering effect on the behaviours that look reasonable. In exploring them the aim must be to avoid nostalgia, to look not for a golden age of possibility, but for suggestive patterns and paths not taken.

This book's field of concern is democracy. Beyond its remit are the remote, otherworldly scenarios that preoccupy certain writers of science fiction and philosophy. Those drawn to these largest timescales look to a future barely recognisable to the present, one in which humans have evolved into another species, spread across the galaxy, or merged with artificial intelligence. Such themes are explored by thinkers today under the heading of 'long-termism', a perspective that asks us to project forward not just by decades or centuries but millennia and more.¹³ Arresting and provoking as these speculations may be, their connection to democratic politics is slight. Dwelling on the most dramatic and distant eventualities can distract from concerns more relevant to the majority of people. The grandest outlooks risk overburdening the present with factors too large to process.

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Insofar as democracy and the future tend to be theorised together, it is often argued that the former is blind to the latter – that democracy is inherently short-termist. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great observer of American democracy in the early nineteenth century, put the view crisply: ‘it is this clear perception of the future, founded on enlightenment and experience, that democracy will often lack. The people feel much more than they reason.’¹⁴ Such arguments abound today in relation to climate change, public spending and debt, areas where the benefits of wise policy may emerge long after the costs. The charge of democratic short-sightedness in its contemporary form tends to highlight the length of the electoral cycle, said to direct the attention of representatives to what is achievable in a five-year period. In their speeches and manifestos, leaders promise only what can be accomplished in this timespan – and are increasingly evasive in the promises they make.¹⁵

This view that democracy must be short-termist is a good example of how claims about the future can be politically loaded. It relies on the idea that people want immediate satisfaction, and forgets that democracy is about more than the policies of a government. Arguably one of the special responsibilities of political opposition is to engage in imaginative thinking, highlighting alternative paths beyond the day-to-day business of rule. If future-oriented politics is weak today, this is bound up in the weakness of opposition. Not only have political parties scaled back their ambitions, but many key sites of power offer few opportunities for organised dissent. Rather than something intrinsic to democracy, short-termism expresses its weakness.

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In some ways progressive politics today looks especially in need of the future horizon. Even from a narrowly European perspective, it is increasingly difficult to romanticise the past. The post-war welfare state, for many an ideal of prosperity and political stability, looks ever harder to disentangle from the history of colonialism and exclusionary nationalism. Likewise it can be hard to find inspiration in the present. A cross-border glance tends to reveal societies in trouble wherever one looks. The days in which Anglo-Saxons could idealise a Scandinavian model seem long gone, as do the days in which newly independent states or new democracies might plausibly just wish to 'catch up' with the rest. If political inspiration is to be found today, then arguably it must be found in the future. It was, as we shall see, in much the same spirit that fascination with the future started to develop in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, giving impetus to a period of democratisation.

How far the future can still act as a source of inspiration is one of the important open questions of the present. As this book aims to show, much that is valuable in politics depends on an expectation that the future is there and can be jointly shaped. To understand the making and breaking of democracy, we must chart the changing shape of the world-to-come.

1

Futures Open and Closed

‘Democracy is a state in which the sovereign people, guided by laws which are of their own making, do for themselves all that they can do well, and by their delegates do all that they cannot do for themselves. [. . .] To found and consolidate democracy amongst us, to reach the peaceful reign of constitutional laws, we must end the war of liberty against tyranny and pass happily through the storms of the Revolution.’

Robespierre, ‘On Political Morality’,

Speech to the National Convention, 5 February 1794

Democracy as it emerged in the eighteenth century had little in common with the ancient phenomenon from which it took its name. It was not, for a start, something one could find on a map. In the ancient world, democracy was the name given in the sixth century BC to the political arrangements of Athens. Rooted in a particular place, it was a description of how things were done. This was not so in the eighteenth century, when democracy was a goal or a spectre. For the French revolutionaries, the term was used to evoke the ideals they were fighting for. The premise was that it was something still in the making. For many

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of their opponents, and some in their ranks, it was rather a fear – of mob rule. It was where one could end up if things turned out badly. Whereas democracy in the ancient world was a description of the present, in the modern world it was something to come.

