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Longtermism, Big Tech, and the Rebalancing of Historical Time: A Benjaminian Critique

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Longtermist ideas and language have become an important ideological source for elite figures in Big Tech today. This article critiques longtermism, arguing that it constructs an increasingly influential temporal plane that rebalances our grasp of historical time. Building on historical theory, this article argues that longtermism's historical time is distinct from that of "modern" progress as well as presentism. To not only critique but to resist this historical time, this article draws on Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history and methodology of actualization, arguing for the development and use of methods of resistance that pierce and disturb the historical continuum emanating from longtermism.

Keywords: longtermism, Walter Benjamin, Big Tech, Californian Ideology, historical time, temporality

In their 1996 paper "The Californian Ideology," Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron identified a new ideological configuration, which fused together Californian counterculture ideas with Silicon Valley neoliberalism. The notion of the Californian Ideology has become highly influential in the field of media and communications. Yet, Barbrook and Cameron's (1996) "The Californian Ideology" is a concept that is both historically and geographically situated, and nearly three decades after their paper, it is important not only to chart the afterlives of this ideology (Hepp, Schmitz, & Schneider, 2023) but to interrogate new ideological sources and components that are underlying Big Tech today. This article describes and critiques one such ideological source: longtermism.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, longtermism developed as an ideology that conjoined aspects of Nick Bostrom's (2002, 2003, 2009, 2013) philosophy and the academic output from his "Future of Humanity Institute," the Effective Altruism (EA) movement, and Silicon Valley discourse.

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At its core, longtermism holds that we have a moral imperative to direct contemporary resources to protect and benefit the long-term future. This radical contemporary branch of utilitarian philosophy is intentionally policy-focused and has, in the past two decades, achieved much that academic philosophy rarely does. First, it has attracted huge financial support to spread its ideas and achieve its aims of shifting global development policy toward its agenda.[2] Second, the basic ethical arguments and policy proposals have gained adherence outside academic circles and claimed the support of elite actors, particularly in policy and technology circles. The influence of longtermist language and ideas is evident in contemporary Big Tech, particularly among high-level actors within the fields of artificial intelligence (AI), cryptocurrency, and space exploration.

The success of longtermism, as well as the financial and ideational power of its supporters, have also drawn increased scrutiny. Longtermism has been criticized for prioritizing the lives of people in richer countries (Gebru & Torres, 2024), for dismissing the significance of climate change (Crary, 2023), and for perpetuating the harms of capitalism (Adams, Crary, & Gruen, 2023). In this article, I seek to interrogate and critique longtermism from a different perspective. Longtermism's startling and concerning consequences, I suggest, emerge from its rebalancing of our very grasp of historical time. I argue that in constructing a future ballooned in importance, longtermism radically diminishes the value of the past and of humans alive today. Not only does longtermism construct a future that enchains the present to its demands, but it also obscures and belittles the past as a meaningful source for shaping the present. The past becomes a minor and inconsequential foundation for action, vastly overshadowed by the threats and the promise of this unleashed future. The consequence of this temporal rebalancing is a radical shift in how political and ethical decisions are framed. In this article, I draw on historical theory, and particularly the concept of "historical time" and its material significance, as well as the debate over "presentism" and progressive time (Assmann, 2020; Hartog, 2015; Simon, 2019). Here then, I invite scholars in media and communications, particularly those interrogating ideological developments in Silicon Valley, to engage with recent developments in historical theory.[3]

Finally, I draw on Walter Benjamin's (1979, 1992, 1996, 2002) work to consider the material consequences of longtermism's temporal rebalancing. I argue that longtermism monopolizes our historical time through the construction of a totalizing future that radically reshapes how we temporalize morality and politics. Rather than entering a discussion within the temporal plane underlying and spreading from longtermism, I suggest that it is by returning to the past, and blasting fragments of that past into this present, that we can critique and resist the historical continuum that longtermism constructs. Here, I take inspiration from Walter Benjamin's methodology of actualization. More broadly, I hope to provoke others to reclaim and repurpose fragments of the past as a means of critiquing and resisting the contemporary ideological embrace of totalizing temporalities.

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[2] For example, see the United Nations's (2021) Report of the Secretary General "Our Common Agenda," as well as the European Commission's (von der Leyen, 2023) "State of the Union Address."

[3] Although scholars in media and communications have explored how temporalities are affected by sociotechnological ideologies and processes, particularly mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2013), I suggest that historical theorists offer an alternative but complementary framework for helping us make sense of, and navigate the specific historical time that longtermism constructs.

