

# Q and A with Jonathan White on *In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea*

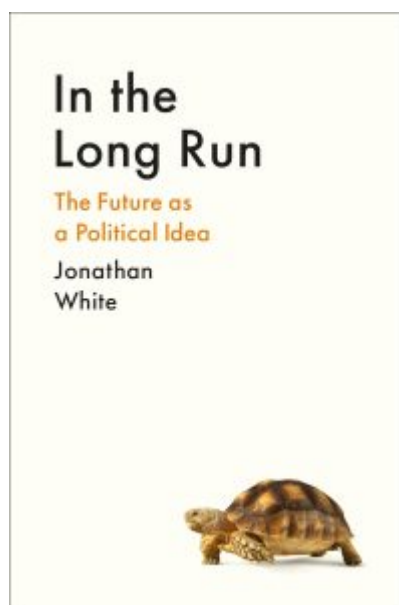
We speak to **Jonathan White** about his new book, ***In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea***, which investigates how changing political conceptions of the future have impacted societies from the birth of democracy to the present.

On Tuesday 30 January 2024 Jonathan White spoke about the book at an LSE research showcase which you can [watch back here](#). On Monday 11 March at 6.30pm he will speak at a public LSE panel event, *The politics of the future* – [find details and register here](#).

***In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea*. Jonathan White. Profile Books. 2024.**

Find this book: 

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**Q: What is the value of examining democracy in terms of its orientation towards, or relationship to, the future?**

My book tries to show how beliefs about the future shape expectations of who should hold power, how it should be exercised, and to what ends. The emergence of modern

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democracy in Europe coincided with new ways of thinking about time. In the 18th and 19th centuries, emerging ideas of a future that could be different from the present and susceptible to influence helped to spur mass political participation. Movements of the left cast the future as the place of ideals, and “isms” such as socialism and liberalism provided the basis on which strangers could find common cause. Conversely, authoritarians have used the future differently to pacify the public and keep power out of its hands. Projecting democracy, prosperity and justice into the future is one way to seek acceptance of their absence in the present.

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**Q: Why is an emphasis on continuation beyond the present essential to the operation of democracy?**

Modern democracy is representative democracy, and that gives the future particular significance. Why should people accept the results of elections that go against them? “Losers’ consent” is generally said to rest on the notion that victories and defeats are temporary – there will always be another chance to contest power. The expected future acts as a resource for the acceptance of adversaries and of mediating institutions and procedures. One of today’s challenges is that this sense of continuation into the future is increasingly questioned. Problems of climate change, inequality, geopolitics and social change are widely viewed as so urgent and serious that they remove any scope for error – waiting for the “next time” is not enough. Every political battle starts to feel like the final battle, to be won at all costs. This year’s US presidential election will be fought in these terms and will make clear the stresses it puts on democracy.

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**Q: You credit liberal economic thinkers like Adam Smith with “pushing back the temporal horizon”. How did their ideas around the free market treat the future?**

In the early Enlightenment, defenders of free trade and commerce tended to emphasise the dividends that could be expected in the short term – peace and stability, for example, and access to goods. But the legitimacy of the market order would be hard to secure if it rested only on immediate benefits. What if conditions were harsh, or wealth was concentrated in the hands of the few? Pioneers of liberal economic thought such as Smith started to promote a longer perspective, allowing them to cite benefits that would need time to materialise, such as advances in efficiency, productivity and innovation. The future could also be invoked to indicate where present-day injustices would be ironed out. What we now know as “trickle-down” economics, in which returns for the rich are embraced on the idea that they will percolate down to the many, entails pointing to the future to defend the inequalities of the present. By invoking an extended timeframe, one can seek to rationalise a system that otherwise looks dysfunctional.

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**Q: You cite the 20th-century ascendance of technocracy, of “ideas of the future as an object of calculation, best placed in the hands of experts”. How has this impacted democratic agency?**

One way to think about the future is in terms of probabilities – what outcomes are most likely and how they can be prepared for. You find this outlook in business, and in government – especially in its more technocratic forms. It brings certain things with it. A focus on prediction and problem-solving often means focusing on a relatively near horizon – a few years, months, weeks or less – as where the future can be gauged with greatest certainty. And that in turn tends to go with a consciously pragmatic form of politics, less interested in the longer timescales needed for far-reaching change. In terms of the democratic implications, a focus on probabilities tends to elevate the role of experts – economists, for example – as those able to harness particular methods of projection such as statistics. If you turn the future into an object of calculation, it tends to favour elite modes of rule.