Nor were the structures likely to be similar. Whereas the ancient Hellenic world was one of small polities and citizenries, in the modern world the state was typically much larger in scale. If democracy could emerge in a modern context, it would not be on the Athenian model of direct democracy, in which citizens could assemble and decide in person. Modern democracy would be representative democracy, with some taking decisions on behalf of others.¹ In the words of Robespierre, the Jacobin republican, it would require that delegates do all that the people could not do for themselves.

Already one sees how modern democracy might develop a structural orientation to the future. Those committed to it would have to take their bearings from a world that did not yet exist, and would need to find ways to bring people with them. Democracy would be something that would follow great change – after a revolution, as it became known.² Delegation would pose a problem of cohesion: political authorities would need to convince those they governed that they shared in a common endeavour. Future-oriented goals offered a way for representatives to justify their actions to those on whose behalf they were acting.³ Likewise, visions of the future would be a resource with which to integrate a large citizenry – a way for strangers to find common cause and picture themselves as a sovereign people.

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But there were also historical reasons why ideas of the future became central to modern democracy. The eighteenth century was a time of unprecedented speculation about what might lie ahead. In part this was because it was a time of rapid social change. The upheavals of post-Reformation Europe were conducive to the experience and expectation of difference. Processes of urbanisation exposed people to alien customs and accelerating technological change, while encounters with the 'New World' suggested new ways of thinking about the old one.⁴ The uncertainty of the present invited fascination with the possibilities of the future.

In what sense, if any, ancient and medieval Europeans had a concept of the future is unclear. That they conceived the world only in terms of cycles is a view now largely debunked. From the use of oracles to military strategy, the writing of history and making of wills, we can see efforts to contend with uncertainty and track the impending course of events.⁵ But it seems clear that the future was not a key political reference point of the kind it would later become. Social and technological structures were more settled, at least on the scale of everyday experience. The fortunes of individuals, families and polities might shift, but within a framework that was expected to endure.

One of the features of political protest in pre-modern Europe was that it tended to be local and spontaneous. It involved specific grievances against specific persons, typically local lords.⁶ This reflected the temporal outlook. Lacking a sense of the basic alterability of the existing order, dissent was reactive in spirit – about seizing food from those felt to be hoarding it, or rebelling against new

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taxes and fines. If the rules of the game are felt to be fixed, only transgressions can be the target of protest. People challenged them as affected persons rather than as part of a larger 'we'.⁷ Without a sense of future possibility, there was little reason to ally with strangers, to build organisations intended to last. Protest was a series of 'scattered sparks'.⁸

Political interest in the future grew with the experience of social change, but also with changing beliefs. In the Abrahamic religions, events to come had long been a source of fascination. Speculation thrived concerning how and when God's will would be revealed. But, for much of their history, these religions encouraged a reactive stance.⁹ Fatalist in spirit they were not – interest in foresight tends to reflect a desire to prepare and adapt¹⁰ – but what humans could do was felt to be constrained, not least because the end of earthly life might be near. Aside from some transformational moments – the appearance of a prophet, a second coming, a last judgement – continuity was the expectation. In this sense, the future they evoked was still 'closed'. This began to change with the Reformation, as those influenced by new ideas started to see more scope for enacting God's will, and to question that they were living in the last days. Freed from the sense that worldly affairs were but an interlude, there was more space for contemplating how things could be.¹¹

If the future became central to modern democracy, it was more specifically an idea of the *open* future – of a future that would be different from the present and susceptible to concerted influence. With this came the motivation for those outside the aristocracy to challenge

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the existing structures of monarchical Europe and develop new principles of authority. Emerging visions of the ideal society reflected, and reinforced, a sense of the mutability of the world. Once this openness had been embraced, new tensions would also arise. Would the new order be possible to sustain? How was political freedom to be squared with the need for stability? Revolutions would have to be followed by constitutions, aimed at ‘the peaceful reign of constitutional laws’ in Robespierre’s terms – but these threatened to close things once more. Ideas of the future could put democracy in question, but first they were key to its emergence.