Longtermism, Ideology, and Big Tech

In “The Californian Ideology,” Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1996) explored the development of a new “virtual class” emerging as decades-long investment in and development of the digital technology industries was producing mass wealth. Merging the business world of the Santa Clara Valley with the alternative enclaves of San Francisco, this “virtual class” extolled an individualist ethos, where they embraced being both “hip and rich.” This critique of a Californian Ideology has inspired further research, particularly by historians who charted its development (Turner, 2006), and it has more broadly come to shape the ideology critique of Big Tech. Yet as Hepp et al. (2023) note, “The Californian Ideology” is not only a geographically situated concept but an historically situated one also. It describes and critiques the particular ideological configuration developing in 1996 and the years preceding it.

Although the Californian Ideology has afterlives in today’s world of Big Tech, it exists alongside other ideological influences and discursive developments (Smith & Burrows, 2021). This should be no surprise given the new and varied technological developments over the past three decades, the intensification of the globalized nature of technology companies, and their remarkable accumulation of wealth. Instead of seeking to chart the historical development of the California ideology, or explore its afterlife today, I draw on Barbrook and Cameron’s (1996) approach of ideology critique to uncover and analyze one component of a contemporary ideological configuration embedded in today’s Big Tech: longtermism. The language and ideas of longtermism, I argue, have entered a broader discourse within Big Tech. At its core, longtermism holds three premises:

1. Future people have moral worth;
2. there could be very large numbers of future people; and
3. we have a moral duty to benefit future people (MacAskill, n.d.).

It is worth engaging with each premise. The first indicates longtermism’s place within a broader tradition of consequentialist utilitarian moral philosophy. Consequentialism broadly refers to the view that an action’s normative value depends only on the consequences of that action rather than, for example, on the intentions of the actor. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory that, at its simplest, specifies that our sole moral obligation is to maximize the total amount of intrinsic value in the world. Value here could refer to an array of experiences, but classically, to happiness or pleasure. From this perspective, humans are understood as containing value, and they matter in that they contribute to the overall net amount of value (happiness, pleasure) in the universe. Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit (1986) argued that we ought to consider future people of holding moral value in any utilitarian calculation (p. 453). Building on Parfit’s (1986) work, longtermist philosopher William MacAskill (n.d.) argues that “just because people are born in the future does not make their experiences any less real or important” (p. 2). This might on the surface appear counterintuitive, but MacAskill (n.d.) notes that we already implicitly accept that people not yet born do deserve recognition as holding some sort of value. How else can we explain why we store nuclear waste and mark it for future generations or invest resources in fighting climate change that will overwhelmingly affect those who are not yet alive?

MacAskill's (n.d.) second premise argues that it is possible that there will be a huge number of future people. Many different longtermist philosophers have attempted to calculate just how many people could exist in the future. Greaves and MacAskill (2021) suggest that 10^{45} humans could exist in the Milky Way alone. To arrive at this indescribably large number, the philosophers' calculations are based on the future realization of space colonization as well as transhumanism.

Beckstead (2014) argues that there is no known obstacle in physics that should stop humanity from colonizing space. If humans spread to other planets, this not only overcomes potential terrestrial constraints on future population size but it also reduces the risk of extinction events. If humans (or posthumans) were able to settle the whole of the Milky Way, then they could access more than 250 million habitable planets (Greaves & MacAskill, 2021, p. 7). The farther humans can spread and colonize, the far greater the human population can grow and, thus, value can grow. Bostrom (2003) argues that utilitarians ought to "focus *all* their efforts" in maximizing "the probability that colonization will eventually occur" (p. 1).

Transhumanism posits that humans can expand beyond the limitations of their biological or carbon-based bodies. Like space colonization, transhumanism is central to longtermism's calculations on the potential number of future people and thus value. There are two aspects to note here: First, escaping the limitations of the human body has the potential to increase the qualitative happiness of every human and, so it is claimed, to increase total value in the universe (Bostrom, 2009, p. 22). Second, transhumanism could enable the evolution of humans from their current carbon form into a more storable alternative form, such as digital bits. The possibility of digital sentience would make space colonization and the production of value far more efficient. Digital beings could live in more hostile environments than carbon humans, and planets would be able to store far more digital beings than they could sustain carbon-based beings (Bostrom, 2003). From this perspective then, any attempt at restricting transhumanism or posthumanism might prevent us from realizing the full potential of value creation.

Timnit Gebru and Émile Torres (2024) argue that the significance of cosmic expansion and transhumanism means that we ought to understand longtermism as constituting one part of an overlapping bundle of ideologies: transhumanism, extropianism, singularitarianism, cosmism, effective altruism, longtermism (TESCREAL). The TESCREAL acronym emphasizes how transhumanist thought, through several variations, has enmeshed with EA and longtermism. Although each component of this ideological bundle has its own genealogy, Gebru and Torres rightly suggest that one cannot fully understand the development of longtermist thought without reference to transhumanist thought and fantasies of cosmic expansion.

