

INCORPORATING FUTURES INTO DEMOCRACY: IMAGINING MORE

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The modernization of science has enabled us to look into the future using numerical figures and computer modeling. Today, models are intensively used for future predictions in our daily lives. From short-term local weather forecasts to longer-term climate change, economic growth, how you age, etcetera, etcetera, today almost everything can be predicted through modeling. With sufficient past data and a simplified representation of reality as key parameters, models provide us with a probable future, and we make decisions based on that probable future predicted by models. In short, we make decisions by forecasting our future using computer models. In that sense, we create what we perceive of the natural world in the digital world. There is nothing new about digital twins; we have gone way beyond making digital twins, and society depends on predictions for the future by models that affect our decision-making. However, these predictions are based on the limited imaginations and creative ideas of scientists and academics who rely on past numerical facts and Bayesian probability. This approach, akin to gazing into a crystal ball, is simply an extension of the past and the present. I propose that the future is much more. It can be

open and inviting to every human co-becoming¹ and all stakeholders in the future of democracy through humanity's gifted ability to be creative and imaginative. Democracy of the future should not allow the voiceless voices of the future or silenced voices of non-humans to be ignored; instead, it should try to incorporate them into the decision-making process. It's crucial that we value and include diverse voices in our vision of the future of democracy, as their perspectives and experiences are integral to shaping a future that is truly representative and just. Inclusivity in decision-making is not just a concept but a practice that values and respects the contributions of all individuals in the democratic process.

In the Japanese science fiction novel *Harmony* (2010) by Project Itoh, Miahha tells her friend Tuan with a sigh, "The future is in one-word 'boredom,' we are trapped in a dungeon called future envisioned by the old people."² How can we prevent future generations from feeling like Miahha and prevent creating a future based on the past? I know that if we are to limit ourselves to picturing our future through our present experiences, we will fail members of future generations. How could our grandparents have known and predicted that half of our days would be spent using digital devices? Models prepared by our grandparents could not have predicted our lifestyle today.

We all know that we need a drastic change in our deadlocked society. Some say capitalism and some say left-wing liberals or right-wing nationalists are to blame. Yet, we don't know precisely what will trigger the change because of the interdependent networks of systemic complexity. In other words, even if we are to solve one problem, no one knows how that solution may create a new type of problem. However, I see that the future we want for our descendants is not what scientists predict, which is often sadly linked with the idea of doomsday. In order to get past our deadlocked situation, we must be motivated to upgrade the system of representative

- 1 Human co-becoming implies the notion of dynamic mutuality between human beings, which suggests that humans can only become more human through interaction and inter-relationality. Just as babies cannot survive independently without parental care, humans are inherently interdependent and can survive and grow from mutual interactions.
- 2 Italicization has been added by the author.

democracy. This upgrade will not only welcome stakeholders of a new imagined community but will also unite us based on our shared common future, thereby fostering a sense of commitment and dedication to the proposed changes. This vision of a united, committed future should inspire hope and optimism in all of us. Why is the intervention that serves future generations within the system of democracy crucial? The twin global environmental problems of climate change and biodiversity loss exhort humans to work together toward the justifiable and hopefully egalitarian use of the social common goods. Inge Kaul defines global commons as “(goods) having nonexcludable nonrival benefits that cut across borders, generations, and populations” (Kaul et al., 2003). This definition of global commons implies that, in our decision-making process, we urgently need to combine the perspective of global commons and a shared common future with a longer perspective. Democratic decisions thus need to become more future-inclusive and consider the distant future of 30–50 years from now. In that sense, fiscal year planning or thinking 3–5 years ahead is not sufficient. We must allow ourselves to have a longer-term perspective in planning our shared future and should include the imagined shared futures in our current democratic system.³

Whether we like it or not, we, the citizens of the earth, are reminded every day that we are compelled to be involved in a grand social experiment on *Spaceship Earth*. The concept of *Spaceship Earth* proposed by Buckminster Fuller in 1968 has never been more keenly felt than now because of the climate catastrophe and severe bio-diversity loss we face.⁴ But we shouldn't worry: the future has always been, and will always be, chaotic. The essential question is how we redesign, adjust, and prepare our

- 3 In Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 endows the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales with a unique role. The Commissioner acts as the guardian of future generations and helps public bodies and policymakers in Wales consider the long-term impact of their decisions. See <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/> for more details.
- 4 The Spaceship Earth metaphor is a powerful tool that helps people understand the finite nature of our planet and the need for humans to operate within its limits. It underscores the interconnectedness of human actions and the necessity for collective action to prevent human-caused catastrophes.

society for that chaotic future. Computer modeling simulations based on cause-and-effect trajectories may identify some possible future aspects. The problem is not the scientific accuracy of these predictions. Instead, it is how we, the current generation, prepare for the future as we deepen our understanding of the root causes of the problems and how we design the ideal future to include future generations. We forecast the near future and plan accordingly. At least, this is how the current democracy generally works, based on what I call the *forecast model of democracy*.⁵ But I have a counter-proposal to the current model, a proposal I call a *backcast model of democracy*, which starts by using our ability to imagine and create an ideal distant future for our shared future society and works back from there.

