

Politics of the Future in an Age of Emergencies

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In our era of relentless crises, politics is trapped in the present, and the future seems to be closing in. The collective act of imagining new possibilities – a core feature of modern democracy – has given way to a politics based on opinion polls, short-term market projections, and economic indicators. Can the European project, itself an expression of technocratic politics, revive a politics of community oriented towards the world to come? A conversation between Elena Polivtseva and Jonathan White, author of *In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea*.

Elena Polivtseva: In your book, you trace how political discourse has become increasingly driven by crises and emergencies – fuelling public anxiety and demanding more calculated, predictable, and reactive decision-making. A lot has happened since your book came out. How has this trend developed since then?

Jonathan White: Over the past year, the emergency mode in policymaking and political discourse has only intensified. We can even say there is an escalation of this sense of crisis, a bewilderment. A clear impulse for this is the re-election of Trump in the US, which has deepened anxiety and uncertainty about what the future holds, particularly around geopolitics, the old divides between West and East, and traditional security paradigms. Overall, these recent developments have widened the path for a politics obsessed with preparedness, predictability, clarity, and certainty. So, the trends described in the book have only gained more ground.

At the same time, it's clear that people are turning away from viewing the future in purely calculated terms. For example, the green movement – which directly addresses real threats and offers precise targets – has been losing influence in Europe. These kinds of quantified appeals don't seem to resonate. Instead, people are drawn to broad, emotionally charged slogans like "Make America Great Again", which are very ambiguous but manage to invoke a sense of belonging and purpose.

Yes, this past year has also been a kind of real-time experiment testing whether an alternative to the current pattern of systemic decay is possible. It comes back to the Trump vote, which signals a desire within society for the unpredictable. This embrace of uncertainty is a form of rebellion against the dominant policy-making impulse to calculate and control the future. People have shown they are eager to step outside the present trajectory, preferring unpredictability over the mere continuation of existing trends.

In this sense, we're seeing signs of protest against the spirit of reducing the future to numbers and targets, which can be quite limiting because it assumes continuity and isolates one variable as the thing to change. When people rally behind slogans like "Make America Great Again", they're rejecting the idea that progress is just a matter of hitting specific decarbonisation figures or growth metrics. They are looking for a shared project that can't be reduced to metrics – a more holistic vision of change.

There also seems to be an effort to reassert a sense of shared fate and collective future, pushing back against the idea that all we can hope for is incremental personal improvement. In this way, the constant appeals to emergency might actually reverse the ongoing individualisation of societies. Crises are, after all, moments of collectivity – times when your problems become everyone’s problems.

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So, calculated and quantified visions from politicians do not seem to appeal to people. But power holders continue to demand quantifiable evidence from civil society and other public sectors in order to secure political trust and justify the allocation of public subsidies. We see this clearly in the field of cultural policy, where artists and cultural organisations are increasingly expected not only to prove their impact through clear metrics but also to predict this impact in tangible ways. If there is a natural human tendency to resist these calculated futures and measured dreams, wouldn’t it make sense for decision-makers to change how they engage with public sectors?

Indeed, the accountancy mindset, once born in the economic sector, has now crept into a whole range of other fields. Sometimes people refer to “new public management” as a way of organising institutions since the 1970s, where everything has to be shown to be measurable – the costs and benefits quantified, value for money demonstrated. You always have to be ready to convince someone looking over your shoulder, whether it’s an investor, an accountant, or any figure demanding tangible proof that what you’re doing is justifiable on those terms.

As you say, this probably doesn’t work very well in many sectors. It may not even work particularly well in its supposed core: the corporation or economic actor. Many decisions in business are more improvised than this model suggests. The companies that succeed – if profit is the measure – often do so less because of carefully crafted strategies and budgeted outlooks, and more because of luck, inspiration, or decisions of individual actors at the right moment.

But whether or not this mindset works in that quintessential setting, it certainly doesn’t translate well beyond it, because the essence of creativity is unpredictability. If you could predict exactly where creativity or originality would lead, it means your project would already have been done and even replicated by many people. It’s precisely because it is so hard to foresee – and requires a moment of looking beyond what you can plausibly extrapolate from the present – that it happens at all.

We in academia, of course, have something similar to the art sector in this respect. When you’re trying to secure funding for research projects, if you already know exactly what you want to achieve, then maybe it isn’t actually worth doing, because more or less you already know what it’s about. If the research is genuinely worth pursuing, you’ll probably struggle to justify precisely what you’re trying to do, how you’re going to do it, or what you expect to find, because its significance lies in its unpredictability.

So yes, this accountant’s mentality doesn’t travel well beyond the core components of capitalism – if it even works there.

Do you think policymakers are also starting to realise that the quantification of public value

ultimately reduces it?

Yes, I actually think that people in decision-making positions don't really believe these modes of operation are relevant either. They aren't convinced by the metrics; they understand that political change needs a value-driven appeal. Yet we all go along and continue playing the game by its rules. Everyone assumes they'll be seen as crazy or reckless if they deviate from these established ways of operating.

So, if this accountant mindset across all fields of policymaking is an ideological mechanism, I don't think it's about decision-makers losing touch with reality. It's more about a felt need to adhere to certain practices, because to depart from them would be to expose the weakness of your position, the fragility of your authority, and the essentially arbitrary nature of making decisions under conditions of scarcity. That's the interesting part: it's not that decision-makers don't see it. I think people in every corner of authority are perfectly aware that there's something hollow about this constant emphasis on calculation. The problem is that we are short of alternative solutions and trapped within existing structures.