The third and final premise argues that, if it is possible that huge numbers of future people (value) could exist, then we have a moral requirement to secure this future value (Bostrom, 2003). The greatest threat to this overwhelming future value, longtermists argue, are existential risks. Bostrom (2002) defines an existential risk as "one where an adverse outcome would either annihilate Earth-originating intelligent life or permanently and drastically curtail its potential" (p. 2). Potential existential risks include biological weapons, self-replicating nanotechnology, artificial general intelligence, super volcanic eruptions, and solar flares (Bostrom, 2002).

Extinction events, however, are not the only threats that worry longtermists. Just as concerning from their perspective is the possibility that human civilization continues to develop but plateaus without accelerationist technologies for space colonization and transhumanism. Given the vast value that *could* be contained within the future, at least within the totalist perspective, there is little value distinction between extinction of life on Earth or the plateauing of human civilization's development to its current earthbound and carbon-based form.

Although it is difficult to foresee the long-term consequences of our actions now, the burgeoning field of existential risk has, over the past two decades, done much to conceptualize and predict existential threats that humanity faces, and the potential mechanisms and policies we could adopt to reduce the likelihood of these events (Torres, 2023). For example, Bostrom (2019) has argued for the creation of a mass biological surveillance system on Earth to monitor the spread of synthetic and natural viruses. Bostrom (2013) explains the consequence of longtermist thinking that "the expected value of reducing existential risk by a mere one billionth of one billionth of one percentage point is worth a hundred billion times as much as a billion human lives" (pp. 18–19). Thus, longtermists advocate the reallocation of resources toward measures that they claim could mitigate any risk to the existence of this vast number of future people. This argument is directed both toward mitigating existential risk but also toward the production of technologies that enable space colonization and transhumanism. From their perspective, there is nothing more important than (re)allocating resources toward these goals.

Longtermist ideas and language have become embedded in Big Tech discourse, and their influence can also be uncovered through financial investments and institutional crossovers. Over the past three decades, as the CEOs and leaders of Big Tech companies have accumulated vast wealth, several leaders of technology companies have invested heavily in space exploration and colonization. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, created Blue Origin, a space and defense company that alongside other projects, enables the ultrawealthy to become space tourists. Meanwhile, Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla, X, and former coowner of PayPal, is also the founder of Space X, a company that has transformed the privatization of space exploration and colonization. Both figures have expressed longtermist language and ideas. Bezos has argued that, in the long term, humanity has two options: either remaining on Earth and capitulating to "stasis and rationing" (Marx, 2019, p. 2), or to pursue the colonization of the universe and the growth of the human population to a trillion people. For Bezos, Blue Origin is step toward the safeguarding of long-term human prosperity. Musk has argued that it is "fundamentally important for ensuring the long term survival of life as we know it . . . to be a multi-planet species" (Swisher, 2020, 00:20:56). Further, Musk claims to take a civilization-long perspective, pondering the need to create AI so that human civilization can continue in digital form, or evolve in the "long term" into an "A.I. symbiosis thing" (Swisher, 2020, 00:34:44). Musk (2022) has described William MacAskill's longtermist *What We Owe the Future,* as "a close match" to his own philosophy, and endorsed Nick Bostrom's work (Musk, 2014). Meanwhile, Musk is a member of "The Future of Life Institute," sitting in the organization's Scientific Advisory Board. Musk has also helped fund longtermist institutes, in 2015 giving US$10 million to the "Future of Humanity Institute" (Peterson, 2015), and further money to "The Centre for the Study of Existential Risk" (Future of Humanity Institute, 2015).

Longtermist ideas have been similarly influential in the cryptocurrency industry. Before his arrest for fraud in 2022, Sam Bankman-Fried founded and ran one of the biggest cryptocurrency exchanges in the world: FTX. Having attended a talk on effective altruism by William MacAskill on the most efficient ways of producing good in the world, Bankman-Fried entered the world of banking and cryptocurrency specifically to fulfill his EA beliefs (Faux, 2022). As FTX grew and Bankman-Fried accumulated billions of dollars, his philanthropic attention was increasingly directed toward longtermist causes. In 2022, Bankman-Fried and his colleagues created the longtermist "Future Fund" to "improve humanity's long-term prospects" and mitigate the risk of existential threats (Future Fund, n.d., p. 2). The fund was run by philosopher Nick Beckstead, while William MacAskill sat on its board, advising on grant allocation (EA Forum, n.d.).

Longtermism's influence also exists among leaders of Internet communication services. Skype developer Jaan Tallin has been a major donor to Oxford University's "Future of Humanity Institute," where Bostrom spent most of his career working. Tallin also cofounded the longtermist-aligned "Centre for the Study of Existential Risk" at Cambridge University, as well as the "Future of Life Institute" in the United States. In 2015, explaining their philanthropic goals, Mark Zuckerberg, along with his wife, Priscilla Chan, wrote that

> We believe all lives have equal value, and that includes the many more people who will live in future generations than live today. Our society has an obligation to invest now to improve the lives of all those coming into this world, not just those already here. (p. 5)

Meanwhile, Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook cofounder Dustin Moskowitz, alongside his partner, Cari Tuna, set up the fundraising website Open Philanthropy, which has distributed US$480 million to causes it labels "longtermist."

