ON FUTURE PEOPLE

Rupert Read

It is no longer socially-acceptable to exhibit prejudice against ethnic minority people on grounds of their ethnicity, women on grounds of their gender, or working-class people on grounds of their class. The last bastions of discrimination are being overcome: such as prejudice against gay and lesbian people, and against disabled people. . . .Or, is there one more, crucial bastion of discrimination still strongly in place?

Take this kind of remark, that I have heard on an alarming number of occasions in casual or dinner-party conversation, and perhaps you have too: 'I don't really care about what happens after I'm dead and gone.' We might dismiss this as the attitude just of some old curmudgeon, and think that it is of no moral or political consequence. But: *it directly implies not caring about future people*, the next generation(s). How would we react if someone said to us, 'I just don't care about what happens to black people' or 'I just don't care about what happens to disabled people'? I take it that we would be singularly appalled.

Philosophy can explain why, quite simply. If we ought to care as much for people separated from us only by identity, or by space, then the same is true for people separated from us only by time. Future people count, too. Their lives matter just as much.

Of course, most readers of THINK probably wouldn't dream of endorsing the extreme remark cited above. But what about this: 'No-one is going to infringe on my rights! I can drive or fly as much as I like. That's freedom!' This kind of sentiment, in one way or another, is widespread these days; you can find it all over the blogosphere at the

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drop of a hat. It is a product of the extreme individualism of our times. Now think what it implies: Because of an unwillingness to tolerate 'infringements' on one's own 'liberty', one is willing to take many things that future people might need. We don't any longer tolerate stamping on the life-chances – effectively, on the faces – of black people, working-class people, disabled people... Why then do we have any respect at all for the person who prizes their own 'freedom' above the right of future people to have a decent life, or indeed any life at all?

I suggest that the answer is: because we haven't fully *thought through* yet that future people deserve to be well-treated and must be decently provided for, just as children and severely disabled people (and so on and so forth) must be. Just because we can't hear the cries of anguish of our descendants yet to come, doesn't mean that they don't count... On the contrary – it just makes it all the more urgent that we make the effort to think and care about them...

Yes, we have got somewhat better about caring about people who are *spatially* distant from us – people in the 'developing' world. The increased power of broadcast media technology has been helpful here. But: there just ain't any such thing as beaming pictures back to us from the future. *That* has to be left up to films such as 'The Age of Stupid' or 'Children of Men'. We are still just not good enough about caring about people who are *temporally* distant from us. Future people.

Nor is this even just a failure of the political Right. Many 'socialists' too seem markedly more interested in the poor of the 'developing' world and in the working class (and in enriching them materially) than in future people. But if equality – the central value of socialism – is to *mean* anything at all, then it must apply to future people too. Industrial-growthism is no good, if it means by implication that we fail to take the rights and needs of future people seriously. We should treat them *as our equals.* So it is now clear: any real socialism *must* be an eco-socialism.

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I think that the considerations above explain some of the current epidemic of manmade-climate-change denialism, which is a striking phenomenon now especially on the political right (e.g. in Britain: in UKIP, the BNP, the DUP, and across swathes of the Tory Party) and in the right-wing media (e.g. the *Mail*, the *Express*, the *Telegraph*). The debate over manmade climate change is a proxy for a debate over differing visions of society: for the green movement, of a better, more localised world; for the 'conservative' Right, of unabated 'freedom' now (whatever the consequences for future people?). But it is vital to note that the 'conservative' vision is rarely honest with us: few 'conservative' politicians dare openly to acknowledge that the consequences of unmitigated uncaring 'freedom' (to burn, to consume, to fly, etc.) now *are* highly likely to be mass disaster later. And so they hide behind a tragic refusal to acknowledge the climate science that greens (and most of the left), by contrast, can and do honestly embrace. Thus: the simple reality is of course that the science in practice does support one side in the debate, and not the other.

And even those benighted readers who have not grasped the nettle of our breaching of the limits to growth – first with CFCs, and now much more consequentially with CO2 – must accept at least this: that if we fail to act precautionarily on reining in manmade climate change, then we are at least, without doubt, imposing systemic *uncertainty* on future people. Imposing on them unacceptable uncertainty and insecurity about their future, and about whether they (and *their* children) will even have a future...

Some philosophers (famously, Derek Parfit) think that, because we don't know exactly what future people there will be, then we cannot wrong them. My answer to Parfit's famous objection is: just because future people are in some sense amorphous, doesn't mean that they aren't in another sense perfectly concrete. They will exist (unless we commit the greatest crime of all) – we just don't know exactly *who* 'they' are yet... But just because you don't know who the victims of a crime will be, doesn't mean that

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the crime is any less. And if the potential victims are in your care – as our children are, and as future people are – then that makes any such crime even worse, even more contemptible. Not to be contemplated. . .

The next great leap forward in seeking justice in this world, and seeking to put in place an ethic of real responsibility and care, will be to take seriously the claims of the future ones. It is no longer possible in the courts to treat other human beings as property, to ignore their rights: slavery is long gone. In countries such as Spain, Switzerland, and New Zealand, such real rights and protections (not mere welfarist gestures – See http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/ – which keep animals' property-status in place) are now being extended to great apes, and to some extent to other animals. There has even been weighty discussion, for over a generation now, of the strong arguments in favour of giving legal standing – real rights – to plants and (more generally and more crucially) to ecosystems and some actual movement in this direction this year, in Ecuador.

We will not flourish as a species unless our ecosystems flourish. I believe that it is high time for future people to be given the kinds of rights and protections that present people – black or white, gay or straight, abled or disabled – already take for granted. *Our human descendants* need to be granted legal standing. This will protect them, and will offer some significant protection – probably, much better protection than any we currently have in place – for ecosystems.

A tentative start has been made, for instance in Hungary with their bringing in a Commissioner for Future Generations, a sort of ombudsman with the interests of future people in mind. But this is only the most tentative of starts. . .

For, if you are against prejudice against ethnic minority people, women, etc. – and you surely are – then it is time to take up the same attitude toward the people of the future. If you believe in justice, if you care about people – and you

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certainly do – then it is time to get behind the idea of being unprejudiced against future people. Let us not take refuge, tacitly or explicitly, in this prejudice, ever again. Ending this prejudice will mean a revolution in our practices. It will save our civilisation.

Future people are coming; and when they arrive, if we haven't created a decent world for them, boy are they going to be mad... Future people may bite back – our children and grandchildren may seek financial restitution from us, if we let them down catastrophically...

But that isn't why we should take future people seriously. We should take them seriously because it is only right to do so, and anything less is not just unjust, it is uncaring, and unworthy of us... The Existentialist philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre warned us during a previous great crisis – the rise of Nazism – against seeking for a 'reprieve' from facing up to our responsibilities. We need to stop hoping for a reprieve. There will be no reprieve; every delay just makes things worse for the future people, and (by extension) for us.

We need to start fighting the climate war now. Anything less simply connotes an unjust discrimination against future people. Philosophers should lead the way, in making clear that prejudice against future people can be acceptable no longer.

And: this might just be the most powerful rhetorical tool at our disposal yet to have emerged... For when you talk this through with ordinary people, they *get* it. No-one wants any more to be prejudiced. If we can get folk to see that to be the unprejudiced 'liberal-minded' people they want to think of themselves as being, they have to start treating the future – future people – very differently, then another world really may be possible...

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