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Traditions of the future

Astra Taylor

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What is the relationship of democracy to time? This question may seem abstract but is actually foundational.

In a letter to James Madison, Thomas Jefferson posed the question of whether the dead should have the ability to rule from the grave. Jefferson's answer to himself was a definitive no. "The earth belongs always to the living generation," he wrote—to the present and not the past nor the future. "[T]he dead have neither powers nor rights over it." The planet's current inhabitants, he effectively proclaimed, are sovereign in time, not just space. But to prevent society from ossifying, he made a rather extreme proposal. After studying mortality statistics, Jefferson concluded that generations turn over every nineteen years. This, he believed, offered a natural limit for laws, which should have a clear expiration date. Short-lived statutes and regulations, renewed only when living citizens saw fit to keep them, would ensure relevance and vibrancy. Whatever one might think of the practicalities of such a scheme—and I believe it to be untenable—I find Jefferson's proposition to be oddly admirable. Advocating for self-destructing legislation is a rather charitable, self-deprecating position for a founding father of the United States.

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If the dead do not exactly have power or rights, per se, they do still have a seat at the table—Thomas Jefferson among them. In ways obvious and subtle, constructive and destructive, the present is constrained and shaped by the decisions of past generations. A vivid example is the American Constitution, in which a small group of men ratified special kinds of promises intended to be perpetual. Sometimes I imagine the Electoral College, which was devised to increase the influence of the southern states in the new union, as the cold grip of plantation owners strangling the current day. Even Jefferson's beloved Bill of Rights, intended as protections from government overreach, has had corrosive effects. The Second Amendment's right to bear arms allows those who plundered native land and patrolled for runaway slaves, who saw themselves in the phrase "a well regulated Militia," to haunt us. Yet plenty of our ancestors also bequeathed us remarkable gifts, the right to free speech, privacy, and public assembly among them.

Some theorists have framed the problematic sway of the deceased over the affairs of the living as an opposition between tradition and progress. The acerbic Christian critic G. K. Chesterton put it this way: “Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death.” Social progress, in Chesterton’s account, can thus be seen as a form of disenfranchisement, the deceased being stripped of their suffrage. Over half a century before Chesterton, Karl Marx expressed sublime horror at the persistent presence of political zombies: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

The most eloquent partisans in this trans-temporal power struggle said their piece at the end of the 18th century. Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine had a furious debate that articulated the dichotomy between past and future, dead and living, tradition and progress. A consummate conservative shaken by the post-revolutionary violence in France, Burke defended the inherited privilege and stability of aristocratic government that radical democrats sought to overthrow: “But one of the first and most leading principles on which the commonwealth and the laws are consecrated, is lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters; that they should not think it amongst their rights to cut off the entail, or commit waste on the inheritance, by destroying at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their society.” Any revolution, Burke warned, hazards leaving those who come after “a ruin instead of an habitation” in which men, disconnected from their forerunners, “would become little better than the flies of summer.”

The left-leaning Paine would have none of it. Better to be a buzzing fly than a feudal serf. “Whenever we are planning for posterity we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary,” he quipped. His critique, forcefully expressed in *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*, was not just an attack on monarchy. Rather, it was addressed to revolutionaries who might exercise undue influence over time by establishing new systems of government. “There never did, there never will, and there never can, exist a Parliament, or any description of men, or any generation of men, in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding and controlling posterity to the ‘end of time,’” he protested.

In his pithy style, Paine popularized a commitment both to revolution and to novelty. “A nation, though continually existing, is continually in the state of renewal and succession. It is never stationary. Every day produces new births, carries minors forward to maturity, and old persons from the stage. In this ever-running flood of generations there is no part superior in authority to another.” Given the onslaught of change, a constitution “must be a novelty, and that which is not a novelty must be defective.” Never one for moderation, Paine advocated a decisive break with tradition, rejecting lessons from the past, castigating those who scoured records of ancient Greece and Rome for models or insights. What could the dead teach the living that could possibly be worth knowing?