The narratives and arguments of longtermism have also shaped how AI risks have been popularized. For example, top AI executives, including Sam Altman, Demis Hassabis, and Dario Amodei, signed a letter arguing that "Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war" (Center for AI Safety, 2023, p. 2). Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, described machine intelligence as "probably the greatest threat to the continued existence of humanity" (Altman, 2015, p. 1).[4] Like Altman, Demis Hassabis, the CEO of Google DeepMind, has sought to calm concerns over AI by acknowledging that he discusses these issues with Bostrom (Fry, 2022). Meanwhile, Anthropic AI, which sells itself as being particularly concerned with "AI safety" received much of its initial funding from Jaan Talin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Sam Bankman-Fried (Anthropic, 2021; Metz, 2022).

Longtermism's growing influence has attracted greater critical attention not only to its ethical foundation but to its material consequences. Of particular concern is longtermism's justification for, and indeed appeal to redirect global resources away from already occurring hazards and crises, and toward minimizing, even if just by a fraction, potential future extinction events. This dynamic plays out clearly in longtermist discussions of climate change. For longtermist figures such as MacAskill (2022) and Ord (2020b), climate change is categorized as a phenomenon unlikely to cause mass extinction. Given this, global resources ought to be prioritized away from reducing carbon emissions or preparing for the consequences of climate change, and instead toward true extinction threats, such as malevolent general AI. As Crary (2023) notes, these longtermist philosophers treat as "relatively morally insignificant the terrible fact that huge numbers of people are already dying, being uprooted from their communities, and suffering other great hardships because of climate change" (p. 54).

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[4] Waters and Thornhill (2023) report that the 2023 attempt to remove Sam Altman as CEO of OpenAI, came from board members who believed that he was not doing enough to accommodate longtermist concerns.

As an ideology, longtermism not only justifies but requires those in power to redirect resources away from those who are already disadvantaged and vulnerable, particularly indigenous people, people from the global south, and working-class people, and instead toward a particular set of elites. The value of someone living in poverty away from centers of power is calculated as radically less than those people who are fortunate enough to be temporally significant. For example, Beckstead (2013) tells us:

> Saving lives in poor countries may have significantly smaller ripple effects than saving and improving lives in rich countries. Why? Richer countries have substantially more innovation, and their workers are much more economically productive. It now seems more plausible to me that saving a life in a rich country is substantially more important than saving a life in a poor country, other things being equal. (p. 11)

Thus, longtermism enables individuals based in elite institutions, such as Oxford University or Big Tech companies, to trivialize and minimize the vulnerability of people alive now. At the same time, it enables philosophers and tech workers to depict themselves as holding abnormally significant universal value. Because longtermism is self-serving, we can understand it as "an ideology in the insidious sense," as a "system of belief and practice that covers up systemic injustices embedded in the fabric of existing capitalist societies in a manner that clears the way for the perpetuation of significant wrongs and harms" (Adams et al., 2023, p. 14).

With these intentionally unequal and fatal consequences and longtermism's own particular genealogy, Gebru and Torres (2024) suggest that the ideology ought to be understood as part of a broader second wave of eugenicist thought. From this perspective, allowing and even enabling horrific outcomes, such as mass starvation or genocide for certain people, can become legitimate if they are calculated in comparison with reducing the chance of future extinction threats. This enables Bostrom (2002) to understand past and present cataclysmic events, such as the Holocaust and the Atlantic Slave Trade, as "mere ripples on the surface of the great sea of life" (p. 2).

Longtermism's historical time not only trivializes and erases the vulnerability of already alive people, but it also minimizes the past and its role in inscribing the present. Crary (2023) notes how the harms that longtermism deprioritizes fall in a "dramatically lopsided fashion on racialized and indigenous groups the world over, groups whose very vulnerability to these harms is a product of long histories of injustice" (p. 54). Longtermism minimizes any acknowledgement of the past's role in inscribing today and why resources are accumulated in certain locations, such as Oxford or Silicon Valley. Not only does it threaten to eject whole new swathes of peoples, landscapes, and ways of understanding the world as temporally insignificant and lacking in value but longtermism's historical time erases these pasts as ethically significant.

Longtermism’s Historical Time: A Comparison With Progress and Presentism

What makes longtermism so disruptive is its commitment to a particular historical time. This historical time, I want to suggest, is distinct from traditional Western philosophical notions of historical time, particularly “modern” progress and presentism, and it is this temporal divergence that leads to the radically alternative ideological priorities.

