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REVIEW ESSAY

Just Out of Our Reach

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Jonathan White, *In the Long Run: The Future as Political Idea* (London: Profile Books, 2024)

Gerard Delanty, *Senses of the Future: Conflicting Ideas of the Future in the World Today* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024)

It's an enduring paradox and sign of our present times that the future has returned to occupy a central space in the humanities and social sciences, and yet social theory has no clear view on what the future is, nor does it make concrete suggestions as to how the future concept might be meaningfully understood. Books on the future often give the impression of the orchestra playing on the *Titanic*: let's enjoy our academic pastime while we have the luxury to think. The future has a certain agency of its own, and outlooks on the future have also changed considerably in the last ten years or so, during which academic interest in the future has exploded. The future is no longer a terrain of speculation on the unknown; it is, rather, a concrete and observable presence in our lives. Climate change is no longer in the future, and the ominous feeling that forms of crisis were brewing that was already part of the declaration of the "end of history" in 1989 is now a growing realization of the impact of our world-altering political, social, and military conflicts.

It will take generations of scholarship to make sense of our present, but it's difficult to escape this feeling of a squeeze between, on the one hand, our need and, on the other, our failure to address something so essential to the human condition in ways conducive to both understanding and purposeful action. Jonathan White's *In the long Run: The Future as Political Idea* is the most recent attempt to consider the future as a problem for the humanities and social sciences. As such, it stands in a field defined by a number of recent or relatively recent works in political ecology, in the anthropology of time, in the sociology of expectations, in anticipation studies, and in a new "history of the future."[1]

[1]Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London, 2013). Dipesh Chakrapborty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, 2021). Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'," *New Literary History* 41/3 (2010), 471–90; Julia Nordblad, "Time for

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In many of these works, the future is not taken per se as the most relevant problem—rather, it forms the backdrop to understanding various forms of future making. White, in contrast, suggests that the future as a specific temporal horizon raises central issues of political theory.

Most recent political philosophy has considered the future through the narrow lens of redistributional justice or contract theory. White's book is an exception here through its explicit dialogue with critical humanities and social theory.[2] *In the Long Run* addresses the future through a set of dichotomous juxtapositions: "futures open and closed," "futures near and far", "futures imagined and calculated," "futures rational and impulsive," and so on. These dichotomies may be poetic—if so, the master of the art is Barbara Adam, who has long proposed seeing the future as such a series of tensions, and also often worked artistically with the future concept.[3] As signposts to a work of political analysis, these dichotomies seem to me unproductive or even false. Viewing the future in terms of dichotomies, not least through the reiterated claim that futures are either open or closed, but also through the idea that futures must be either real or unreal, utopian or dystopian, images or calculations, prediction or forecast, is not a productive engagement with a temporal horizon that is all of those things, which is precisely the reason why the future is a difficult thing to grasp in social theory. The future is, as Reinhart Koselleck most importantly pointed out, a perfectly dialectical concept, although in the hermeneutic, not the historical materialist, sense.[4] Openness and foreclosure depend on our place in time, our viewpoint on the world, and our understanding of what many authors of the postwar period called the human condition. The human condition was a term developed by Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt. It expressed a much more complex relation to the problem of being in time than a simple juxtaposition of foreclosure or freedom.[5] In the idea of the human condition was the observation that freedom had reached unprecedented scope through decades of democratization, mastery of technology, and the end of scarcity. At the same time, the forces of progress had created a sense of walking in the wilderness, a loss of horizon that Hannah Arendt described as the loss of the sense of boundaries that made the human universe a welcoming place, not terrifying one. That futures are "open" is a worn and used trope which reflects difficult geneaologies from the rejection of historicism and the "freedom of choice" in Cold War and early neoliberal debate. The principle that the future is always open emerged from postwar debates in the Mont Pèlerin Society and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The paradox of the open future is, of course,

Politics: How a Conceptual History of Forests Can Help Us Politicize the Long Term," *European Journal of Social Theory* 20/1 (2017), 164–82. Jens Beckert, *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (Cambridge, MA, 2016). Francois Hartog, *Chronos: The West Confronts Time* (New York, 2022).

