



More in
Common

The Endless Sea

Imagining a Story
of Tomorrow

Giuliano da Empoli

“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

Antoine de St-Exupéry

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ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

The Endless Sea project is led by More in Common, an initiative set up in 2017 to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. Our teams in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government to connect people across the lines of division. For more information, please visit www.moreincommon.com



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FOREWORD

Hope has become a scarce commodity in the early decades of the 21st century. There is a widespread sense of exhaustion running through society, caused by deepening divisions and discontent with failed systems, and the far-reaching fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Established institutions and leaders, to which we all once looked for direction, are no longer trusted. This is a climate in which despair can set in, divisions can thrive and conflict can become entrenched.

A powerful tool in breaking cycles of conflict is imaging the future together: shifting people's gaze from the struggles of today towards the possibility of change tomorrow. More in Common's research shows, across the fault lines of social divisions, a shared longing for the common good. But at the same time, many people feel they have lost both a sense of agency to shape a better future and have lost hope that the system can deliver the change they aspire to on issues like jobs, healthcare or the environment. Leaders, too, are struggling to articulate a vision for the future that resonates widely and transcends the well-worn narratives of decades past.

That is why More in Common is launching an exploration of 'the vast and endless sea' – to understand the aspirations, ideas and visions that might help shape a positive story of tomorrow. Our goal with this project is to support change-makers, thinkers and practitioners to turn people's attention toward the future world that we will all share, and in so doing help transcend the divisions of today. We are buoyed by 'bubble theory' which suggests that significant and sometimes rapid change can occur in attitudes, relationships and communities when "bubbles of new appear in a sea of old" or "bubbles of old regain dominance in a sea of new."

The task is as immense as the sea itself, but the journey can be a source of inspiration. One of the things we have learned is that the Endless Sea project will be as much about reinventing the journey as about defining a point of arrival. How we talk about the future will need to be different and new. We also know that to be effective, new narratives must understand and speak to the aspirations of large majorities including those too often excluded from conversations about the future.

We have begun this work by commissioning a paper from the author and political advisor Giuliano da Empoli who has joined More in Common as a Senior Fellow to lead this first phase of work and explore interest in this 'narrative moonshot'. In this initial paper, Giuliano draws inspiration from groups ranging from the Mexican amusement park chain Kidzania to the Yes Men group of pranksters and from Fridays for Future to the municipal elections in Istanbul. These all have one thing in common: they are a source of movement and energy

Imagining a Story for Tomorrow

and in that sense, we have much to learn from them and from the many organizations contributing, in their own way, to that story of a better tomorrow.

The paper you are about to read is part of an experiment to assess if this type of work helps us achieve More in Common's mission of uniting divided societies. Our hope is to bring more voices into this conversation, and to learn more about the ideas and visions that resonate with people across societies. We hope too that it will spark new contributions, ideas and inspirations drawing from a variety of worldviews and life-experiences.

We hope you enjoy your travels on the Endless Sea and would love to hear from you on your return.

Mathieu Lefèvre and **Tim Dixon**, co-founders, More in Common



INDEX

INTRODUCTION The Hope Gap	6
PART I The Big Switch	9
Intensifiers	
The Fun Factor	16
Prefiguration: A Future You Can Touch	17
The Energy of Transgression	19
The Narcissist as Changemaker	21
No Ordinary Heroes	22
A New Kind of Leadership	23
PART II The Age of Existential Politics	26
From Climate to Home	31
From Inequality to Dignity	32
From Online to Offline	33
From Representation to Power	35
CONCLUSION	38



INTRODUCTION

In Mike Nichols' "The Graduate", Dustin Hoffmann plays a twenty-two year old boy just out of college. Like most people his age, he's searching for meaning, trying to figure out his place in the world. His parents throw him a party. He wanders around by the pool, drink in hand, smiling wanly at the guests, puzzled, until he is grabbed by a friend of his father's, Mr. McGuire.

