

Daniel Innerarity

The Future and its Enemies: In Defense of Political Hope.

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Daniel Innerarity opens this compact reflection on the myopia of our democratic culture by asserting that '[t]he most pressing matter for contemporary democracies is not to accelerate social processes but to recuperate the future' (17). The book is arranged as a series of interconnected theories—of acceleration, future studies, decision, responsibility, social rhythm and political contingency—that, together, doubtless raise more questions than they answer, but are nevertheless deeply provocative. We can get a good idea of the book's scope and main messages by unpacking the quoted passage above. What is social 'acceleration'? What might it mean to 'recuperate' the future in the face of accelerative processes? And, finally, exactly who, or what, are the eponymous enemies of the future?

There are three aspects to the 'semantic field of acceleration': technological change, social change, and pace of life change (24). All involve an enervating quickening characteristic of the modern age. Goods and information move faster than ever, patterns of association among people alter more rapidly, and we feel more than ever as though we are pressed for time. Further, the acceleration is accompanied by a largely reactive deceleration. Thus we see, for example, 'intentional decelerations' such as the slow food movement, 'the defense of serenity', the glorification of 'aesthetic idleness', and so on (26-27). We also observe 'pathological' decelerations, like traffic jams, psychological depressions, and economic slowdowns (26). Most importantly, acceleration is really a kind of 'false mobility' (24). That is, although we are moving more and more quickly, there is very little genuine innovation in democratic societies. Beneath the bustling veneer of our social and political lives there is 'a paradoxical stagnation of history in which nothing truly new emerges' (26). Think about how a present obsession with speed shapes our future-directed desires. If Innerarity is right, we must believe that *what* we have is good enough, and our desires are therefore confined to getting more of this stuff and getting it more quickly. How *could* genuine novelty appear in these circumstances?

So Innerarity's guiding criticism of our political culture is the way it washes out the future. As he puts it, the solution to many of our problems lies neither in the 'flight forward' (32) nor in the strategies of deceleration just mentioned, but rather in the struggle against false mobility. This involves taking responsibility for the increasing uncertainty that marks our lives. Gone are the days when we could divine the future (the dream of pagan culture) or know it with certainty (the dream of Enlightenment culture). Given the complex social and geophysical systems in which our lives are enmeshed, we should realize that we cannot fully control or know reality. These systems are characterized by emergent properties, tipping points, positive and negative feedbacks, and so on.

They are, as such, inherently unpredictable. As Ulrich Beck has argued, this is why we should see the management of risk as the paramount task of democratic politics.

Although the book is short on examples, we might get a better grip on these claims by focusing on an issue Innerarity mentions only *en passant*: climate change. There are those who think the best policy here is to seek out oases of deceleration (thus Lovelock emphasizes the need for ‘sustainable retreat’ from globalized complexity), and others who think climate change is ‘just an engineering problem’ and should not, as such, interrupt our technologically-driven forward movement. The result is what many have decried as a debilitating ‘inertia’. We are doing exactly nothing about the profound threats to our civilization posed by climate change. This is true in spite of all the furious surface activity we observe around the issue: the endless rounds of COP meetings, successively dire IPCC reports, strenuous if largely confused public debate, etc. And hovering above all of this is the quite legitimate worry about how we could possibly be morally responsible for something whose causes and effects—both spatial and temporal—are so diffuse.

How might we apply Innerarity’s model to a super-wicked problem like this? First, we should embrace its complexity and uncertainty. By now we have failed in our efforts to mitigate climate change, leaving us little to do but manage or adapt to its effects. Innerarity is telling us that, as things stand, there is no reason to think we will do this at all intelligently. Being open to, and politically flexible in the face of, climate surprises will allow us to cope more effectively with the challenges they create for us.

But, second, this demands a post-ideological politics. Innerarity describes politics as ‘the attempt to civilize the future’ (118). If we can strip democratic political culture of the inertia of bureaucracy, this or that ‘ideological monopoly’ (118), or nostalgia for any kind of fatalistic necessity, we will by that fact have created a more open public space, one in which we can review our options candidly and implement our choices nimbly. Moreover, we can see how the forces just mentioned, in virtue of their rigidity and attachment to past patterns, might block a true apprehension of the future. In contrast to how these structures orient us, Innerarity is urging us to forgo the mug’s game of trying to *predict* the future: ‘the big question...is not what awaits us, but what we are going to do’ (120). This renunciation opens the path to a truly autonomous politics, one not beholden to the imperatives of technology, the growth economy, or media-generated enthusiasms.

This brings us to our final question: who are the enemies of the future? They are those on both the left and the right of the current political spectrum. The problem with the left is that it is mired in anti-realist utopian thinking, while the right is entirely uncritical in the face of the technological and economic juggernaut. We are thus besieged by Cassandras and Pollyannas, and politics is predictably limp as a result: ‘reality and efficiency are managed by the right wing, while the left is free to enjoy the monopoly of unreality... In this way, there are those who are afforded reality without hope and others, hope without reality’ (121-122). Of course, the right is winning in the sense that it now controls political reality, so the task of recuperating the future and thus reinvigorating democratic politics lies with the left. But to fulfill its mission the left must abandon the safe terrain of utopian critique—expressed for instance in the knee-jerk rejection of globalization—and challenge the right on its own terms. Climate change (among other things)

surely requires just this sort of re-orientation. Our inertia has its roots in an ideological struggle that is undermining our ability to respond wisely to the risks we now face on this front. Our only hope is in the political sphere, but politics must first be liberated from ideology.

Byron Williston
Wilfrid Laurier University