Longtermism’s Historical Time

Longtermism imagines the future as containing far greater ethical potential and value than the present or the past. This conception of the future is well expressed by Beckstead, Singer, and Wage (2013): “We believe that future generations matter just as much as our generation does. Since there could be so many generations in our future, the value of all those generations together greatly exceeds the value of the current generation” (para. 12).

To borrow a phrase from Edelstein, Geroulanos, and Wheatley (2020), longtermism constructs a future that bloats “the temporal plane of moral responsibility” (p. 21). The future is reconceptualized as an empty and universal space that exists for value to be produced within it. With its focus on space colonization and transhumanism, this is a future that is radically extended both temporally and spatially.

Because longtermism, from a perspective of universal total value, constructs a future far heavier than the past and the present, it rebalances the temporality that underlies our contemporary ethical debates. It is this future looming over us that becomes the criterion for whether present actions are to be justified or condemned. We can, so it is argued, in the present, calculate accurate predictions of the potential value of the future, and we must use those predictions and calculations to transform our economic and political actions today. Ethics, as well as policy, becomes reduced to asking whether an action enhances or reduces the likelihood of protecting a future imagined to contain overwhelming value. From this radically extended consequentialist perspective, ethics then becomes reduced to calculating future value and the imagined temporal effects of present actions and lives on that future value. We are left with a radical reordering of value: present humans are far less significant, from a universal perspective, than the potential value of the calculated number of imagined future people.

Yet, if the value of people alive is diminished in this temporal plane, the significance of the present, or, more accurately, this particular historically situated present, increases. Ord (2020b) argues that we live “at a time uniquely important to humanity’s future” (p. 11). With the technology we have developed and are on the verge of developing, we humans have never had such potential to enhance ourselves and secure the protection of the future expansion of humanity. We are the generation, Ord (2020a) writes, with the potential to “reach a place of safety—a place where existential risk—is low and stays low” (p. 30). Although the present is marked by universally significant potential, it also contains unprecedented risk of existential destruction. For example, Bostrom argues (2014) that we are on the verge of the first superintelligence that “might well get a decisive strategic advantage. Its goals would then determine how humanity’s cosmic endowment will be used” (p. 115).

Longtermism and Progressive Time

Here, we can distinguish longtermism's historical time from the dominant historical time of the past two centuries: "modern" progress. The historical time of modern progress swept through Western historical consciousness in the 17th and 18th centuries (Koselleck, 2002). "Progress" conjoined the past, present, and future, "the combination of all three, constituting a *course*" through the notion of linear and progressive history (Simon, 2019, p. 3; emphasis in original). Under "progress," the present is constructed as one developmental stage in a long and inescapable historical arc toward the ever-better. The past becomes the evidence through which the developmental and linear nature of history is explained. In this way, progress brought "the totality of history, under a common concept" (Koselleck, 2002, p. 229).

In progressive time, the future is depicted as inevitably better than the present, while the present becomes one developmental step in a broader teleological unfurling. In contrast, longtermism stresses the danger and threat of the present, altering it from a mere moment in the inevitable chronology of progress. In longtermist time, our present holds radically outsized importance, potentially irreversible consequences for the history of humanity, and universal value. Although in progressive time, the present is one inevitable stage toward the bending arc of time toward betterment, for longtermists, our present is a period of almost unfathomable significance, which is stalked by incredible danger. Future historians, Ord (2020b) argues, will describe this age as "the precipice":

> In the middle of the 20th century, we came through a high mountain pass and found that the only route onward was a narrow path along the cliff side, a crumbling ledge on the brink of a precipice. Looking down brings a deep sense of vertigo. If we fall, everything is lost. We do not know just how likely we are to fall. But it is the greatest risk to which we have ever been exposed. This comparatively brief period is a unique challenge in the history of our species. (p. 31)

For progressive time, the past was of considerable importance; it was in the past that progress could confirm its own narratives of development and teleology and, in so doing, remold the past for its own purposes. In contrast, longtermism radically diminishes the significance of the past. It is not in the past that longtermism searches for its own temporal confirmation, but instead it finds this through projections of the future. For longtermists, then, the past's moldability to narrative becomes insignificant. The story of past progress loses all weight in our historical consciousness when compared with the unrealized potential of the future, and the bloated responsibility of the present to secure that future.

Longtermism and Presentism

If longtermism's temporal plane differs from that of "modern" progress, then one possibility is to understand it within the framework of "presentism" (Hartog, 2015). In his *Regimes of Historicity*, Hartog (2015) argues that a contemporary temporal regime of "presentism" has become dominant in the West and, at least in some interpretations, has replaced the modern time of progress. That we have left the time of "modern progress" and entered a "presentist" time is evidenced by what Andreas Huyssen (2000) identifies as the "surprising . . . emergence of memory as a key concern in Western societies: the focus on the present past" (p. 21). As Colla (2021) describes it, "past and future become nothing more than extensions of the now" (p. 125). Although in "modern" progressive time the future is perceived as a promise of linear development, in our current presentist temporal order, it is perceived as a catastrophe (Hartog, 2015, p. 13). Although Assmann (2020) critiques Hartog's (2015) account, she argues that "within a relatively short period of time, the future itself has lost the power to shed light on the present . . . the very concept of the future itself is being called into question" (p. 4). This "regime of historicity" has left the West unable to have any hope for the future or any meaningful relationship with the past.