Envisioning the future

‘With what joy should I part from the gloomy, wretched aspects of my contemporaries, to awake in the midst of those fair days that thou shalt bring forth; that blissful period, when man shall have regained his courage, his liberty, his independence, and his virtue! How happy, could I but behold thee otherwise than in a dream.’¹² So began, with this direct appeal to the future, one of the most influential of eighteenth-century utopias,¹³ Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *The Year 2440: A Dream if Ever There Was One* (1771).¹⁴ Updated and expanded over forty editions that spanned the French revolutionary period, the book was a bestseller, running to tens of thousands of copies.¹⁵ It inspired a genre of writing in which the reader was introduced to a society of the future and the ways it surpassed the present.

The idea of evoking an unfamiliar world was not new.

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The most renowned texts of early utopian literature, including Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), tended to locate that world somewhere physically remote. Conceived in an age of exploration, they portrayed faraway lands arrived at after a journey.¹⁶ It was in the eighteenth century that authors started to shift their imagined world from elsewhere in space to elsewhere in time.¹⁷

Mercier's tale was set in Paris, seven hundred years in the future. It described a city that would be clean, virtuous and egalitarian albeit monarchical, humane and rational in its justice, and cosmopolitan in outlook – the utopia of an Enlightenment liberal. Among the many innovations to come were a justice system that would be 'founded on reason and humanity, her precepts [. . .] wise, clear, concise, and few',¹⁸ and a universalist outlook on the world that saw 'all men as our friends and brethren'.¹⁹ The Paris of 2440 would include a statue to Humanity, before which the figures of France, Holland, England and other nations would be cast as kneeling, 'demanding pardon of Humanity for the cruel wounds they had given her during the last twenty centuries'.²⁰

Utopias tend to be a commentary on something closer to home. Offering a point of contrast, they magnify the faults of a world the reader can be presumed to know. Mercier was explicit in his condemnation of the present. Like other utopians before him, he used the genre as a way to express dissent, giving the reader a picture of how things could be different.²¹ Aware of the political provocation this implied, he initially chose to publish his text anonymously, and it was duly banned in France and beyond for being critical of Church and State.

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Future-oriented utopias have particular qualities that can give them distinctly subversive potential. They not only question the desirability of the familiar, but its stability. A utopia set elsewhere in space is discrete from the 'here and now'. The two can live in parallel, linked only by the narrator's visit. By contrast, a utopia set elsewhere in time is typically one that must displace the society familiar to the reader, as the Paris of 2440 displaces the Paris of 1771.²² The passing of the years, the reader of Mercier's tale learns, will bring the latter society into existence at the expense of the former. This gives future-oriented utopias a certain kind of realism, but also a political edge. By evoking a world 'after' the familiar one, they cast the latter as temporary. Its failings are not eternal but constitutive of a phase, and injustices that might be normalised are brought into view as things that could – and will – be otherwise. Certainly, a future-oriented utopia is different from a prophecy – there is often a more wistful tone, expressing a fear that the vision will never be fulfilled. But its structure inevitably casts the 'here and now' as something transient, and gives reason for political hope.