The ideal conceptual future democracy would be equally inclusive of all living and non-living beings on our planet, viewing each one as a member of a planetary citizenry. Philosophers like Bruno Latour have hinted at the importance of inviting others who coexist with us on Earth, including non-humans, into the “Parliament of Things.” Although there is no direct link to what Latour proposed, in 2017, a robot named Sophia was given legal personhood in Saudi Arabia. The Whanganui River in New Zealand was granted the same legal rights as humans in the same year. These incidents do not explicitly imply whether non-living or non-human beings are included in the system of democracy, especially when we are still struggling to extend equality to all human races and genders. However, one apparent thing is that democracy has always been and continues to be about expanding its *horizontal* democratic sphere. This expansion has gone from inviting non-aristocratic men to participate (the etymology of democracy is from the ancient Greek words *demos* [δῆμος], the ordinary people, and *kratos* [κράτος], power, so the power of the people), to eventually including women, and gradually to the possibility of inviting other living and non-living things to be stakeholders in the democratic system.

So, how can we incorporate the silenced members of our society, future generations, and non-human and non-living beings into our democracy? The *present generation* is the connection point between people who

- 5 As argued above, the forecast model of democracy incorporates model prediction into its decision-making process. However, such prediction is based on a simplified understanding of the natural world, using past data as its prediction base.

lived in a distant past that no longer exists and people who will live in a distant future that does not exist yet. In other words, the present generation represents a bridge between past and future generations and is entrusted with decision-making regarding the different stakeholders. So, shouldn't the present generation act on behalf of the speechless voices of earthly human co-becomings in the representative system of democracy, inclusive of future generations of non-humankind?⁶ In the ideal future democracy, a playful role-play in the "Parliament of Things" should be realized that allows representative members to speak for the silent voices of future generations, trees, plants, animals, and non-living things, such as rivers, mountains, seas, robots, and, perhaps, AI. Future democracy must be about loosening and opening the human *ability for creativity* and the *capacity of imagination* to create a more diverse and inclusive congress. This is also crucial to the backcast method of democracy I introduced above. We first have to imagine our ideal shared *distant future*. In other words, the backcast method is a way to fill in the gaps of the imagined shared future and work backward to create that imagined future from the present, trying to fill in the gaps from now to make that ideal imagined future. In short, it is the opposite of what we are doing today through model-based decision-making, which forecasts from the present to predict the future. However, the future remains uncertain because of the lack of a shared view of an ideal future. The backcast method of democracy attempts to incorporate our shared view of an ideal future into the decision-making process. My dear reader, what would you like to see in our ideal possible future?

How should we proceed to apply intergenerational democracy based on the imagined community? One perspective of embracing human co-becoming stresses the importance of realizing mutuality, connectivity, and reciprocity for humans to become more human, which is the concept of human co-becoming. When facing the problem of a planet that is filled with future uncertainties, it becomes crucial to look beyond the *horizontal*

- 6 I propose inviting non-human and non-living beings into the democracy as members of the Parliament of Things. Referring to the metaphor of Spaceship Earth reminds humans that we need not only humans, which is already quite a dominant species, to become human co-becomings. But non-humans and non-living beings of the earth should count as members of the Spaceship Earth, as should the crucial agencies and entities that help us humans grow to become better beings.

nature of the democratic sphere and address the *vertical* realm of the democratic sphere that invites future generations of humans, as well as human co-becomings, to be part of the distant future. In recent years, several European countries, including Austria, Belgium, and Germany, have lowered the voting age to teenagers aged sixteen and over to incorporate the voices of the (near) future. However, many adults are further concerned with lowering the voting age out of fear of putting too much responsibility on children. In short, the current limited (or rational) thinking fails to invite “others,” both human and non-human, who will be part of our distant future to add their as-yet-unheard voices to the social democratic system.

