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# COMMON FUTURES

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION  
AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY

*Yavor Tarinski*

*Alexandros Schismenos*



POLITICS/PHILOSOPHY

# COMMON FUTURES

## SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Exploring the global emergence of twenty-first-century social movements opposed to capitalism and State authority, Yavor Tarinski and Alexandros Schismenos show how these movements form autonomous networks built on direct democracy and solidarity. Even amid the ongoing global crisis caused by capitalism, the potential for a different, radically rooted politics has appeared. The authors identify and detail the importance of grassroots movements, which can bring radical change and create a more democratic future. *Common Futures* probes the roots of the environmental crisis by examining the relationship between social and ecological problems. But Tarinski and Schismenos go beyond the analysis of today's crises, contemporary struggles, and social movements: *Common Futures* clarifies the conditions for the re-creation of free public time and space and identifies practical steps that we can take to alleviate the inevitable problems of our future.

***"The perfect book for those who wish to make the radical shift from capitalism's despondent citizenry to that of the empowered, re-rooted, politicized consciousness. Highly recommended, and certain to be a classic."***

— Dr. Hawzhin Azeez, founder of *The Middle Eastern Feminist*

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“How do we replace the figure of homo economicus and his cut-throat world with that of the steward, caretaker to the living? *Common Futures* makes the compelling case that Cornelius Catstoriadis’ notion of “self-limitation”—at the heart of his thinking about ecology, democracy, and the necessary relation between the two—is where we begin.”

—KRISTIN ROSS  
AUTHOR OF *COMMUNAL LUXURY*

“Tarinksi and Schismenos have produced a profoundly timely book that is essential reading. The crisis of unfettered ecological destruction through capitalism and the nation-state’s synergistic exploitation of nature and promotion of destructive normalcy, produces a collective sense of hopelessness and fatalism. The alternative is a radical change towards direct democracy and political ecology, which the authors powerfully argue arises through horizontal and leaderless social movements. This is the perfect book for those who wish to make the radical shift from capitalism’s despondent citizenry to that of the empowered, re-rooted, politicized consciousness. Highly recommended, and certain to be a classic.”

—DR. HAWZHIN AZEEZ  
FOUNDER OF *THE MIDDLE EASTERN FEMINIST*

“Tarinksi and Schismenos capture our unnervingly discordant experience of time. We are, on one level, stuck in the déjà vu of capitalism, where the presents just repeats itself and nothing changes, in fact nothing is allowed to change, despite surface appearances. But on another level, we are hurtling blindly towards global ecological catastrophe, fearing a future that approaches with frightening speed. To change this ‘futureless present’, something else is needed, something that is not enmeshed in the same mindset that it seeks to transcend.”

—MAT LITTLE  
AUTHOR OF *THE DISOBEDIENT SOCIETY*

“Mobilizing many voices of radical thought and events of rebellious practice of the last two centuries, Tarinksi and Schismenos outline a timely autonomist political ecology. Its readers will be challenged and inspired.”

—VASSILIS LAMBROPOULOS  
AUTHOR OF *THE RISE OF EUROCENTRISM*

“This is a timely book that seeks to break our present asunder, opening up the possible future of direct democracy and political ecology. Drawing force and inspiration from recent social movements which enact and agitate for a world beyond nationalism and alienated representation, the authors flesh out the political projects of direct self-institution, radical political ecology and social self-limitation, which promise to break with the ‘eternal present’ of (non-) representative democracy, nation-states and the unsustainable economics of growth. This is a future of life, freedom and real democracy that we can create together, equally, collectively and rhizomatically from the grassroots, in order to overcome the present dead-ends of elite rule, consumerism, ecological devastation and global injustice.”

—ALEXANDROS KIOUPKIOLIS  
AUTHOR OF *COMMON AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC POLITICS:  
RE-THINKING SOCIAL CHANGE*

# Introduction

## Futureless Present, Time and Social Transformation

, Mar 2nd

*The following is the introduction of the new book “Common Futures: Social Transformation and Political Ecology” by Yavor Tarinski and Alexandros Schismenos.*

### Futureless Present

Why have we incorporated the term ‘future’ in the title of this book, one might ask. Well, most of all, because we live in a futureless present. This might seem quite strange to many, since most people today perceive time as unstoppably moving in a one-way direction. In such an imaginary representation, there is always a clearly defined past, present and future. But the reality is much different than that.