One of the building blocks of democracy is the concept of the people, the subjects in whose name laws are made. Utopian thought helped bring it to life, presenting an image of a society extended in time, of a 'we' that endures, to which good or bad things may happen. To depict the city was to depict a collective, and one firmly rooted in the world. Taking the longer view, readers could be encouraged to step back from the familiar faces of the present and identify with an enduring community.²³ Utopias offered a picture of coordination between strangers, beyond the

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ties of immediate kinship. Unlike in the rebellions of an earlier age, the 'scattered sparks' of local grievance, a sense of collective identity could start to emerge. Here was an accessible rendition of the idea of a people – in the first instance that of the city, but with the potential to stand in for something wider. To describe its prospects was to foster the idea that it might be grasped as a unity.

Picturing a future utopia raises the question of transformation. How will the reader's society become the one foretold in the book? Will change happen suddenly with some decisive event? Or will it be a drawn-out process, incremental or proceeding in fits and starts? Will change be peaceful or violent? Utopian writers in the eighteenth century often refrained from answering such questions directly, preferring to focus on the end state. By presenting his vision as a dream, Mercier largely avoided the question – in a dream, the transformation has already happened. But by locating his vision in historical time, he encouraged the reader to speculate about how change might come about. Might it be led by conscious design, and if so by whom? The question of transformation raised the question of agency.

This idea comes through in a utopian text by an American author influenced by Mercier. *Three Hundred Years Hence* (1836) by Mary Griffith was centrally concerned with gender equality.²⁴ The transformed world she described was brought into being by the energies of women. Griffith has her guide in the future say to his relative visiting from the present, 'if you only look back you will perceive that in every benevolent scheme, in every plan for meliorating the condition of the poor, and improving their

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morals, it was women's influence that promoted and fostered it.²⁵ Her use of the dream format leaves ambiguity. There is little suggestion that women of the reader's own time might lead the change – these figures seem to occupy an intermediary future. If the future is makeable, it may not be directly makeable by 'us'. But the suggestion nonetheless is that this capacity exists, that some people will remake the world.

If utopians used the future to inspire the reader, they also used it to offer reassurance that change would not be too radical. Utopian thought was as much about ruling out possibilities as embracing them, and in this it reflected the politics of its authors. Griffith, for instance, engaged with the question of race relations, and presented what was on one level a bold vision of racial equality. In her future society, slaves had been freed, their rights guaranteed, and blacks lived in dignity. Her visitor to the future notes that 'the question of slavery was a very painful one in my time' and he 'dreads to hear' how the emancipation of slaves was achieved. 'You have nothing to fear on that score,' comes the reply, 'for the whole thing was arranged most satisfactorily to all parties.' Here, however, the text starts to read less like a vision of racial harmony than a fantasy of enduring hierarchy and separation. We are told that slave owners were well compensated for their loss, while the slaves for their part were patient and non-violent – 'they would never have arrived at their present happy condition if they had sought to obtain their freedom by force'. When her visitor to the future notes that he has 'seen very few negroes' and asks his host where they are, it turns out that the government, with their consent, 'actually transplanted the whole of the negro

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population to Liberia, and to other healthy colonies'. Their freedom is enjoyed far away, and – a lengthy passage underlines – without racial intermarriage. The text thus tempers its story of change with a message intended to reassure the reader that the future is not to be feared.²⁶

Not everyone who raised the possibility of a different future presented it as one to be welcomed. If the future was the ultimate, the extreme formulation, it could evoke a warning about how things might go wrong. In this period, the threat was often pictured as an external force undermining the progress that society would otherwise achieve. In two novels with the title *The Last Man*, by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville (1805) and Mary Shelley (1826), nature is the source of undoing, in the form of infertility and plague. This was apocalyptic fiction, indebted to older ideas of an end of the world imposed on man from without. But the option was now available to trace the source of decline to human deeds and inclinations, as dystopian literature would explore.²⁷

The future as profoundly different, possibly better though conceivably worse, and the outcome of human endeavour – what had emerged was an idea of the open future.²⁸ Already present were a number of key democratic themes: the possibility of collective self-determination, the community extended in time, the questions of transformation and agency, and the felt need to assuage fears that the outcome was unpredictable and potentially too radical. Here was a distinctive way of thinking, a stimulus to the political imagination. What remained was to connect ideas of the future to action, to move from desiring a better world to constructing it.