[2]Here, it stands in the company of authors such as Stefan Eich, "Expedience and Experimentation: John Maynard Keynes and the Politics of Time," *American Journal of Political Science* (2024), at https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12839; or Daniel Innerarity, *The Future and Its Enemies: In Defense of Political Hope* (Stanford, 2012).

[3]Barbara Adam and Chris Groves, *Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics* (Leiden and Boston, 2007).

[4]Reinhart Koselleck, "Erfahrungsraum und Erwartungshorizont: Zwei historische Kategorien," in Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, vol. 2 (1989), 349–75.

[5]Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (London, 2014). Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958) (Chicago, 2013). Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, 1956).

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that in their emphasis on open future horizons, neoliberals did much to close down the potentiality of open time and set futures on paths predefined as optimal or rational. The marketplace became the harbinger of potentiality, and politics the area of foreclosure.[6]

White doesn't pay attention to the historicity of future statements such as "open" or "closed," and as such his book stands in stark contrast to Gerard Delanty's *Senses of the Future: Conflicting Ideas of the Future in the World Today*. The latter carefully unpacks an intellectual world of thinking about the future in the humanities and social sciences of the twentieth century. *Senses of the Future* is a wonderfully rich work of scholarship. Yet the many conflicts and tensions outlined by Delanty are never quite drawn to their full in view of the urgency of our future crisis. Delanty indeed stresses that the future is "open," and argues that it is this openness that makes the future a fundamental concept of human action. It is as a concept of action that the future has mainly been approached in social theory throughout the twentieth century, in other words not as a form of divination or prophecy, but in opposition to ideas of law-bound developments and determinism. From a phenomenological standpoint, the future is about the problem of being *in time*, and as Karl Mannheim, for instance, suggested, the future concept was central to distinguishing in a critical way between the closed hegemony of ideology and the open potential of utopia.[7] Delanty's book is a testament to the richness of thinking about the future as precisely a problem of action in the twentieth century, and yet we stand at a moment in time when we seem to be faced not simply with the loss of future that, it is said, leads to nostalgia and grief, but with an overwhelming sense of future catastrophe and inaction. While White considers the loss of future as leading to a crippling of political imagination, Delanty proposes that the sense of a squeeze in human time is an imperative for philosophizing. Our urgency must be creative. Perhaps for this reason he spends much time on scholars of the Cold War period, since they introduced the problem of a coming man-made Apocalypse as an in fact inescapable product of the human condition.

Futures are, of course, always "open" in the sense that what has not happened yet remains to some extent influenceable. At the same time, they are not open if we consider that the structures of the present—among which I would count fossil-fuel capitalism, populism and fascism, financial and geopolitical instabilities, technologies of war, and a new cycle of armament spending—are far beyond the reach of any one of us and arguably only influenceable through a radical reinvention of collective action. Even if such forms of action emerge, and may well already be emerging, these future determinants will in all likelihood still prove difficult to influence, because they have been in the making for a long time and deeply problematic ways of dealing with the future are part of the institutional structures of contemporary society. Liliana Doganova explains, in her recent book on the role of discounting in models designed to deal with climate change, that the very tools and methods of calculation and foresight with which we pretend to manage futures rather play the role of constantly deferring our future burden

[6]Jenny Andersson, *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists and the Struggle for the Cold War Imagination* (Oxford, 2018).

[7]Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* was first published in 1936.