What is time? Let us take a look at our nearest clock. It is supposed to measure time, but in actuality it counts repetitive oscillations of the clock central mechanism. It assigns these measurements to homogenous time-intervals that are both the same as regards their duration and distinct as regards their position on a linear counting table. Clocks rather assign arbitrary coordinates to the temporal flow, just like a map assigns arbitrary coordinates to the planetary surface. They map natural temporality in terms of social processes, creating the artificial measured time that is distinct from the natural temporality itself; in natural time, every day is differently balanced with the night, depending on the season and the amount of sunlight; traditional agricultural societies organized their lives along these natural rhythms. But in the time of the clocks, every day is similarly divided and an arbitrary, unnatural division of temporal intervals has been established; the clocks are a symbol of the detachment of social temporality from natural time.

On the other hand, actual moments of time are neither the same nor linear, their content and value differ as regards each individual. Our subjective time is not the time of the clocks and nothing that happens in time is accounted for by the clocks. There are moments of boredom, that seem to never pass and moments of action where time seems to fly. The value content of time depends on the activity we indulge ourselves in. Our subjective time cannot be detached from the time assigned by the clocks, since we organize our everyday lives on a time-schedule determined by that arbitrary measurement of oscillations. And, even if we escape these constraints, our subjective time bears an inherent differentiation between our unconscious psychical temporality, a dream time that is neither ordained nor repetitive, nor directly accessible to us but rather felt in

terms of emotional affects, and our conscious personal temporality, which is already a socialized temporality, a time devoted to our conscious interactions with others or with the world.

All those interactions create new forms of co-existence, presence, and activity, therefore creating new forms of social temporality. They create the common present in which we all live in, the social-historical locus of actual co-existence, which is not isolated, but also carries with it the representations of the past and the aspirations of the future. Time is not external to us, not only because we are temporal beings and our existence is temporally situated, but also because our actions create new forms of being, new processes of becoming, transform the past and gestate possible futures. Things change constantly, but they do not change in the same way, neither at the same rhythm. Social entities have different durations, social institutions and structures are supposed to endure, while individuals are finite. But the social present created by the social imaginary always carries with it a dimension of pastness, a public representation of history, which forms the basis of our identity, our self-identification with social significations and roles and also an orientation toward the future, which invests our actions with the meaning of foreseeable aspirations and inscribes them to a common and indefinite future horizon.

Yes, our daily experiences are being rushed by the capitalist clock. We feel as there is never enough time for all the things we have or desire to do. And this is true, as our daily temporalities are being densely fragmented in a highly precarious setting, where we have to rush from one task to another, in increasingly fragmented routines, if we don't want to fall at the bottom layers of society, among those most disempowered.

But there simultaneously is another feeling, that of time saturation, when looking at the world at longer temporal scale. We are not speaking here of history repeating itself, as argued by Marx when quoting Hegel (1). Instead, what we have is a general feeling of *Déjà vu*. People grow older, things get worn out, the planet keeps spinning, but on social level things remain generally the same. Yes, governments still change, new reforms are being passed and alliances forged or disbanded etc. But the organizational form our societies have remains unchanged, often even when people try to imagine an alternative social model. This is the promise of stability and normality offered by the Capital-Nation-State complex—an oligarchic order, whose institutions remain unapt for alteration. The only choice people have to do more than just minor reforms or revoking of certain individuals is to revolt and initiate their own alternative institutions. But this is more difficult than it sounds.

Even before Fukuyama's proclamation for the end of history we had two opposing sides, each claiming to be alternative to the other. But, in reality, they were the two faces of the same coin. Castoriadis described them as "Fragmented" (i.e. Western) versus "Totalitarian" (i.e. Soviet) bureaucratic capitalism (2), thus underlying their sameness.

But it still seems as people remain unable to imagine a future that will go beyond that *déjà vu*. We hear of Degrowth, Commons, Circular economy, Zero Waste economy, etc. but all these supposedly radical new theories seem to stem from the very same imaginary they aim to challenge: Thinking of social change in economic terms.



