Robert Hassan - No future: Democracy in the age of neoliberal speed

Today, now-focussed executive government bypasses people and parliaments to function in the service of now-centred economic imperatives, argues Robert Hassan. Democracy will eventually die if we continue to unthinkingly accept that our short-termism and reliance on abstract market mechanisms will look after our future.

The subject of global warming has been simmering away in the public consciousness, so to speak, for over a decade now. During that period, debate on the validity of the science has shifted inexorably towards a consensus around the fact that it is now happening, and that industrialisation is largely to blame. Nonetheless, on Halloween Day 2006 British Prime Minister Tony Blair delivered a frightening future scenario to a world encultured into not thinking beyond the next six months. He bullet-pointed [1] the Stern Report on global warming and [2] solemnly declared it the ‘most important report on the future published by the Government in our time in office’.

The contents and meaning of the actual 700-page report may have been upstaged by the prominence and some might say, celebrity, of its messenger. Still, we live in a media-soaked and celebrity-oriented world. The Report’s author, [3] Sir Nicholas Stern has no name recognition, so it was Blair who delivered it, making sure that media coverage was blanket. Accordingly, on that October day the airwaves and Internet buzzed with projections of environmental Armageddon if the recommendations of the Report were not taken up. Pious politicos of almost every stripe, in all the major economies, argued the need for action, and commended the author—an economist who prescribed a wholly market driven set of solutions—for his sagacity and for his sober (read non-ideological) assessments on what we all need to do.

By the beginning of November, our collective sense of angst seemed to have dissipated. Other issues had clawed their way back to prominence in the local and global mediascape. The country-sized butcher shop that is Iraq, reasserted its domination of our media gaze, fascinating us like a fatal car crash in super slow-mo, with no detail too grisly for the bloggers, or future scenario too outlandish for the MSM.

In Australia the media focus was in fact still connected with the momentary and subsiding media fright over global warming. Just like in the USA, the UK and in many parts of Europe, the nuclear option is once more being talked about openly, as is the purported ‘clean coal’ solution to CO2 emissions. A front-page article in the Australian newspaper on 4th November storied a government review that gave a green light to more research into the nuclear power alternative. The government rationale behind its readiness to countenance the building of nuclear power plants [4] was summed-up bluntly by prime minister John Howard himself, who opined: ‘We would be foolish…with our vast resources of uranium, to say that we are not going to consider nuclear power’ (Australian 2006). Throughout the entire article the word ‘plutonium’—with its particular resonances in history and culture, and what we know about its effects for our future—did not appear.

Stepping back from the future

Clearly, in the age of neoliberal globalisation, our future is contextualized in terms of economics. Moreover, the dismal science is cleverly spun so as to hearten us, or at least lull us into thinking that the future and the problems of the environment therein, can be solved through neoliberal economic means such as carbon trading, nuclear reactors or ‘clean coal’. The market will look after us. Don’t worry. So we don’t. Or try not to. We sublimate our apprehensions over a what a radically-changed environmental future would look and feel like, and deal with what the neoliberal economic reality forces us to deal with—the short-term perspective. And it is within this foreshortened horizon that we effectively step back from the future and our responsibility towards it. However, what we miss in this liminal space is that our approach to the future cannot be made rational or coherent through economics. Only through politics and ethics is this possible.

So where do we situate politics, the politics of liberal democracy in this context? It may seem obvious, but to many it’s not: if we want to think about the future more carefully we need to consider time and how our liberal democratic institutions function within a temporal framework. Jean Chesneaux [5] put the problem plainly when he wrote that:

Speed has become one of the paramount values and requirements in our modern societies. Yet democracy needs time, as a major pre-condition for political debate and decision-making; it cannot surrender blindly to speed. Nor does speed favour the dialogue between present, past and future, which is fundamental for the proper exercise of democracy.

The ‘paramount values’ Chesneaux refers to are those of neoliberalism, so-called ‘free-markets’ and an unrelenting promotion of the cult of ICTs to transform our world into an allegedly hyper-efficient consumer wonderland. Speed is the essence of profit under capitalism and since the 1970s, global economy, culture and society have been placed on an open-ended continuum of
speed that sets no limits as to how fast the market and ICTs can drive us.