Yet, I suggest that longtermism's historical time does not fit the presentist framework. In contrast to Hartog (2015), the catastrophic future that longtermism warns of and is motivated by is not perceived as inevitable, and the present is not perceived as unchangeable either. Fears about existential risk have not constrained longtermists to see only an extension of the present (Simon, 2019). It is not that longtermists extend the present into the future but that they construct a future that reorients the present toward a different direction. In a sense, longtermism lies in opposition to presentism, viewing the present as a space to enact the precursors to the far more significant future. For Ord (2020b) and others, the importance of the present occurs only because of the significance and potential value that the future holds in this rebalanced historical time. To frame longtermism as an example of Hartog's particular notion of presentism is to obscure the future-loaded temporality that longtermism constructs.

Materiality as Well as Meaning: Recovering and Reassembling Benjamin

Having explored longtermism's distinctive historical time, I now draw on and reassemble Walter Benjamin's (1992, 2002) critique of the historical time of progress, as well as his methodology of actualization, to develop a means of resisting the historical time emanating from longtermism.

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin (1992) fixes his gaze on the idea of linear and progressive historical time that monopolized the dominant sense of temporality of his age.[5] Benjamin (1992) challenges us to see this historical time as an all-consuming and totalizing force that is in itself "homogenous, empty" (p. 260). This progressive empty time is positioned as a direct consequence of the capitalist forces that Benjamin was critiquing; the imagined accelerative momentum of capitalism helped propel a time of progress. Universal history, the pinnacle of this historical time, requires that its emptiness be filled; it "musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time" and in doing so produces a "homogenous course of history" (Benjamin, 1992, pp. 262–263). This time negates and hollows out the open nature of the future, closing it around whatever direction progress is hijacked toward.

This historical time, Benjamin (1992) argues, is one based on expulsion, both of meaning and material. The concept of progress, aligned to whichever future is held at any time, expels people, events, and history that do not fit or align to it. The universalizing "historical progress of mankind" produces a kind of history that is scattered with debris (p. 261). Progress constructs a future that reorients and discards the present and the past, leaving rubble and erasure behind it. This debris refers to the bodies mangled and destroyed, the natural resources and landscapes extracted, manipulated, and scarred, as well as memories and ways of imagining the world, required to be forgotten and extinguished. What Benjamin helps us to see is the practice of discarding that occurs under logics and times of optimization and progress.

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[5] Benjamin originally wrote *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in 1940 as he was attempting to escape the Nazi regime, and just before he died by suicide.

The Benjamin (1992, 2002) I am drawing on is one concerned with unraveling the temporality of progress (Lida, forthcoming). I have, however, already argued that the historical time of longtermism is distinct from the modern conception of progress, which begs the question: How is Benjamin relevant? I suggest that Benjamin's unraveling of progress as a historical time offers us a line of critique that can similarly be used to lay bare how the longtermist temporal plane produces an historical continuum that discards present and past bodies, natural resources, and memories that do not fit its temporalized value computations. Moreover, as I will set out below, to bring history through Benjamin's method of actualization and in doing so to interrupt a historical continuum, whether that continuum emanates from progressive time or longtermist time, is to enact a Benjaminian radical intervention. Benjamin's relevance then emerges from a perspective that enables us to critique longtermism's historical time and its material consequences, as well as a methodology that offers a form of resistance.

Longtermism's historical time, as already noted, emanates a radically future-oriented continuum that erases not only the past but discards all that in the present is deemed temporally insignificant. The newly deemed temporally insignificant are ejected from this historical continuum and, consequently, lose other claims to value, visibility, and memory. A Benjaminian gaze enables us to see clearly how longtermism's rebalancing of our grasp of time becomes the condition upon which the value of life is measured. As value is thrust into the future, the meaningful content of "the now," and of one's needs in "the now," is radically diminished. The value of contemporary and past human life becomes radically altered. What Benjamin (1992, 2002) helps us to see is the material practice of discarding that occurs under monopolizing historical times and logics of optimization.

Let us return to this revealing statement from Nick Bostrom (2013): "the expected value of reducing existential risk by a mere one billionth of one billionth of one percentage point is worth a hundred billion times as much as a billion human lives" (pp. 18–19). Here, Bostrom's calculation emanates a threatening historical time in which practically the entirety of universal value (future lives) is at risk of total destruction in the now. Suddenly, every action and decision of the now becomes disoriented and reoriented as it collapses into a new temporal order. The value of a billion human lives abruptly becomes revalued as only holding the same value (or indeed less) as, for example, a new normative framework on AI regulation or investment in rocket reusability.