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to some one else's present.[8] One of the problems with our so-called tools of foresight is that they do not help us clarify the boundaries between what we know and do not know about future time, nor what we may be able to change or not; in other words, we lack a reflection on the open-versus-closed nature not just of an abstract, metaphorical future, but of very concrete and specific trends. Ways of talking about the future, from the innumerable think tanks, experts, institutes for the future, and so on of the present, is often peppered with unclear time frames—and the further we move from the present, the more we see of phantasmagoric speculation of what life in distant time will be. Hypercapitalist and super-ecomodernist? A hybrid of Wild West homesteading and rewilding? Genetically modified, all-disease-cured Nietzschean transhumanism? Or an apocalyptic struggle for increasingly rare fundamentals of human need, water, bread, firewood. "The future is open," in this context, is part of a mysticist gospel, and its effect, I would suggest, is to create a time gap between the calculable and actionable time frames of the present and a long term that is both evacuated and omnipresent but rarely the object of genuine academic engagement. More often than not, our modes of knowledge production make it difficult for us to discern crucial epistemological distinctions such as the very crucial difference between not knowing enough about coming time, and a very different but more salient problem of in fact knowing a lot, but lacking the will or capacity for action. The future is not just a product of what we do, but also of our inaction, and often we fail to chart the difference between long-term and short-term trends and to identify the key moment or good path for action. The problem of the future is very rarely a problem of not knowing, and very often a problem of our inability to agree on what we know to be important and future-relevant knowledge. This is not a problem that we are close to solving anytime soon, but White is correct in suggesting that, as democracy erodes, so does our capacity to think constructively about the future and so the idea that it is "open" benefits a part of the political spectrum while the idea that it is "closed" benefits another.

There is such a thing as a knowledge theory of the future. A central contribution to understanding the future as a problem of modern social science was made by the French philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel, who suggested the notion of *futuribles*.[9] Futuribles, said de Jouvenel, were not facts exactly, since things happening in the future cannot be directly observed, but rather they were germs of unfolding developments. Many futuribles are observable, if not directly, in the present and de Jouvenel, who argued in the context of many other central epistemological interventions on historical time in the 1950s and 1960s, thought that it was of the essence to consider what these future germs may develop into. To de Jouvenel—a complicated historical character who came from interwar French fascism, joined key neoliberal circles in the 1940s and 1950s, and ended his life in romantic ideas of ecology and human happiness—this was not a task of binaries between real and unreal. Rather, it was a matter of a constant, informed speculation, including on things that to the present are neither visible nor palatable, and he viewed it as a task for the political scientist.

[8]Liliana Doganova, *Discounting the Future: The Ascendancy of a Novel Political Technology* (New York, 2024).

[9]Bertrand de Jouvenel, *L'art de la conjecture* (Monaco, 1962).

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It's hard to know what de Jouvenel would have thought about the knowledge problem that the future presents today. Knowledge about future developments has grown exponentially in the postwar era, as computer power and data collection encompass time and space in unprecedented ways. Most futurists of the postwar period agreed that the future is not, per se, a knowledge problem, but a problem of sense making and of boldness in seeing clearly where discernible trends lead. In the Cold War era, futurists saw this boldness as a matter of urgency and argued that saving the future and rehumanizing it required all imaginable forms of ingenuity, from calculation to imagination and storytelling, and from scientific intervention to law, activism, and journalism. They also saw the future as a massive call to interdisciplinarity and thinking across the boundaries of knowledge production. They would, therefore, have rejected dichotomies and proposed that what the future requires is a scientific undertaking across the disciplines and with the range of intellectual dispositions available to us—including calculation and storytelling, facticity and narration, prediction and prophecy. Instead of dichotomies, it would become clear that the future as such is a problem to the humanities and social-science mind, precisely because it stands exactly at the crossing point of many false dichotomies, not least that between the real and the unreal, the material and the constructed. This is a key challenge to contemporary social theory: my impression is that the future has been compartmentalized in the present-day humanities and social sciences so that historians take one part, sociologists another, and political theorists and philosophers yet another. Our inability to dialogue across these boundaries has meant that the future remains the weak spot of twentieth-century critical thinking, and there is also a problem here in our willingness to revisit twentieth-century thinkers without taking into account the sense of urgency with which they approached the future.