So, how can we listen to and incorporate the voices of future generations (and non-humans)? I think the key is expanding the current generation’s imagination and creativity and looking deeper into the current society. In whatever attempts we make, we are permanently gridlocked in the present in a certain forever-*presentness*, and we can only think about the future from where we are now: from *here and now*.⁷ Therefore, I propose that our imagined community — and I’m partially borrowing this idea of an “imagined community” from Benedict Anderson’s touchstone book on nationalism — should extend its notion in terms of timescale. Simply put, Anderson’s argument identifies the elements for the rise of nationalism as religious communities, printing industries, and the use of language, which is far different from the current rise of the right-wing nationalist movements. Suppose nationalism is the sense of belonging to the nation-state. In that case, I propose that if we had a shared *global* history beyond mere state histories, the sense of belonging to a shared planetary community could develop a new type of imagined community that allows us to envision our common Imagined Future and bring it into being.

But how can we stretch our imagination and creativity given the issue of “presentness”? The illusion of modernity suggests that we can determine what is right by understanding events through the verifiability of science via quantification, digitization, and computer modeling. In other words, modern science has successfully pushed the *belief system* toward numbers

7 Yes, right! This is inspired from Zen Buddhist thought. Zen is not only about meditation and mindfulness – action from here and now is constantly required.

and quantification, away from the mystique religious belief system. Using this logic, a distant future will require us to maximize our trust in the human ability to imagine and play, away from blind faith in numbers and quantity. For example, through GNP, we can predict economic status using numbers. However, GNP growth does not necessarily imply that we will find happiness and satisfaction in our future life. A future democracy calls for a design based on *qualitative* aspects, not *quantitative* ones — not merely an extension of the past and the present to the predictable future, but a playful imagination of the ideal future beyond cause and effect. The future is filled with uncertainty. Thus, I propose that now is the time to maximize humanity's playfulness, imagination, and creativity to make humans more humane through mutuality and reciprocity beyond the predicted deadlocked future anticipated by computer models. Instead of being fearful and saddened by a future predicted by computer modeling or AI, we need to dream together the shared ideal common future, the imagined Shangri-la, and then backcast from that ideal state to identify what are the feasible steps that we can take now to make our society better.

By producing a new perspective to realign existing issues, such as how to govern the global commons more justly beyond nationalism and national borders, we can design a different path for the possible future. If we continue on the present path with limited imagination and chain ourselves to the finiteness of the data we can obtain, the possibility of our shared future will be reduced. In other words, we can only design an ideal future if it is not based on the predictions of quantitative analysis but rather if the present generation seriously considers the future we want with playful thoughts. As citizens sharing the vision of an ideal collaborative Shangri-la future, we invite the future generation, including non-human and non-living beings, into the imagined community that ties us with the notion of a shared future. Is this radical? I don't think so. We had already opened our doors to the imagined community that shares our common future when the Club of Rome first published *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, which links the potential for a future to choices made today. However, the problem with that attempt and subsequent attempts to consider the future have been based on computer modeling that relies on quantitative

analysis. Making democratic policy decisions with the distant future in mind has been ongoing for quite a while, especially since we became aware of the harm we are inflicting on our planet and how that impacts our shared future.⁸ Still, we have been bound by conventions. We are limited to always thinking and navigating with fear that confronts us with risks, dangers, and hazards of what might happen, thereby restricting our minds from dreaming freely. We must take a deep breath and believe our distant future can be bright, happy, and backcast from that shared ideal future to change how we think, imagine, and dream, starting today.

As a tentative conclusion, I would like to summarize what this idea could achieve. Using imagination, we can envision ourselves as a tree cut down in the rainforest, a contaminated, smelly, and polluted river, or an oxidated sea where sea mammals and fish suffocate. We could also imagine ourselves as a time traveler representing future generations, returning from the distant future to advise the current generation on what could be done *now* to change the conventional path — my proposed backcast method. We need to remind ourselves of our ability to dream playfully about our shared future and how we want our society to be in the next 30 to 50 years. Through such a thought exercise, we can incorporate the ideal virtual future, our dream society, into our democratic system. How do we want our society to be when our children and grandchildren are grown? It is up to the present generation to decide whether we will be flexible and comfortable with our imagination and creativity. By incorporating this imagined common future now, we can open the different and alternating possibilities of intergenerational democracy based on our shared ideal future.

- 8 The United Nations is currently drafting the United Nations Declaration on Future Generations aimed at the Summit of the Future, which is to be held in September 2024. The idea behind this declaration is to consider the interests of future generations in national and global decision-making. For more details, refer to <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/declaration-on-future-generations>.

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