It is not only that from this supposedly universal perspective the value of those now alive is reduced but that those who do exist in the present become recategorized on the basis in which they are imagined (or not) as holding long-term temporal significance. It is this that justifies the reallocation of resources from the poor toward those elite figures who can produce the greatest long-term ripples (Beckstead, 2013, p. 11). With longtermism, the present contains only universally relevant value in its ability to produce the greatest future temporal effects. Longtermism's temporal plane and historical continuum then produces new debris: the people, objects, and knowledge not deemed temporally significant. The value of life becomes equated with its temporal significance as judged by those who claim to calculate the future most accurately.

I draw on Benjamin (1992, 2002) here, not only so that we can better navigate the material consequences of monopolizing historical times but because Benjamin also offers a methodology that critiques and disrupts the historical continuum produced by a particular temporal plane. Benjamin's methodology of actualization, I suggest, can help resist the historical time that longtermism creates, just as it could the historical time of progress.

Benjamin's (2002) "Historical Materialism" lays out a methodology of actualization that aims at "blasting apart the historical continuity which allows the historical object to constitute itself" (p. 475). It is a methodology that attempts to disrupt the structures of continuum by dragging the fragments of ejected debris that litter history and reassemble them into a new constellation of the present. As Judith Butler (2014) argues, Benjamin's methodology sought to identify and "flash up" discarded images from the history of the oppressed that, in doing so, broke through "interrupting the continuum of history" that "threatened to monopolize temporality" (p. 100). Benjamin forces us to ask how we can reassemble the history of the oppressed to transfigure or reconstellate the dominating time of the present and its "destructive propulsion" (Butler, 2014, p. 104).

Benjamin's method calls on researchers to crack open and sift through the "discontinuous structure of the world" and uncover "small material particles that indicate what is essential" (Kracauer, 1995, p. 263). It is the litter of historical time, "the rags, the refuse" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 475) that we can redeem into the present, and in doing so pierce the continuum of history woven into our everyday experience. Redemption of the ruins of history occurs through the actualization of those past fragments into the present, blasting through the historical time that evicted and erased them. It is to snatch a fragment from the threat of erasure and "to make do with what is resurrected only today, isolated pieces of interior that have broken away and yet contain the whole within them" (Benjamin, 1979, p. 337). As David Frisby (1985) writes:

> In order to realize their significance, the fragments that are collected must be wrested for their usual context. They must be assembled anew alongside other fragments. Their uniqueness must be recognized and redeemed. This can only take place when we recognize the fragment as itself a distinctive whole riddled with its own tensions. If it is a historical fragment it must be snatched from the false context of the historical continuum in which it is embedded and placed in our present. This wresting of the fragment from its encrusted context requires a destructive intention in so far as the false continuum is reduced to rubble. (p. 216)

Where then can we begin to redeem and actualize the rags and fragments that have been and are being discarded from the historical continuum produced by longtermism? Benjamin's methodology of blasting fragments of the past into the contemporary requires that one draw precisely upon that which the triumphant temporal narrative has discarded. Here then, one must consider the past from the perspective and tradition of the oppressed. I interpret this broad criterion to include not just the people who have been ejected from longtermism's historical time but the landscapes, ecosystems, and ways of understanding human value. What particular forms of knowledge, ontologies, and ways of considering time and human value have been subsumed, rejected, or conquered? What are the fragments that have been discarded and seemingly lost? What does longtermist time attempt to bury?

A Benjaminian methodology, I suggest, must begin underneath the "ripples on the surface of the great sea of life" (Bostrom, 2002, p. 2); the events and peoples that are discarded and erased as irrelevant in this new temporal plane. As Crary (2023) emphasizes, it is again "racialized and indigenous groups" whose vulnerability in the now, as well as the "long histories of injustice" that produced this vulnerability, face being erased (p. 54). It is through flashing up images of "the then" of dispossession and defiance that we might find humility and avenues of resistance in "the now." Doing so can help us blast through and denaturalize the temporal plane underlying this ideology, and with it a contemporary attempt to eject "inconvenient" peoples and landscapes from the realm of value, as well as memory.

To fully critique and resist longtermist historical time through a Benjaminian methodology requires a bigger research project(s) than can fit in one single article; it requires collecting and uncovering historical artifacts under this theoretical framework as well as considering the disappearance of peoples and artifacts whose trace is beyond our archives (Hartman, 1997). I recognize that, given the scale of historical injustice, dispossession, and defiance that faces expulsion from a longtermist historical time, there are a plethora of different research areas that could be pursued under this framework. Here, I simply point to two potential lines of work among many.