An emphasis on prediction is also something that has shaped how politics is covered in the media. Consider the use of opinion polls to narrate change – increasingly prominent from the 1930s onwards – which encourage a spectator’s perspective. Or consider a

style of reporting quite common today, whereby a journalist talks about “what I’m hearing in Washington / Westminster / Brussels”. Its focus is on garnering clues about who seems likely to do what, and what they think others will do. The accent is less on the analysis of how things could be, or should be, or indeed currently are, and more on where they seem to be heading. It is news as managers or investors might want it – and politically that often amounts to an uncritical perspective.

**Q: You discuss how desires to calculate the future through military forecasting took hold during the Cold War. What are the legacies of this in governmental politics today?**

One of the main functions of military forecasting during the Cold War was to second-guess the actions of enemy states – where their weaknesses lay, where they might attack, and so on. That was true in both the West and the East. But forecasting was also applied to the control of populations at home, and not just with an eye to foreign policy. Fairly early on, national security experts started to get involved in public policy and urban planning – think of initiatives such as the “war on crime” launched by US President Lyndon Johnson in 1965. The outlook of the military forecaster began to transfer from the realm of geopolitics to public policy, counterinsurgency and the management of domestic protest, bringing methods of secrecy with it. Today’s forms of surveillance governance are the descendants of these forecasting techniques. And so too are conspiracy theories, which are often based on the idea that some have more knowledge of the future than they let on. Theories of 9/11 that suggest the US government saw the attack coming and deliberately let it happen, or even assisted it, are emblematic.

**Q: Why is reducing social and economic inequality important to enable future-oriented political engagement from as many people as possible?**

Democratic participation requires the capacity to see the present from the perspective of an imagined better future. But that presupposes the time and capacity for reflection. Those living in insecure conditions typically lack the resources and inclination to turn their eyes to the future. In exhausting jobs, the focus tends to be on getting through the day (or night): the present dominates the future. In precarious jobs or unemployment, people lack control of their lives: the future can look too unpredictable to bother with. Political engagement also depends on a sense that the problems encountered are shared with others. A workplace centred on short-term contracts on the contrary presents

individuals with a constantly changing cast of peers. Other things can also undercut a sense of shared fate – personal debt, for instance, or algorithmic forms of scoring (eg, in insurance) that focus on the particularities of individual lives.

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This is the sense in which the social and economic changes of the last few decades have fostered the *privatisation* of the future. The choices of political organisations like parties and movements are crucial in this context. They can either challenge these tendencies, developing that critical perspective on the present and a sense of shared fate – think eg, of a movement like [the Debt Collective](#). Or they can reproduce these tendencies – eg, by treating voters as individuals who want only to maximise their own interests.

**Q: What effects can crises have on how governments and citizens conceptualise and act on the future? Are current democratic political systems capable of addressing the climate crisis, the great future-oriented challenge of our time?**

Crises tend to engender a sense of scarce time, and in the contemporary state that tends to bring a managerial approach to the fore. Emergencies are governed as one more problem of calculation, with a focus on concrete outcomes that can be traced from the present. The risk is that questions of justice and structural change get marginalised, as considerations that distract from the immediacy of the situation and open too many issues. Emergency government tends to prioritise short-term goals over long-term, and those which are concrete and quantifiable over those which are not.

Climate change too tends to be turned into a problem of calculation in policymaking circles. One sees it with the targets and deadlines invoked. By making net zero carbon emissions an overriding objective, authorities can marginalise considerations no less relevant to human wellbeing and environmental protection – biodiversity, global health and economic equality, for example. This is why some climate scholars see such methods as counterproductive. By emphasising a particular set of variables within a delimited timeframe, targets and deadlines get us thinking more about the near future, crowded with specificities, and less about the further horizon and the more general, incalculable goals that belong to it.

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The pitfalls of exactitude are something I try to highlight in the book. Not only is it hard to make predictions in a volatile world, but a focus on quantified targets can be counterproductive, since the facts at any moment can be bleak. As the socialists of the late 19th century understood, if the future was to be about radical change pursued over the long term, one could not afford to get lost in the details of the moment. Taking the future seriously meant *not* hemming oneself in with false precision but setting out clear principles and organising in their pursuit. I think this is a message that still applies. Climate change requires science and precision to grasp, but climate politics requires balancing this with a sense of uncertainty, open-endedness, and the possibility of radical change.

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*Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science. The interview was conducted by Anna D'Alton, Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books.*

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