Paolo Virno suggests that “[d]éjà vu arises when the past-form, applied to the present, is exchanged for a past-content, which the present will repeat with obsessive loyalty – that is to say, when a possible-present is exchanged for a real-past.” (3) This is exactly what nation-states do as they strive to create a national identity by homogenizing their subjects—extracting certain interpretation of a particular event from the past and turn it into what McKenzie Wark calls past-in-general (4). In the imaginary of the nation-state, the national identity is something that does not change over time. Minor developments, like those occurring in the language, are being recognized, but the present nation is seen as a direct continuation of the past. In this sense there is no really tangible future in the imaginary of the nation, only a futuristic setting in which its future generations will continue their national legacy.

Besides the feeling of déjà vu, provoked by the current status quo, the absence of future is also present on an existential level. Due to the danger of global warming, our existence as a specie on this planet has come under question. Not only will cities and other human settlements come under water, but also deserts will expand faster, displacing millions of people from their homes, creating massive waves of climate refugees. The worst thing is that there already are such.

The planetary conditions that make life as we know it possible are very fragile. The smallest climate change might have disastrous consequences and our societies are set on a course that is already overpassing the danger-zone. World governments and corporations seem unable, but also unwilling, to take any measure to tackle one of the most dangerous and existential crises in human history—the climate one. Despite thousands of international treaties, summits and agreements, we are still on a collision course with the planetary boundaries.

During the 21st century and amidst the digital and informational revolution, social time has been transformed in three important ways. First, there is an unprecedented sense of actual global temporality, emerging from the global interconnectivity provided by digital networks; this global temporality consists of a new sense of global synchronicity, which practically means that we can have direct access to events happening in other places of the world and a new sense of global diachronicity, which practically means that we can have direct access to the historical archives of other societies. This has presented current social movements with a new range and depth, since they can communicate their actions around the world, but also become points of reference for future actions elsewhere, that form a common history of emancipation against the official narratives of authority. But this diachronicity, based on the dominant informational technologies, may be more shallow than we think.

Second, there a new sense of acceleration and presentism, imposed from above with corrosive effects against collective memory. Big Data, used by companies and governments to plan the future based on the statistics of the recent past, is the driving force behind this phenomenon. Luciano Floridi has argued that the use of Informational Communication Technologies (ICT’s) creates a “hyperhistory,” which is the secondary interpretation of historical events based on Big Data. He debunks two myths related to hyperhistory. The first regards the quality of recorded data memory:

*“ ‘Save this document’ means ‘replace its old version’, and every digital document of any kind may aspire to such an ahistorical nature. The risk is that differences are erased, alternatives*

*amalgamated, the past constantly rewritten, and history reduced to the perennial here and now. When most of our knowledge is in the hands of this forgetful memory, we may find ourselves imprisoned in a perpetual present.” (5)*

The second myth regards the quantity of recorded data memory:

*“Since 2007 the world has been producing many more data than available storage. [...] In history the problem was what to save [...] The problem becomes what to erase And this leads to a slightly reassuring vicious circle: we should soon be able to ask big data what data are worth saving.” (6)*

This artificial perennial present threatens to reduce historical memory to a shallow, constantly, rewritten pastness, that does not lean on human experience but on data recordings and their interpretations. Along with systemic accelerationism, which forces social processes to speed up without pause for reflection, they form the core of systemic presentism, which obscures our collective memory of the past and leaves no time to envision a different future.

Third, this existential crisis introduces another temporality—one of urgency, brought up by the threat of global ecological catastrophe, toward which humanity is blindly running while striving to fulfill the unfulfillable systemic ambition of expansive growth and unlimited exploitation of nature and society. Urgency, on the one hand complements the system’s accelerationism, bounding society in an exhausting agony between a rush for the future and a fear of the future, but on the other it has inspired social movements that rise against the system and the dreadful dystopian horizon of self-destruction that its policies have made all too real. We have to act as soon as possible, otherwise there might not be tomorrow. Future generations must also be taken into consideration as our (in)action today will directly affect the world they will inhabit one day.

This sense of urgency urges us to act toward radical change. Nation-states and their business associates respond by attempting to enforce the déjà vu effect of normality, reaching as far as deeming peaceful climate movements as terrorist (7). Some argue that the political form, which will appropriately correspond to this urgency is the totalitarian one, as it allows for quick unchallengeable decisions to be taken—the so-called eco-fascists. But they seem to be lurking still within the contemporary imaginary, based on domination and exploitation. It is this mindset that led us exploit nature in the first place.