Making the future

The revolutionary period in America, France and Haiti between the 1770s and the 1790s pointed the way to a more politicised utopianism. One of the major legacies of the revolutions was to give concrete illustration of the openness of the future, connecting dreams of change to practical deeds. They had started out as efforts to restore an older order felt to be corrupted – in this sense they were reactive, on the older model of rebellion. But over the course of events they acquired a different kind of significance, as markers of a new beginning.²⁹ The utopian idea of a future that was quite different from the past, and susceptible to human influence, had found concrete expression.

The revolutions were distinctive in part because they were shaped by ideas-based collectives. Figures such as Robespierre loom over the period, but they were tied to groups defined by their interpretation of what the revolution demanded – notably the Jacobins, and then the factions that emerged out of them. Their conceptions of the future were an evolving combination of diverse intellectual strands, loosely centred on concepts of justice, reason and will.³⁰ Early revolutionaries sought constitutional monarchy on the British model – they stood for anti-feudalism and anti-despotism, combined with an insistence on law and individual freedoms. From 1791, under the leadership of the Girondins and Montagnards, the goal turned to abolition – they defined themselves by republican ideals, combined with democratic ideas of equality. A common thread was the effort to organise collectively in pursuit of a shared understanding of

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how the future should look, one that could be updated as events unfolded. Unlike earlier forms of political rebellion aimed at correcting local abuses, the forward gaze helped strangers come together and identify with a wider cause.

These movements also marked a contrast with literary utopianism. The imaginative speculation of writers like Mercier brought the future into view, but it did so with limitations. First, utopian fiction tended to cast the future as an end point, an ideal to be reached, with the effect that these visions might age quickly as society changed. What was written as a utopia might later come to look conservative and idiosyncratic. Griffith's ideas of racial separation, in which slaves would be freed but sent off to Africa, are an extreme example of a more general pattern. Mercier's text had lost much of its vitality already by the 1790s, with France changing more in a few years of revolution than he had envisaged it would in seven hundred. Mercier himself was aware of the risk of presenting too static an image of the future: he explicitly rejected that his utopia was perfect, stating that the Paris of 2440 still needed further improvement.³¹ But the problem he faced was a structural one, to do with the fact that literary utopianism consisted of largely fixed texts rather than an evolving body of ideas. However many new editions their authors might release, the basics of the vision were cast. Utopian thought retained a point of closure, a time after which things would continue unchanged.

A second political limitation of these literary experiments was their tendency not to cover how the vision described might be achieved. There tended to be little sense of how to act on it, which meant that the makeability

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of the future remained abstract. Mercier would later declare his utopian book 'a dream that had announced and prepared the French Revolution'.³² But this was a retrospective rationalisation, and somewhat misleading – his book had been a vision of enlightened monarchy, and it had offered few clues for action. Moral awakening seemed to be the expected mode of change for these writers – the rationale for the texts themselves, and the reason why they were peppered with examples of reasoned persuasion, as the central protagonist learnt from their experiences in the future. Confronted with the fact that the rights of women are neglected in his time, the lead figure in Griffith's novel notes that this 'is incomprehensible to me now, but I never reflected on it before'.³³ Insight came by the force of the example. These texts offered no template of agency, and left the reader to wonder whether they were in fact no more than a beguiling dream.

A third limitation was that these visions of the future remained the speculation of individuals. They attracted a wide readership, but one that was generally fragmented. Indeed, their ideas of the future might invite no more than escapism, as the reader let their imagination roam. To become politically significant, ideas of the future would have to make their way beyond individual texts to larger collectives. Imagined futures would need to be coupled with the power to revise them and act on them.