McGuire is a determined fellow. He looms over the young graduate at least twenty centimeters taller and has clear ideas about the young man's future. He lures him off to one side and tells him in a definitive tone.

—*"I just want to say one word to you. Just one word."*

—*"Yes sir."*

—*"Are you listening?"*

—*"Yes sir, I am."*

—*"Plastics."*

After a long silence the graduate stutters,

—*"Exactly, how do you mean?"*

—*"There's a great future in plastics. Think about it."*

Sixty years later, mainstream politicians and policy-makers no longer give the same answer to those who ask them about the future. Instead of "Plastics", they proclaim "Renewables". But aside from this minor adjustment, they continue to exhibit the same emotional blindness as Mr. McGuire.

Faced with scores of voters in search of meaning, or at least in search of some fixed point in an increasingly moveable reality, they offer, at best, a functional answer. Which doesn't stop them from being astonished when broad segments of the public turn to leaders and movements that offer a strong sense of meaning: "God, country and family", according to a historic slogan recently resurrected by Giorgia Meloni, the rising star of the Italian radical right.

It is enough to observe the events of the last year to realize to what extent the practical dimension of politics is disconnected from the symbolic and emotional ones.

In Europe, for example, it is no exaggeration to say that the last year has been marked by unprecedented progress. Faced with the health crisis, the states of the European Union have, for the first time, reached an agreement to launch a joint Recovery Plan, financed by the issuing of European bonds. This historic turning point came after another groundbreaking event - the launch of the European Green Deal, which aims to make the continent carbon neutral by 2050 - and not least the agreement on vaccines which has allowed the 27 countries to coordinate the purchasing effort instead of competing with each other, despite the absence of a specific EU competence on health matters.

But while concrete advances have been extraordinary, the same cannot be said on a symbolic or emotional level. On the contrary, the perception that most European citizens have of the past year and a half is that of growing disunity. In their eyes this began in March 2020, with unilateral border closures and blockades of healthcare supplies, and continued in the following spring with delays and recriminations that marked the start of the vaccination campaign. Not to mention some striking (and viral) images of European weakness, such as the scene in which Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen is left standing in the presence of two seated men during the meeting with Turkish President Erdogan.

The result of this lag between the material and symbolic dimensions is that awareness of the progress made by the European Union has been confined to the conference halls of Brussels and a few national capitals, while the perception of growing disunity has spread through the channels of public opinion, further fuelling the Eurosceptic narrative that continues to make headway in most member states.

The lack of a positive European narrative, however, is only one aspect of the more general absence of a motivating vision of the future as a radical alternative to the return to the past championed by the leaders of national-populist movements. At the national level, even leaders who had established themselves through a strong ability to project an optimistic vision of the future - think of Emmanuel Macron - are now struggling to follow their own thread.

In America, the context may be different, but it shares the absence of a compelling and positive vision that can combat the current divisive and disruptive narratives that seem to

be proliferating across the country. Today, most moderate political voices bemoan their own irrelevance, blaming the rise of authoritarian voices on fake news and conspiracy theories, without understanding that these draw their strength from being incorporated into broader narratives that echo the fears and aspirations of growing segments of our societies. For those who adhere to an authoritarian worldview, the truth of singular facts does not matter. What rings true is the message taken as a whole, the way it matches their feelings

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Imagining a Story for Tomorrow

and personal experience of a triptych loss of trust, control and voice. Donald Trump and other authoritarians prove particularly masterful in their emotional conjuring of loss. While the facts lined up by moderates might very well be true, facts are mostly useless if the overarching vision rings false or fails to mobilize.

With respect to this situation, the current health crisis could represent a possible turning point.

On the one hand, the crisis has overshadowed some of the key issues on which national-populist movements have based their rise in recent years, first and foremost immigration. This has caused a temporary decline in these movements in most European countries.