**Liberal democracy and the crisis of time**

Democracy does indeed require time. Ideally it needs the time it takes to fully understand issues and problems and possible consequences. Liberal democracy has its own temporal rhythms and cycles that have been structured and guided since the 18th century by calendar and clock. In German there is a term *eigenzeit* that translates, roughly, as 'a time in everything'. We know this intuitively at least. The differing embedded times in nature, culture and in our bodies create a highly complex temporal world, comprising of what time theorist [6] Barbara Adam calls 'timescapes' which are given coherence and form through context. Moreover these temporal contexts or timescapes can be made more or less durable through the iterative processes of enculturation and institutionalisation and habit. Over the past two hundred years liberal democracy has developed its own timescape and has been more or less successful in being able to take a leading role regarding how we approached the future through the progress-oriented tenets of modernity.

Today liberal democracy flounders in the wake of neoliberal speed.

Today, now-focussed executive government bypasses people and parliaments to function in the service of now-centred economic imperatives. The human catastrophe that is Iraq is but the most recent example of quick solutions from executive government with little thought to 'what happens next'. As social acceleration increases we are correspondingly unable to think of alternative ways of being and seeing; so we revert to habitual forms of thinking, the reflex action to reach to what is already at hand: ‘clean coal’ or nuclear power or market mechanisms suddenly become ‘solutions’, and deeper temporal problems such as radioactive waste are simply wished away. In this mode, [7] Ulrich Beck’s ‘risk society’ is the inevitable consequence of losing sight of the future and abrogating democratic control over time.

In our postmodern age we confront a crisis of time. The idea of progress appears to us now as a relic from a long-gone past. And when we are briefly able to lift our head from the priorities of the now, the future looms dark and forebodingly on the horizon. The temporal sureties and rhythms of the clock that had displaced pre-modern temporalities are themselves being displaced by postmodern flows of virtual space and ‘network time’. And in our postmodern age we confront a crisis of politics. Accelerating spatio-temporal network flows hollow out the local-national frameworks that supported liberal democratic processes and the imminent potentialities for the construction of inclusive futures. The dominating and rapid beat of neoliberal globalization, by contrast, functions in a whirling vortex of immediacy.

It is incredible to be reminded by Hans Jonas that in over two thousand years in which philosophers have constructed ethical worlds, [8] *nothing in these could be regarded as an ‘ethic of the future’,* as a guide to how we should think about and be responsible to those yet to be born. Jonas argued that in the age of ‘modern technology’ such an ethical stance is increasingly imperative.

Jérôme Bindé the Director of Analysis and Forecasting at UNESCO [9] has reflected upon this and writes that:

Our relation to time has enormous economic, social, political and ecological consequences. All over the world, the citizens of today are claiming rights over the citizens of tomorrow, threatening their well-being and at times their lives, and we are beginning to realize that we a jeopardising the exercise by future generations of their human rights. Without proper attention, future generations are in danger of becoming the prisoners of unmanageable changes...

We are already captive to the ideology of the market and its corollary that ICTs are simply a solution in search of a problem. To develop an ethics of human conduct that is temporally oriented, and focussed more particularly on the long-term, is to put in place the foundation stones for a new kind of politics. Liberal democracy is not dead, but it is bleeding and weakened. It atrophies more when political celebrities and global media act as if there is no history of political will, no political dynamism possible in the present, and no belief in our capacity to act as a collective agency to envision a more open and inclusive future. Democracy will eventually die if we continue to unthinkingly accept that our consumer-fuelled avarice and our short-termism and reliance on abstract market mechanisms will look after our future. Only when we begin to speak of global warming (and our world more broadly) in terms of temporal, ethical and political challenges, will we (all of us) have a chance of approaching the future with some confidence.

Further links

[10] Timescapes of the network society


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[1] the Stern Report on global warming:
http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/sternreview_index.cfm
[4] was summed-up bluntly by prime minister John Howard himself:
http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page10300.asp
[5] put the problem plainly when he wrote that: http://ssi.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/39/3/407
[8] nothing in these could be regarded as an ‘ethic of the future’:
http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/gec/gecko/detsadam.htm
[9] has reflected upon this and writes that:
http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/public_culture/v012/12.1binde.html

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