This was what made the revolutions of the eighteenth century so distinctive. Whereas Mercier and his imitators tended to present the future in the guise of a dream, the revolutionary experience showed how transformations could be more concrete. With their agitation against

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the monarchy, declarations of rights, and efforts to build republican and secular government, the Jacobins and their offspring demonstrated how the future could be made, and not just by tomorrow's people but by today's, acting collectively. By offering a demonstration of the contingency of the old order, and the power of groups to shape what arose in its place, the revolutions gave credibility and substance to those ideas of the future that had found expression in literary form.

Symbolically, perhaps the most dramatic political expression of emerging beliefs in the alterity and malleability of the future was the French Republican Calendar.³⁴ The idea emerged from radicals who wanted to combine social change with new habits of thought that would distance people from the past. For centuries the control of time had been in the hands of traditional authorities; the Church used it to embed religion in everyday experience, from the rhythms of the sabbath to the rituals of saints' days, Christmas and Easter. For dissidents such as Sylvain Maréchal, atheist man of letters, this entailed a backward-looking outlook that reinforced social continuity and inherited hierarchies. His *Almanach des honnêtes gens* (1788), a pocket calendar for the ordinary person that offered predictions, guidance and structure, was an effort to de-Christianise the experience of time, and with it to challenge both ecclesiastical authority and the feudal order it supported.³⁵ His ideas would be institutionalised by the Jacobins in 1793, as they replaced the Gregorian calendar with a new one.³⁶ Evoking a new Year Zero, the Republican Calendar pursued a rupture in time, casting the future as more rational, egalitarian, accessible, predictable and

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universal than the past. It was a statement of agency, of the capacity to make the world anew. And, unlike utopian thought, it was practical and tied to collective power – less intended to persuade people that the future could be different than to immerse them in an outlook that would make it so.

Nor, for Maréchal and his fellow radicals, was this to be the end of the process of self-determination. Whatever the implications of a new Year Zero, for many the revolution remained incomplete, or indeed was the source of new threats and injustices that echoed those it was meant to displace. The true rupture was yet to be achieved.

‘The French Revolution is nothing but the precursor of another revolution,’ declared the manifesto of the Conspiracy of the Equals, a group formed by Maréchal, François-Noël Babeuf and others on the militant wing of French politics in the 1790s. ‘One that will be greater, more solemn, and which will be the last.’ Writing in early 1796, their sense was that the revolution had stalled: the monarchy had been replaced with a republic, but economic power had been left untouched, while the poor were now losing their newly won rights. To make good on the promise of real transformation, a Republic of Equals was to be founded, as distinct from the legacy of 1789 as from the Ancien Régime. To act in the name of equality was to act in the name of an ideal yet to be realised, in the name of an order to come. The Conspiracy offered the clearest expression of a new kind of collective, defined by its vision of the future and its efforts to propel it into being.

‘The day after this real revolution, they’ll say with astonishment: What? Common happiness was so easy to

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obtain? All we had to do was want it? Why oh why didn't we desire it sooner?' Just as Robespierre sought to inspire his followers by evoking a peaceful world beyond the 'storms of the Revolution', the Conspiracy communicated its motivation to act in the idea of a better future. It failed in its immediate goals – the Conspiracy was quashed and its leaders arrested – but those participants who survived took care to record its story for posterity. Its model of activism, centred on the ideas-based collective, would be retained and revived in the following decades.³⁷

Democracy and the open future

The revolutionaries and utopian writers of the late eighteenth century would not always have called themselves democrats, but the outlooks they pioneered were charged with democratic significance. A future that could be different, and whose contours could be shaped – an open future – was an empowering idea that recast the existing world as something to be acted on.³⁸ Injustices would become harder to overlook once it was recognised that they could be temporary. With abstract goals such as liberty and equality, it was possible to look beyond the existing order – beyond absolutist monarchy and social hierarchies – and see pathways of transformation.