On the other hand, as More in Common's research has shown in recent months, the Coronavirus crisis has clearly revealed what we call a 'hope gap', as large groups of people in countries hardest hit by the pandemic express both a desire for system change and a belief that the current system cannot deliver the change they want.

As the world reels from the impact of COVID-19, many long for unity, common purpose and decisive progress on issues from democratic governance to jobs and the environment. A majority of people don't believe that McGuire-style politicians can deliver.

This 'hope gap' will keep growing unless a new mobilizing narrative emerges, one capable of tapping into people's desire for both unity and progress, restoring a sense of agency in a time of increasing uncertainty.



PART I

The Big Switch

—*“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”*

It is not certain that Antoine de Saint Exupéry, the author of *The Little Prince*, really formulated this sentence which is commonly attributed to him. What is beyond dispute, however, is that the human brain, in addition to a left side, analytical and rational, is also composed of a right side, responsible for impressions and emotions, which almost always tend to prevail when people need to make an important decision about their life and future, politics should reflect this.

McGuire type characters, who fail to come to terms with the joy and terror of being alive, with the desire to love and be loved, with the search for meaning and the dilemma of facing death, do not know the true meaning of the word “politics”. They may be able to cope when times aren't challenging, but they are bound to be obliterated at the first sign of turbulence.

The search for the perfect power point slide, the Holy Grail for so many politicians formed in the eighties and nineties, became a handicap from the moment that history started moving again – the moment that new actors, equipped with new rhetorical weapons, started undermining the very foundations of liberal-democracies.

Being a fixer is not enough, when what is called for is an inventor. There is nothing worse than proposing incremental change at a time of transformational need. And nothing could be more wrong than to think that human evolution is based on the systematic calculation of immediate interests. On the contrary, biologists such as Scott Gilbert and Ford Doolittle have long shown that if living beings calculated accurately, they would have become extinct long ago.

The stories we tell ourselves, the dreams we have, the illusions, even the errors of judgment, determine the course of our lives at least as much as managing with our interests and needs. A principle that holds true even in the most extreme cases.

When analyzing Isis propaganda, the French philosopher of language, Philippe-Joseph Salazar, discovered that to attract young followers from the banlieues, far from resorting to urban lingo, the Islamic State adopts an elevated language that appeals to their values, their sense of nobility and moral elevation. "The thousands of young French people - because among all the contingents they were the most numerous - who traveled to Syria, exposing themselves to death in the name of their new faith, wanted to lead a more elevated life. To them, the *République* seemed base, and the language it uses, vile¹."

The same is true, in different contexts, of many other forms of extremism, from ultra-nationalism to various forms of religious fundamentalism, all of which have in common that they take advantage of our society's inability to respond in an inspiring way to the Graduate's search for a meaningful life.

The scope of this paper, admittedly, is not to craft an alternative narrative to extremism. But between the rants of fundamentalists and the power-point slides of the McGuires, there might be a space for a vision of the future that is able to fire up our imagination and our desire to project ourselves into the future.

The Quest for Utopia

In times of transformation, when traditional points of reference have lost their value, we all need new horizons towards which we orientate. It is not by chance that a pragmatic lawyer and statesman like Thomas More felt the need to produce his "Utopia" during the second decade of the sixteenth century, when new geographical discoveries, the invention of the printing press, and religious upheavals were radically challenging the condition of Europeans.

According to French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, utopias have one main function. "The effect of a utopia is to question what exists in the present", he writes, "it makes the present world seem strange. We are usually tempted to affirm that we cannot lead another life than the one we are leading now. But the idea of utopia introduces a sense of doubt that shatters the obvious"².

Utopia acts like Cartesian doubt, or like the sense of wonder that presides over the birth of philosophy. It does this with an imaginary narrative, without necessarily telling us if it wants to be realized or not. It teaches us to think by reinventing, to return to reality after having left it for a moment, to better put it in question.