White's *In the Long Run* makes the important but problematic argument that times of emergency become times of democratic deficit, because of the constant focalization on the present. Democracy and representational procedures take time, and White is right to suggest that democracy is dependent on a long-term horizon that mobilizes people for common action. In White's argument is a plea for a return to a more qualitative and grounded party politics, a sympathetic argument for democrats. I do find it problematic. Emergency, for White, comes from the stack of future challenges that pile up on our present: populism and fascism, but also climate activism, which rejects technocracy and the slow work of institutions in favor of direct action. I cannot see these as a side of the same coin, and it is also hard to make sense of White's argument that a long-term-minded politics depends on acknowledging defeat and handing over victory to one's opponent. The obvious critique of White's argument is that there are many different presentisms and also many different emergencies in our tormented present – should we really approach fascism and populism with the same call to the long term as we might the civilizational challenge of climate change? Surely the latter calls for urgent action while the first requires us to protect the history and longevity of democratic institutions. Are all calls to emergency in politics bad? Democracy depends on managing emergencies, and in the past, periods of acute crisis management—not least in the interwar period—have laid the basis for democratic institutions, challenged as they may be in the present. Arguably there is something about democracy and its slow turning of the wheels even in light of the unthinkable that is part of our future problem

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today. What indeed is the emergency? The futuristic call to a time that stops in the name of mastering the present, or the cumulative result of a set of geological, viral, biological, and atmospheric challenges that present societies cannot claim to be ignorant of but have chosen to ignore (indeed through democratic procedures)? Problems become emergencies when they are not dealt with in time. White seems to think that there is a sense of guilt and shame in the idea of the future, which is conducive to an inherently totalitarian politics. I don't agree with that, and I would suggest that any democratic engagement with the future must begin in an acknowledgment of the fact that we have both the knowledge and the institutions to deal with our long-term challenges but we choose not to, and that there is a sense of broken responsibility in that. White does not engage with the historical literature on the temporal regimes of democracy, nor with those works in intellectual history or political theory that have shown that a fundamental element in our modern notion of democracy is its emphasis on present generations at the expense of the future living. To White, different political movements have different future manifestos—from the revolutionary to the slow "snail" of reformism. While this is interesting, missing from White's analysis are those arguments—such as those of the French philosopher Pierre Rosanvallon or historian of ideas Julia Nordblad, for instance—that have emphasized that the future, precisely because of its long-term dimension and its constant reach beyond periods of electoral accountability, is the theoretical problem of democracy in the way that it has developed in the Western world since the seventeenth century.[10] This leaves us with a question: if the modern party apparatus, a political object that we should perhaps be careful not to idealize since it grew historically around the idea of redistribution from scarce resources, is out of tune with the Anthropocenic condition, then how should we do democratic politics in the future?[11] Political theory should be mobilized in order to think about this problem, and White leaves us a little short-changed by pointing to the need for new forms of democratically anchored expertise and a remaking of party structures. While it is easy to agree with those points, it begs the question, do we have time for that?

Delanty's *Senses of the Future* is a very different book which will be a useful guide for students and scholars of social theory. It sets out a breathtaking exposé of the many ways in which key political intellectuals and social theorists have grappled with the problem of the future across the twentieth century. Delanty explores a set of conflicts and dilemmas in the future concept. One of those conflicts is indeed the nature of openness versus foreclosure; another is between freedom and responsibility. This brings Delanty to emphasize the future as an essentially contested concept, linked inextricably to the problem of making sense of the human world. Delanty ends up in a different place from White: to Delanty, addressing the long term from where we presently are necessitates a new form of cosmopolitanism, in which the engagement with linear progress, mastery of nature, and short-term growth cycles of the postwar era is replaced by visions of global solidarity, new forms of activism, and an extended idea of the future living.

[10]Pierre Rosanvallon, *La légitimité démocratique: Impartialité, réflexivité, proximité* (Paris, 2013). Nordblad, "Time for Politics."

[11]Fredrik Albritton Jonsson and Carl Wennerlind, *Scarcity: A History from the Origins of Capitalism to the Climate Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, 2023).

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I read Delanty's book as an important contribution to a great growth of social-science and humanities thinking about the future in the last decade or so, which has also sought to revive an archeology of the future in the different forms of futures studies in the Cold War moment. To my mind, the future concept was fundamentally reformulated in the atomic era by a number of key thinkers who sought to imagine a kind of "open" future horizon beyond totalitarian or totalizing ideologies of the left and right, and positioned the future indeed as a problem of what it really meant to be human, and to be in the world. The strands of thinking that they developed were not only temporal—considering the consequences of human action into an extended time frame of twenty-five, fifty, a hundred years—but also spatial—considering the horizons of human agency across the globe.