Once reality could be held to a set of ideals, the political experiences of one location could acquire a wider significance and be used for inspiration. Because they addressed future states of affairs, detached from the particulars of the present, ideals such as liberty and equality could travel. Revolution in France could prompt revolution in Haiti.

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Events in what was then known as Saint-Domingue, led by 'Black Jacobins'³⁹ such as François-Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture, were sparked in part by the denaturalisation of the existing order in France, and the lingering mismatch between revolutionary talk of freedom and equality and the conditions of slaves in the colonies. 'Let us go forth to plant the tree of liberty,' declared Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1797, 'breaking the chains of those of our brothers still held captive under the shameful yoke of slavery.'⁴⁰ Ruptures in one place could inspire efforts to emulate and surpass them elsewhere, precisely because they were articulated in terms of future-oriented ideals.⁴¹

An open future implies the prospect of shaping the world in line with chosen values and priorities. The rejection of necessity – the belief that things must either stay as they are or develop in a predetermined direction – is a core democratic principle. It is a precondition of pursuing political freedom, and of banding together with others in a bid to shape power. These possibilities would be further realised in the nineteenth century with the rise of political ideologies. Liberalism, socialism and communism were all forms of collective imagination, typically promoted by movements and parties as counter-visions to another in circulation.

As the French essayist and politician Félix Bodin put it in the 1830s, 'everyone prepares a future according to his fantasy'.⁴² From the idea of the open future these movements drew their vitality and capacity to mobilise, introducing new social groups into political life with the promise of change. In turn, they contributed to maintaining the openness of the future. To the extent they presented

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rival conceptions of the future, they ensured a variety of paths were available. They also allowed a certain dynamism in how the future was approached. If the attachment to lone individuals, whose vision of the future 'closed' the moment they put down their pen, had been a limitation of eighteenth-century utopian thought, nineteenth-century collectives were in a position to continually update their visions, adapting them to changing times and opinion. Not all these movements were convinced of the value of modern democracy, but they nonetheless saw advantages in contesting its institutions. The representative structure of this system was conducive to the development of ideologies, as a way to connect activists with supporters.⁴³ These were the living utopias of a movement.

The Conspiracy of the Equals had presented its ideas as a manifesto, a mode of expression that encapsulated perfectly the idea of a future-making project. In politics as in art, a manifesto signalled an intended break with the status quo.⁴⁴ Not only did it lay out a programme of action but it gave form and visibility to the collective that would pursue it. It was a declaration in the name of a group. With such texts political movements could consolidate their ties and project them into the future. That the text was often anonymous conveyed that the group was more than the sum of the individuals involved.⁴⁵ To organise around a manifesto was to commit to a project of principle, liable to be passed on to future generations of activists. By invoking a higher ideal, members made themselves accountable to a cause beyond their immediate interests. And just as a manifesto served to constitute the actor, it served to conjure its audience. 'People of France!' began the manifesto of the

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Equals, evoking and reinforcing the identity of those who should hear it and sympathise. The authors of manifestos sought not just to describe a desired future but to usher it into being.⁴⁶

But while the idea of the open future was closely tied to democracy, it also posed challenges. The most obvious was that it might be misleading. Could anyone be sure that the future was really so open? Rapid social change might suggest that it was susceptible to influence, but there was nothing to say that the course of change had not been fixed in a way that escaped control. A determined future might come in disguise.⁴⁷ Equally, the trajectory could be undetermined but beyond human control. And should there be scope for influence, the parameters might be narrower than thought, whether squeezed by nature, socio-economic structures or bureaucratic institutions. The openness of the future might be more limited than it seemed.