First, one might begin with sites that enabled imperial countries, such as Britain, to steal, extract, and accumulate resources from West Africa and North America through the Atlantic Slave Trade. The Codrington Plantation in Barbados is just one dystopian site within a broader system that enabled wealth to be amassed by the United Kingdom, and in this case, elite British universities, such as Oxford University's All Souls College.[6] From the scraps of archival evidence, might one attend to the violent enslavement and murder of people that enabled vast resources to be extracted and redirected to centers of opulence, learning, and power in the United Kingdom? Might traces of people's resistance, of refusing to convert to the religion of the slaveholders, of the continuation of Obeah cultural and religious practices on the plantation (Glasson, 2011), enable us to slice through longtermism's erasure of how slavery's afterlife structures contemporary inequity (Hartman, 1997)? I suggest that such a methodology might be one form of resistance against renewed attempts to redirect resources to elite British universities and deem already vulnerable people's lives as radically insignificant.

Second, one might begin by activating the latent pasts and continued presence of indigenous land seizure and expulsion that underlie today's "development" in space exploration. Deondre Smiles (2020) sets out how settler colonial logics and histories continue through renewed land dispossession in the name of space exploration. Sebastián Lehuedé's (2023) research shows how contemporary astronomical research in Chile is dependent on the erasure and discarding of indigenous ontologies as well as land. Underlying these renewed examples of erasure and dispossession lies latent pasts of injustice. Reassembling fragments of these latent pasts and flashing them into "the now" can be one form of resistance against longtermism's attempt to eject people and their experiences from contemporary categories of value and dignity.[7]

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[6] All Souls College was the home of Derek Parfit, one of the godfathers of longtermism.

[7] Here, one might look toward Nick Estes who, based upon an indigenous consciousness of time, particularly deriving from the Oceti Sakowin people, disrupts traditional Western narratives of progress and practices of indigenous land grab. As Estes (2019) argues, "Indigenous notions of time consider the present to be structured entirely by our past and by our ancestors. There is no separation between past and present,

I am not suggesting that a Benjaminian method alone can halt longtermism's worldmaking project. Instead, a Benjaminian approach to historical research might well combine with normative frameworks that stand apart from longtermism. Most obviously, this methodology could complement political and philosophical calls for global reparations as an alternative worldmaking project (Táíwò, 2022) to the one longtermism demands. After all, Táíwò's global reparations framework is an attempt at future making, which does not erase the discarded past but instead emerges from memories of ejection and dispossession.

Yet, I do argue that a Benjaminian approach can be an important form of resistance—one that centers the rags and discarded pasts whose erasure is so essential to longtermism's project. This is not simply a call to "document" the past but rather to reassemble images of this past to break apart "the amnesiac surface of time" (Butler, 2014, p. 106). The very act of flashing up these pasts into "the now" is intended to disrupt the historical continuum emanating from longtermism. To disrupt this continuum is to produce what Benjamin calls *Jetzteit* or "now-time," within which "the then" and "the now" become momentarily fused. This "now-time" offers the possibility of refusing the given categories of past, present, future, and their weaving into a historical story. It is through the construction of this now-time, even if just for a moment, we open up a gap of resistance. For Benjamin (1996), it is in this gap that the possibility of redemption and revolution can emerge. In the same way that a general strike's revolutionary nature not only comes from disrupting the means of production but by showing people an alternative sociotemporal order for a day (Benjamin, 1996), this method of actualization ruptures through an alternative way of weaving together our sense of time, and with it, human value.

Conclusion

In 1926, Walter Benjamin published *One Way Street.* It is in the section "Fire Alarm" that Benjamin begins tussling with the dangers inherent within the historical time of progress. It is ironic that longtermism rebalances our sense of historical time by propagating its own "fire alarm" of sorts. This precipice we stand upon is not simply the imagined presence of existential threats but the consequences of anything that might stop the massive expansion of future universal value. The precipice that this article seeks to highlight is the unraveling of how we value human life. The fire alarm we must listen to is the one that Benjamin emphasized almost a century ago.

Longtermism constructs a historical time that is radically future loaded. The past becomes insignificant in contrast to the future, and this particular present only gains significance in its unique ability to secure a future of unimaginable value. The present's value does not come from contemporary human life but rather from actors imagined as temporally significant for the protection of future human lives. An historical continuum emerges from this temporal plane, one that erases and belittles the cataclysmic events of the past as well as the present. It is only through engaging with the temporality and historical time embedded within and emanating from this ideology that, I argue, we can fully critique and resist a contemporary ideological configuration permeating the language and actions of Big Tech leaders. In doing

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meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of our past. Our history is the future" (p. 14).

so, we can crack open space to grow a historical consciousness that does not serve to eject people, objects, and memories for the sake of certain elite interests.

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