The development of futures studies in the immediate post-1945 moment should be viewed, I think, as a turn in the humanities and social-science imagination toward what we may call planetary or Anthropocenic knowledge. It was not, after 1945, climate change that was immediately at the core of attention, although the seeds of thinking about climate change can clearly be found in this moment. Rather, it was the possibility of destruction of the human world through the forces of technology and rationality. In futures studies—which developed in a close relationship with other epistemological innovations of the time, not least systems analysis, peace and conflict studies, and ecological economics—was a cosmopolitanism, although first shaped by the boundaries of the Cold War conflict and the emergence of the global South. Key to the futures studies imaginary was the idea that the future could be rethought not as a space of colonial conquest and superpower territorialism, but as a space of the common interests of all "mankind."[12] A certain temporal distance to the present was seen as necessary—if ordinary people could project themselves into a future space, then they might see the common interest in peace, instead of war, and they might also see the necessity of living in harmony and respecting scarce natural resources. In future studies was also a kind of neo-utopianism, indeed a reformulation of the utopia concept in light of the potential of man-made apocalypse. Utopia, said Hans Jonas—in direct dialogue with Erich Fromm and Ernst Bloch—was no longer a space of "hope."[13] There was no time for hope; rather Jonas saw utopia as the imperative of responsibility (*Prinzip Verantwortung*). Man, said Jonas, was the only animal who could deploy his cognitive powers to conjure up futures and to both know them and imagine them differently. The central capacity was the ability to consider through informed speculation the long-term consequences of actions, acknowledge uncertainty, and respect the principle of no harm. As a manifesto for a hyper-technological age, Jonas redefined the outlook on progress: technologies that threated to undo existence were not good technologies and action without long-term responsibility was a misuse of human intellectual capacities, indeed a breach or a form of trespass of what, to Jonas, were necessary boundaries to human action.

[12]Jenny Andersson and Sibylle Duhautois, "Futures of Mankind: The Emergence of the Global Future," in Caspar Sylvest and Rens van Munster, eds., *The Politics of Globality since 1945* (Abingdon and New York, 2016), 106–25.

[13]Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago, 1984).

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Of course, the cosmopolitanism of Cold War futures studies was much more limited than any engagement with the temporal and spatial dimensions of humanity must be today. Futures studies is also still very much a domain of white academic thinking. As Arjun Appadurai once pointed out, the capacity to think about the future is unevenly redistributed, and large parts of the world are quite literally stuck in the present—even worse, they have had their future taken away many times.[14] As Delanty carefully points out, cosmopolitanism is itself today a fractured concept, and in new future imaginaries of the present are sidetracks and perversions of ideas of the long term and ideas of future generations. Consider the utilitarian, hyperrational 'long-termism' of the now closed, scandalous Oxford Future of Humanity institute, the rejection of both history and reproductive futures in posthumanist thinking, or the rejection of speciesism that flourishes in the critical humanities and that at their worst remove the very idea of the responsible human subject. To embrace the future is, as Barbara Adam suggests, to care for it, to seek to establish the link between the past and the future in ways that acknowledge the long line of human life, and respect for other life forms. As such, cosmopolitanism is impossible without the notion of responsibility, as a principle extended in time and space to encompass virtually all that is living. An engagement with the "open" future would be to see, as Delanty does, all those living as a great array of potential that must not be foreclosed but embraced. Our task becomes to identify such potentiality. In contrast, a presentist concern with calculable future preferences, cost–benefit analysis across known and unknown forms of living, genetic enhancement, or climate engineering would appear, to me, to be ways of closing down potential. War is, of course, perhaps the largest closing down of human potential imaginable, yet war, and the urgency of crisis, has led human societies to rethink the future many times in the past, and to come out with ideas of large-scale institutional change in the name of the global future. Likely this is also where our present is heading, although it seems like a horribly slow and tormented process.

[14] Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*.

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