Every person, whether or not they have children, exists as both a successor and an ancestor. We are all born into a world we did not make, subject to customs and conditions established by prior generations, and then we leave a legacy for others to inherit. Nothing illustrates this duality more profoundly than the problem of climate change, which calls into question the very future of a habitable planet.

Today, I'd guess that most of us are more able to imagine an environmental apocalypse than a green utopia. Nuclear holocaust, cyber warfare, mass extinction, superbugs, fascism's return, and artificial intelligence turned against its makers—these conclusions we can see, but our minds struggle to conjure an image of a desirable, credible alternative to such bleak finales, to envision habitation rather than ruin.

This incapacity to see the future takes a variety of forms: young people no longer believe their lives will be better than those of their parents and financial forecasts give credence to their gloomy view; political scientists warn that we are becoming squatters in the wreckage of the not-so-distant liberal-democratic past, coining terms such as *dedemocratization* and *postdemocracy* to describe the erosion of democratic institutions and norms alongside an ongoing concentration of economic power. Meanwhile, conservative leaders cheer on democratic regression under the cover of nostalgia—"Make America Great Again," "Take Our Country Back"—and seek to rewind the clock to an imaginary and exclusive past that never really existed.

This is the motivation of those who, more than a century after the Civil War ended (indeed, well into the 1990s), still erected Confederate statues across the country. These monuments were built not to honor history but to pledge to the perpetuation of white dominance. In this sense, they were the inverse of those Communists who, under the cover of the Iron Curtain, kept the people in limbo, deprived of both liberty and equality, justifying an unbearable present by invoking some perfect future that would never come to pass.

Meanwhile, a new breed of Silicon Valley billionaire is preparing to flee from the future. Elon Musk, the former PayPal investor and founder of Tesla, the electric car company, occupies the progressive pole of this position, promoting renewable energy use while simultaneously plotting his rocket-fueled departure from the planet. Worried that life on earth may well be ecologically unsustainable, he is pursuing the possibility of establishing private colonies on Mars to serve as an escape hatch for those who can afford it. In 2018, Musk told an audience at the South by Southwest conference that his ideal Mars settlement would have everything from "iron foundries to pizza joints to night clubs. Mars should really have great bars." What's more, it will be run as a direct democracy, "where everyone votes on every issue." Musk's comment was soundly mocked, as his union busting at his factories back home was being reported in the media at the time—how democratic can a space colony be if owned by someone who denies collective bargaining rights on earth and then takes off in a spaceship, leaving most human beings on the planet to suffer? Still, his view represents those who are not ashamed to imagine a future that only the obscenely prosperous would live to see.

Peter Thiel, Musk's old business partner at PayPal, who also has plans to escape the reality he is creating, makes Musk look enlightened by comparison. An outspoken supporter of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, Thiel is also the founder of Palantir Technologies, a data-mining and surveillance company that works for the national security state. Like other members of what

might be described as the “anxious affluent,” Thiel has purchased property and citizenship in New Zealand, where he believes he and other elites can survive civilizational collapse.

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Influenced by such a vision, Thiel proudly articulates antidemocratic sentiments. “Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women—two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians—have rendered the notion of ‘capitalist democracy’ into an oxymoron,” he wrote in an essay for the Cato Institute, a prominent right-wing think tank. He made it more than clear that it was the democratic element that would have to be sacrificed.

Democracy, a growing number of people seem to believe, is dying. The question for them is how best to mitigate or weather its decline. Against this knee-jerk apocalypticism, this loss of faith in liberalism’s prospects, this toxic longing for a whitewashed past and an oligarchical future, belief in democracy as a viable project of collective self-rule is, in itself, a radical act. Though it contradicts many of our modern shibboleths, the crusade for a more democratic future obliges us to look to the past. From those democratic innovators Jefferson and Paine we inherited an obsession with novelty, in daily life and in activism. This was groundbreaking in the 18th century, but in the 21st it has become orthodoxy. Our relentless presentism, encouraged by the 24/7 news cycle and social media, enjoins us to immerse ourselves in an eternal now, a state of amnesiac contemporaneity. It severs us from the past and the future—which serves the powerful just fine: the past contains many ideas they would rather see buried than revived, and reconfiguring our way of life to account for the future would entail a massive disruption of business as usual.