Uncertainty on such matters could provoke anxiety. While those confident of the future's openness might embrace democratic methods, those fearing the opposite might be prompted to ditch them. If the path to the desired future was narrow, or if a window of opportunity seemed to be closing, it would be tempting to use any method going. The French Revolution, for example, became considerably more brutal and authoritarian as its proponents saw their options narrowing.⁴⁸ Here was an early instance of a pattern that would become familiar – the democracy-harming effects of temporal pressure. Feeling trapped in an airless present, the temptation is to seek the immediate breakthrough. As politically important for democracy

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as whether the future was considered open was the degree to which future possibilities seemed to be expanding or contracting.⁴⁹

For those with a stake in the existing order, the very idea of the open future could be disturbing. It spelt an unpredictable world, and could give rise to not just hopes of a better future but fears of degeneration. Novelists such as Mary Griffith felt the need to reassure their readers that things would not get out of hand, that slaves would not take revenge on their masters. For those with a sceptical view of human nature, or of the poor and disadvantaged in particular, a closed future might seem more attractive. Conservatives and counter-revolutionaries could fear change in general, as a break with valued traditions and the authority of the Church.⁵⁰ Liberals might embrace change in principle but fear the consequences if pursued by the many. Here was one source of the appeal of 'invisible-hand' arguments that suggested progress was best approached obliquely. Embracing the agency of a sovereign people was attractive only if one believed their influence was likely to do more good than harm.

The template of absolute rupture introduced in France in the late eighteenth century had the potential to foster democracy, but the revolutionary moment could not last indefinitely. Without new structures, the ideals of the revolutionaries would most likely be self-cancelling – flux would favour the most powerful, undoing any achievements of the period. But having seen the possibility of remaking the world, would people accept whatever new authority was put in place of the old? The Republican Calendar was a reflection of this concern. Just as it declared

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the beginning of a new age, it was intended to cast the new order as permanent and irreversible, something one could not look beyond. In the same instant that it opened the future, it was intended to close it down.

Democracy depends on a future that is malleable yet sufficiently structured as to retain some shape. Striking that balance is difficult, which is why revolutions bring with them the question of constitutions – of how to build a stabilising framework. Constitutions are about making rights, rules and procedures durable, so that the exercise of power becomes at least somewhat predictable and accountable. Not unlike the introduction of a new calendar, the introduction of a constitution is a statement of agency – of the capacity to shape the political world rather than merely inherit it – while also setting much of that agency in the past, at the polity's Year Zero. Whereas revolutions underline the openness of the future, constitutions are intended to tame it.⁵¹

The centrality of representation to modern democracy was promising as a way to lend structure to the future. By creating a role for mediating institutions – elected parliaments in particular – it fostered lasting entities that could be abstracted from the individuals that occupied them. Like laws and constitutions, institutions build continuities that persist even as their personnel changes. The procedures and timetables that make up an institution provide a basis on which to project forwards in time, rendering the openness of the future more manageable. They provide a context in which disruptive interventions on the model of the manifesto could be made compatible with orderly politics.

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One of the great challenges for modern democracy from the eighteenth century onwards would be how to lend structure to the future without nullifying the revolutionary promise of change. Would some kind of lasting compromise be possible between the demands of freedom and constraint? Could constitutions, laws and institutions be embraced as extensions of the people's will? Or would politics oscillate between moments of rupture, closure, and the desire for revolution once more?

2

Futures Near and Far

When utopian thinkers sketched visions of societies to come, they often projected them into a distant future, centuries from the present. Mercier set his in 2440, around seven hundred years from when he was writing – a date that no likely reader could be expected to experience. This was the makings of a conception of the long term – of a future spacious and accommodating.

One reason to appeal to the distant future was its implications for the present. To place an ideal world far in the future is one way to emphasise the degeneracy of contemporary society. Only with the passage of much time could one hope for something good to emerge. It was a statement of pessimism about the present, but it was also about giving full rein to the imagination. The more temporal space these writers allowed themselves, the more effectively they could evoke a very different world. Also, the longer the interval, the less shocking and more palatable their arguments might appear. Radical change might be coming, but there was no reason to be afraid – it was not going to happen anytime soon.

The distant future evoked in utopian fiction was arguably no good to political agitators. For those involved in