### Reclaiming the Future

When we think of the future, we lean on our conception of the past, and our thinking takes place at the present. In every moment we reflect on time, we find ourselves both immersed in and detached from a temporal flow that seems to supersede us in every way. Immersed, since our envisioning of the future is never *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*, but rather conditioned by our present situation, which, in turn, is framed by the past; detached, since our envisioning of the future places us on an imaginative a-temporal point of view, which functions as an imaginary escape from our past and present reality. However, neither this immersion nor this detachment is complete, since we are always present, always open to outside temporality, but also, we are always individuals, always rooted in our own personal perspective. Social time is what mediates between natural temporality and psychical temporality and the common field where our



conscious individual time is formed and integrated within our collective history. No society could exist on a 'no future' assumption and the terror of such a possibility nurtures the most nightmarish dystopias.

Future dystopias are a recent social-historical construction based on a sense of collective hopelessness and a modern feeling of fatalism. But this occurs only because we are individually excluded from the central political decision-making that brings forward future possibilities. In our nation-state societies, the official past, embodied in established authorities and official historical narratives, which function as the justification mechanism for established authorities, casts its shadow over the present both as authority and as tradition. Instituted attitudes, norms and stereotypes that reproduce social inequality and exploitation invest on the repetitive dimension of temporality and try to control the future, thus securing the status quo.

But, change and alterity are immanent in time. Time passes and this passage is manifested in the emergence of alterity, the appearance of the new, the questioning of the traditional and the opening up of unforeseeable futures. Social injustice, inequality and exploitation erode the foundations of social belonging and identification with authority.

The creative dimension of time erupts without warning in rebellions, revolutions and the rise of new significations. These are the moments where the arbitrary foundations of established authorities are exposed as such and the political question regains its full existential depth, being rephrased as a questioning of society's institution as a whole and a collective impetus toward the reclaiming of the future, which means the re-institution of the present.

So, at this moment, we, as co-existing social individuals face an unprecedented dilemma between a fervent, agonizing presentism without pause, or a different, radical present, based on the anti-systemic and humane values of equality, freedom and respect for nature. It is not a free option that we can freely decide. It is rather a cause of struggle against the system, in order to create the free public space and time where we can actually have an option. Then there are the countless grassroots movements around the world that demand a radical systemic change toward a common future for all. Sometimes consciously and sometimes not, many demand a paradigm shift oriented toward a project of direct democracy, which will allow to all people participate in the shaping of institutions and all spheres of public life. These movements provoke a break from the déjà vu effect of capitalism and nation-states and lay the foundations of a democratic and ecological future. This means that we have to radically alter our present, thus reclaiming the future.

#### Political Ecology and Democratic Theory

The first two chapters of the book are dedicated to exploring the theoretical outlines of political ecology and direct democracy as the foundational basis of a plethora of common futures. Both are viewed as intrinsically interconnected and timely as never before.

The first chapter is dedicated to political ecology. As a rich body of theory and practice, it is crucial for understanding the root causes of the ongoing climate crisis and environmental degradation. Through the lens of political ecology, the ecological catastrophe we are facing is not due to some naturally occurring events, or something which humanity did recently. Its roots span

long before the emergence of capitalism, back to the first traces of patriarchy and gerontocracy. In other words, it is the early forms of domination and oppression that have gradually shaped humanity's imaginary to obtain a sense of pseudo-mastery over nature and exploit it.

Political ecology also goes beyond contemporary fallacies like economic growth and overpopulation scaremongering as they both aim to maintain the contemporary regime. Furthermore, it is not a scientific discipline, but instead it has to do with the ability of human societies to self-limit their activities in relation to nature. In this sense, ecology is essentially political and is interlinked to democracy, as they both involve active social self-limitation.

The second chapter thus introduces us to certain theoretical outlines of direct democracy. The term direct is being used as to indicate the active and participatory nature of democracy. In this sense there is a clear distinction that must be made between the current oligarchic regime and democratic theory and practice. To equate the contemporary parliamentary system with democracy means to strip the term from any real meaning as then everything can be described as democratic—from constitutional monarchies like the UK until the Zapatista caracoles and Rojava's cantons. The absurdity of describing as democratic every liberal oligarchic system is evident from one such comparison.