I came of age in the nineties and aughts, after experts declared that we were at the end of history. The message, received loud and clear through a kind of cultural osmosis, was that protest was over and the future would simply be more of the same. Though some brave souls tried to buck the trend, conventional channels tended to portray engagement in social justice as risible and *démodé*. Feminists were mocked for being frumpy artifacts, antiwar protesters ignored as a hippie hangover from the sixties, and union organizers dismissed as specters of a discredited socialist era, destined for the dustbin. I was schooled in a postmodern theory that celebrated apolitical pastiche, was told that Marxism was a defunct “meta-narrative,” and that faith in progress would lead only to tragic ends. Instead of caring about the world and what might happen next, we were encouraged to cultivate an attitude of ironic detachment.

A new cohort of progressive activists has upended these convictions. Citizens young and old have woken up to the realization that social movements, updated and evolved, are a life raft. They understand that social media is no magic bullet and that organizing today requires the same slow and steady work it always has. (Indeed, effective organizing may now involve more work, not less, to combat the negative behaviors that social media affords and incentivizes.) By harnessing digital tools to long-standing methods of organizing—marches, occupations, boycotts, strikes, riots, the formation of pressure groups, and party building—they are adding a contemporary twist to proven, effective tactics.

The resurgence of interest in traditional left-wing politics is a sign that times have changed. Union membership in the United States is historically low, and organized labor has been dealt

some major blows, but young people are far more likely than their elders to have a favorable view of unions: three-quarters of those aged 18 to 29 versus half of respondents aged 50 and older. In a remarkable reversal for citizens of the country that brought the world Amazon and Coca-Cola, more American millennials now say they would prefer to live in a socialist society than a capitalist one, and this preference has helped send a slew of self-described democratic socialists to office at the local and state levels. Some might object that socialism can only represent a return to an ignominious Cold War past, not a viable horizon, yet the egalitarian principles that provide the heart of the socialist impulse are old but not passé.

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Because democratic socialism has never been tried in the United States, it's no wonder that a political program centered on fulfilling a variation on Pericles's ancient definition of democracy, on providing for the many, not the few, strikes young people as refreshingly novel. The next step, however, is expanding "the many" to somehow acknowledge and account for future generations, adding a new temporal dimension to our concept of social inclusion. If the combined descendants of the earth's human and nonhuman creatures, in all their diversity, are to have a chance of a decent life, those of us who live here and now must create a society that is not just equitable but sustainable.

Sustainability has become fashionable in recent years, but the concept is worth deeper contemplation. In the dictionary definition, "sustain" means "to continue or be prolonged for an extended period"; its etymological roots in the Latin *sustinere* connote support, holding strong, something lifted "up from below." Thus a sustainable democratic society involves reorienting our relationship to time, allowing for drawn-out and deliberate public participation, but this can be achieved only by transforming society's underlying economic relations, as well.

Capitalism thrives on speed, novelty, consumption, obsolescence, and, above all, growth. True sustainability, then, is anathema to capitalism, which rests on the following precept: there must be more value at the end of the day than there was at the beginning. Contraction is a crisis for capital—indeed, without expansion there is no capital, for there is no profit. At bottom, the twin perils of inherited wealth and mass indebtedness, as well as the threat of ecological apocalypse, flow from an economic system predicated on greed and boundless accumulation.