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But this public servant trap yet again led to a rebellion in society and politics. Populism is obviously a word that conceals many things, but in shorthand, you might say that populism is a politics of volition – doing what you want to do rather than what you have to do. Much of the support for populist movements over the last 10 or 15 years has been exactly this kind of rebellion. People like Trump, Boris Johnson, or Milei in Argentina all present themselves as charismatic figures who simply refuse to bow to necessity. They don't do what the economists say they have to do. They don't follow what the strategists say is required to win elections. They do what they want to do. At least, that's the public image: being yourself, being authentic, being undisguised in your intentions. So, I think that anyone drawn to those parties on these grounds is perhaps engaged in a form of rebellion.

As someone working in cultural policy and advocacy, I was pleased to see that whenever you described a major paradigm shift in history in your book, there was always some kind of creative element involved. Utopias were often shaped by writers and artists – though of course not always for good. The *Futurist Manifesto*, for example, was created by an artist and later embraced by fascists. In our sector, we believe that if today's imagination crisis can be addressed at all, the solution lies partly in the arts. That's where you can still imagine beyond what exists today – to think about the future in ways not limited by today's problems. What role do you think arts and artists can play today in reviving “future as a political idea”? Can art help channel that rebellion in society against the status quo into something more meaningful than populism?

I believe art can play an important role here. But from my sense, art has increasingly come to understand itself – especially over the course of the 20th century – in a rather apolitical way: as something that demonstrates its quality precisely by standing apart from philosophical or political disputes. This actually weakens the capacity of art to be that space outside politics from which critical reflection can emerge –

the kind of reflection that ultimately makes change possible.

Yet, art is essential to overcoming today's crisis of imagination in many ways. First of all, art can *historicise the present* – to remind us that the lives we are living are not unprecedented or beyond comparison. Art can convince us that we can still understand people in different centuries. Someone can tell the story of a 19th-century life, and it still resonates with us. We can recognise the emotions, hopes, and purposes people had in other eras.

Insofar as art cultivates that sense of cross-temporal understanding, it carries a very important political message. A lot of politics is about building projects that connect us with those who came before and those who will come after. That's another crucial thing: the space of culture offers the capacity to place the present in context – and to link it to a longer human story. This can happen, for example, through a book that reflects on the past or offers a vision on a future.

As you suggest in your book, a creative idea alone cannot mobilise people. It needs to be given a political shape. So my question isn't even about what messages artists or their individual works send, but rather: what practices do they offer? What modes of thinking or values do they convey that could be embraced in politics to help build a better future?

I think perhaps one distinction – though not a perfect one – between the Left and the Right is that right-wing politics often invokes ideas of community and shared experience, but rarely pairs this with any real participation in decision-making or control over organisations. For example, the US Republican Party isn't in any meaningful sense a party in which ordinary people participate.

This politics of the community on the right is often more symbolic than substantive. Even movements like Trumpism keep the fundamentals of the economy intact. In that sense, they are fundamentally status-quo-oriented.

What other parties could potentially offer – but too often fail to – is something different: a politics of community grounded in actual involvement, self-determination, and real equality. You see this in certain ideas of movement politics or more participatory parties that have tried to foster hands-on engagement. Participatory budgeting in parts of South America in the 2000s was one attempt to do this.

Insofar as the cultural sphere can create spaces of sociality that feed into this kind of political organising, that's one pathway to nurture a more genuinely participatory community politics. It all starts with local organising. It always has. Local concerns – like housing, public spaces, or simply having somewhere to gather – are the kinds of ultra-local causes that nonetheless carry wider political significance. That is because if you build habits of people getting together and seeing each other in a more favourable light, that can slowly change how society works. One challenge of contemporary life is that we often see each other at our worst: online, in moments of anger or confrontation; on the street, as rushed individuals just trying to get by. What we have fewer occasions for is seeing each other as thinkers, as people willing to talk, deliberate, or act out of something other than self-interest.

Creating spaces where strangers can encounter each other in a more generous light – whether it's a reading group, a cultural street event, or a music festival – is, in a way, a form of proto-political action. These experiences can reveal the stranger as someone who shares emotions you recognise and value, someone who appears as you'd hope to see yourself, rather than as you fear you are seen in daily life. So, building spaces can spill over into community and participation out of which real change might grow.

Artistic and cultural practices and experiences can also demonstrate what the decommodification of

time, relationships, and, essentially, wellbeing and the “good life” can look and feel like. This can be a backbone of sustainable living, and ultimately strengthen the greening agenda.

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Today, Europe faces a choice between further developing the EU as – in your words – “an individual consumer project”, or building it as a shared future and a true community project. How do you think the EU can respond to this crossroads?

To generate real solidarity, the EU must become much more assertive in addressing economic inequality and pursuing an egalitarian agenda around wealth distribution. True solidarity requires policies that confront deep economic divides within countries, not just between them. Yet EU mechanisms still mostly operate on the principle of transfers between richer and poorer member states, which misses the fact that the major inequalities run *through* societies, not only *between* them.

The EU should also see itself as more than an engine of economic growth – as a community of citizens who share values and a future. Somewhat paradoxically, the rise of the far right shows there is genuine appetite for this. Increasingly, far-right parties aren’t simply anti-European nationalists but are promoting an alternative vision of Europe; one that rejects technocracy and calculation in favour of a rhetoric of belonging, sacrifice, and deeper purpose.

Of course, the far right grounds this in narratives of cultural threat and hostility to migration, which are dangerous. But their success demonstrates that many people want a politics motivated by more than material abundance. The idea that there are things worth sacrificing for – something larger than profit or consumption – resonates widely. The challenge for other political movements today is to tap into this desire for meaning and shared purpose without reproducing the exclusionary politics of the far right.

There is an appetite for a different vision of European politics. The task is how to meet that appetite with an inclusive, democratic alternative.

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