As it is defined by Rousseau, direct democracy, first and foremost, is a regime of self-limitation. This implies that the whole citizenry will take an active part in the law-making, self-instituting and all the limitations that will be set before their actions. The essential difference with the current regime is that it will be through a process that allows to all members of society to participate and voice their concerns, proposals etc., unlike the current setting, in which it is governmental elites, consisted of professionalized politicians and technocratic elites, that do that behind closed doors or as part of media spectacle.

The project of direct democracy is incompatible with the current parliamentary regime and its tools. In this line of thought political parties are viewed as obstacles to democratic self-management, as they tend to become entities interested mainly with their hold on power. The concept of the need for roots is also presented as an integral part of direct democracy. Unlike capitalism and nationalism, who both uproot people from their organic communities, democracy strives at rooting people through the detaching of politics and history from the sterilization of the Nation-State and linking them instead to the organic experience of life in our cities, towns and villages.

Finally, there is the question of ideology. In the last piece of chapter two, we attempt to differentiate politics from ideologies. Exploring the works of diverse thinkers, ranging from the Situationist International, Friedrich Nietzsche, Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, a clear distinction is being drawn. While ideology is being presented as an imaginary that saturates space and time, hindering the flow and clash of ideas, direct democracy comes as the exact opposite—the creation of public space and time, in which history is being viewed as creation and dissensus is being maintained.

The target of chapter two is to find the common linkages between democracy and ecology and to suggest that tackling environmental catastrophe requires collective efforts from below. In this

way, it paves the way for the following chapter that focuses on the specificities of concrete social practices and movements.

## Social Movements

The agents of radical change in our time are neither political parties nor traditional forms of organized struggle, like the syndicate, but rather horizontal and leaderless social movements, that move beyond representative politics.

During the 21st century, grassroots social movements have manifested their power in rebellions and insurrections that seem to erupt successively throughout the globe. From the anti-globalization or alter-globalization movements of the early 2000s to the insurrections in Chile and Hong Kong that began in 2019 and continued well into 2020, societies rebel against State and corporate politics.

The common features of these rebellions are their use of ICTs to globally diffuse their message, the absence of formal leaderships and their horizontal, direct democratic manner of organisation. Another, emergent common property is that refutation and refusal of traditional representation mechanisms, thus formulating informal channels of communication that bridge the local and the global, the particular and the universal, transgressing the national level of state politics. However, they face an array of problems, ranging from traditional ones, like how to defend themselves against state oppression and violence, to new ones, like how to address issues of representation, decision-making and decision-enactment. Direct democracy and community seem to provide a fertile ground for solving those issues, albeit the historical forms that both direct democracy and community have taken in the past, namely the commune-form seem inadequate. Modern communities cannot be closed in themselves but need to remain open to the world, whereas direct democracy cannot be locally restricted, since there are social and environmental problems that transcend locality. A possible answer can be found in the form of social transnational networks, supplemented by the new digital network technologies. But there is neither place nor time to freely experiment with these, without a direct confrontation with established authorities.

We devoted the second part of the book to a research on the temporal, contextual, and conceptual challenges raised by the recent social movements of our century, focusing on our experience in Greece and Europe. In the third part, we present a brief timeline and description of Greek and French social movements, starting from their historical rooting in the 1960s and before and proceeding to examine their qualitative elements as they struggle against the establishment toward a common future, as we engage in a theoretical dialogue with thinkers such as Jacques Rancière, Kristin Ross, Cornelius Castoriadis, Murray Bookchin, and others.

In the fourth part, we delineate some of the conceptual challenges that these movements have faced or brought about, like the questioning of nationality, representation and temporality in terms of freedom, equality, ecology, social, and individual autonomy. The convergence of direct democracy and social ecology in a free public space and time seems to be the necessary ground from which we can collectively, equally and deliberatively project the radical horizon of a common future.



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*Common Futures: Social Transformation and Political Ecology* is available [here](#).

Footnotes:

1) Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

2) *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. David Ames Curtis, London: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 218-238.

3) Paolo Virno, *Deja vu and the end of history*, London: Verso Books, 2015, p. 18.

4) <https://publicseminar.org/2015/02/virno-and-history/>

5) Luciano Floridi, *The 4th Revolution*, 2014, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 20.

6) Ibid. p. 23.

7) <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jan/27/terror-police-list-extinction-rebellion-shared-across-government>