"Debts are subject to the laws of mathematics rather than physics," the radiochemist Frederick Soddy observed in 1926. "Unlike [material] wealth which is subject to the laws of thermodynamics, debts do not rot with old age.... On the contrary [debts] grow at so much per cent per annum... which leads to infinity... a mathematical and not a physical quantity. Oblivious to the laws of physics, capitalism's commitment to compound expansion inevitably leads to environmental catastrophe, compelling the extraction of natural resources to meet escalating targets, forcing us to behave, in aggregate, like Lewis Mumford's "drunken heirs," ransacking our common inheritance, despite the fact an overwhelming majority of individuals believe that environmental protection is more important than economic growth.

In contrast to ecologically attuned public sentiment, influential and esteemed economists provide the frenzied pursuit of gain with a glowing patina of respectability by maintaining that the insatiability of markets is perfectly rational and ultimately beneficial. Yale's William Nordhaus,

for example, has made his reputation arguing that we should “discount” or delay climate adaptations until a hypothetical future date. His optimistic linear models predict that we will all be richer down the road, which means the necessary adaptations will then be comparatively cheaper, and thus less painful, to make. Of course the problem with paying later is that it may be too late, and that the monstrous growth projected to save us may be the cause of our demise.

Read also Serge Latouche, “[The world downscaled](#)”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2003. In response, environmentalists since the seventies have understandably promoted “degrowth” as an alternative to self-destruction. But while our collective footprint must be dramatically reduced and consumption reined in, not all growth is bad—the question, rather, is which areas should expand and which contract. The oil and gas sectors, along with meat industries and car manufacturers, must shrink dramatically or disappear to avert a worst-case scenario, while new infrastructure (efficient public transit, urban agriculture, the retrofitting of existing construction, wind and solar farms, reforestation and conservation projects, and more) must prosper.

Creating a zero-carbon society will require trillions of dollars of investment and state action on an unprecedented scale. This presents an opportunity to experiment with democratic modes of investment and forms of growth propelled by public mechanisms. As we saw with solar energy, our current profit-driven model does not encourage capital to invest in the technologies and institutions needed to save the planet. There’s no assurance that ecological sustainability will be guaranteed under a more socialist system, but subordinating our collective survival to the short-term imperatives of the market means we don’t stand a chance.

The fact is, we’re up against ecological limits, not monetary shortages; we are constrained by a carbon budget not a federal one, and we need to remake our economy to reflect this reality. Ample wealth exists to be reclaimed for collective benefit, and bringing finance under democratic control will mean that money will finally serve people, instead of the other way around. Nationalization and other forms of community ownership of energy suppliers and infrastructure will be crucial but must also involve genuine public oversight and control.

To finance a green transformation on the necessary scale, new forms of socially productive, as opposed to predatory, credit and debt are required. Credit and debt are promises, commitments between parties, and those bonds can inhibit or emancipate, expanding our horizons by enabling ventures that bear future benefit (in the absence of credit we are left with savings, the wealth stored up in the past). Lending need not involve usurious, compounding rates of interests that bloat beyond what a person, community, or ecosystem can reasonably repay.

As economist Ann Pettifor has noted, the pressure to increase income demands that *both* land and labor be exploited ever more intensely. The degradation of soil, sea, and atmosphere comes from the same source as the day-to-day deprivations of our working lives, propelling the hand-to-mouth treadmill on which many find themselves stuck. Millions of people toil nights and weekends, juggling multiple jobs, with the rewards flowing to the already rich. (Since 1973 productivity rose 77 percent in the United States while wages stagnated, the rising tide lifting only the most luxurious yachts; since the same year, the average American works an additional five forty-hour workweeks annually.)

That the affluent few are able to live idly off of unearned dividends and interest while most find themselves enduring extended shifts for a reduced pay-check makes this much clear: it is not just wealth but leisure that must be fairly apportioned if a sustainable democracy is to be achieved.

Questions of labor and leisure—of free time—have been central to debates about self-government since peasant citizens flooded the Athenian Pnyx. Plato and Aristotle, unapologetic elitists, were aghast that smiths and shoemakers were permitted to rub shoulders with the Assembly's wellborn. This offense to hierarchical sensibilities was possible only because commoners were compensated for their attendance. Payments sustained the participation of the poor—that's what held them up—so they could miss a day's work over hot flames or at the cobbler's bench to exercise power on equal footing with would-be oligarchs.

For all their disdain, Plato's and Aristotle's conviction that leisure facilitates political participation isn't wrong. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, radical workers agreed. They organized and fought their bosses for more free time, making substantial inroads until a range of factors, including the cult of consumption and a corporate counterattack, overpowered their efforts. A more sustainable, substantive democracy means resuscitating their campaign. Free time is not just a reprieve from the grindstone; it's an expansion of freedom and a prerequisite of self-rule.

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A reduction of work hours would have salutary ecological effects as well, as environmentalists have noted. A fundamental reevaluation of labor would mean assessing which work is superfluous and which essential; which processes can be automated and which should be done by hand; what activities contribute to our alienation and subjugation and which integrate and nourish us. "The kind of work that we'll need more of in a climate-stable future is work that's oriented toward sustaining and improving human life as well as the lives of other species who share our world," environmental journalist and political theorist Alyssa Battistoni has written. "That means teaching, gardening, cooking, and nursing: work that makes people's lives better without consuming vast amounts of resources, generating significant carbon emissions, or producing huge amounts of stuff." The time to experiment with more ecologically conscious, personally fulfilling, and democracy-enhancing modes of valuing labor and leisure is upon us, at precisely the moment that time is running out.

With climate calamity on the near horizon, liberal democracies are in a bind. The dominant economic system constrains our relationship to the future, sacrificing humanity's well-being and the planet's resources on the altar of endless growth while enriching and empowering the global 1 percent. Meanwhile, in America, the Constitution exacerbates this dynamic, preserving and even intensifying a system of minority rule and lashing the country's citizens to an aristocratic past.

The fossil fuel and finance industries, alongside the officials they've bought off, will fight to the death to maintain the status quo, but our economic arrangements and political agreements don't have to function the way they do. Should democratic movements manage to mount a successful challenge to the existing order, indigenous precolonial treaty-making processes provide an example of the sort of wisdom a new, sustainable consensus might contain. The Gdoonaaganinaa, or "Dish with One Spoon" treaty, outlines a relationship between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and Nishnaabeg people. The dish symbolizes the shared land on which both groups depend and to which all are responsible; in keeping with the Haudenosaunee Great Law of peace, the agreement aims to prevent war, so there is only a spoon and no knife, to

ensure no blood will be shed. The dish “represented harmony and interconnection,” Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains. “Neither party could abuse the resource.”

Nishnaabeg environmental ethics dictated that individuals could only take as much as they needed, that they must share everything following Nishnaabeg redistribution of wealth customs. . . . These ethics combined with their extensive knowledge of the natural environment, including its physical features, animal behavior, animal populations, weather, and ecological interactions ensured that there would be plenty of food to sustain both parties in the future. Decisions about use of resources were made for the long term. Nishnaabeg custom required decision makers to consider the impact of their decisions on all the plant and animal nations .

Both Nishnaabeg and Haudenosaunee law dictates that leaders must take the needs of the next seven generations of their respective communities into account.

What comes next is an open question. Capitalism is in doubt. The patriarchy is trembling. White supremacy is sputtering. Borders are going up where they once came down. Technology may tip the balance of power toward an elite that owns the robots and controls the algorithms. The natural environment is on the brink of chaos. To combat the apocalyptic apparitions, we need to conjure alternative worlds, leaping forward *and* looking back. As Hannah Arendt observes in *Between Past and Future*, tradition does not have to be a fetter chaining us to dead matter; it can also be a thread that helps guide us toward something better and still unseen.

What kind of ancestors do we want to be? With every action or inaction, we help decide how the future will unfold. What principles and commitments do we want to adopt for a democracy that doesn't yet exist? How will we cast our votes for a society we won't live to see?