¹ P.-J. Salazar, Comment le Califat séduit, pourquoi il persuade, in "Panorama des idées" n.5, 2015, pp. 30-44.

² P. Ricoeur, L'idéologie et l'utopie : deux expressions de l'imaginaire social, in "Autre Temps", n.2 1984, pp.53-64.

In these times that we're currently experiencing, utopias can function as valuable resources to help us bridge the hope gap between the desire for radical change after the pandemic, and the expectation that significant change will not actually take place.

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Even before the pandemic, clear signs pointed in the direction of a multiplication of so-called "intentional communities." Between 1976 and 2016, "Communities", a magazine published by the Global Ecovillage Network, calculated a threefold increase in their number in the United States alone. For this reason, some have spoken of a "fifth wave" in the establishment of communes after the 1790-1805, 1824-1848, 1890-1915 and 1965-1975 periods.

What's even more significant is that, compared to the past, there is an increasing emphasis today on the importance of the relationship of these experiments to the outside world, rather than on the illusion of radical self-sufficiency. The long-term survival of any intentional community depends on its ability to maintain relations with the surrounding society. Many members are now aware of this and of the fact that they can act at the margins to influence ways of living together in the larger society. People don't stay in these communities their whole lives - five to nine years on average - and afterwards, when they return to live in mainstream society they continue to promote community values in the spaces in where they re-integrate.

In the past, it has happened more than once that this form of diaspora has allowed utopian communities to exert a considerable, and largely unacknowledged, influence on their time and, above all, on future developments. Take the case of Monte Verità.

In the autumn of 1900, a small group of young German non-conformists settled on a hill near Ascona, on the Swiss side of Lake Maggiore. Two musicians, a painter with an ascetic spirit, an ex-soldier of the Habsburg army, a girl passionate about esotericism and the heir to an industrial dynasty: they were dreamers, rebellious spirits seeking a new life in harmony with nature, far from the social conventions of the bourgeois society that was still dominant at the time, before the catastrophe of the First World War. They let their hair grow long, practiced veganism, yoga, nudism, indulged in "light baths", free love, and a form of improvised dance that involved new steps and movements never seen before.

Theirs was not a Luddite experiment. Quite the opposite: the idea was to put the most advanced technologies of the time at the service of a new life project. "We make judicious use of all the tools made available by science and modern hygiene," wrote Henri Oedenkoven, one of the community's founders, in 1903, "we lack nothing".

They had even acquired a source of water in the vicinity to produce electricity and thus get the light and energy required to run their machines. "We want everyone, without having to leave the area, to be able to have everything they want at their fingertips, without the help

of servants. Given the simplicity of our way of life and with the help of modern machinery capable of producing everything, everyone will be able to provide for themselves³."

Baptized "Monte Verità" within a few years the commune became a magnet for hundreds of writers, artists, scientists and philosophers, including Hermann Hesse, Mary Wigman, Max Weber, Erich Maria Remarque, Carl Gustav Jung and Erich Mühsam.

The experiment itself only lasted for about twenty years and was marked from the very beginning by the disputes and ruptures that always accompany this kind of attempt, but its influence on the culture and history of the twentieth century has been considerable. In many ways, the counterculture of the 1960's can be said to have been invented on the shores of a Swiss lake: from clothing styles to psychedelic music, meditative practices of oriental origin, the sexual revolution and the seeds of contemporary ecology.

Even Apple has its origins on Monte Verità. In the seventies, Steve Jobs was such a maniacal follower of a diet largely based on the consumption of apples, developed by Arnold Ehret, one of the original inhabitants of the Monte Verità later transplanted to the United States, that he decided to baptize his start-up with the name of his favourite fruit⁴.

Beyond the anecdotes, the impact that a tiny Alpine community, now largely forgotten, has had - and continues to have - on Western society demonstrates the role that utopias can play in transforming reality.

Analyzing the history of Monte Verità and, above all, the ideas that started there, landed on West Coast campuses in the Sixties, before conquering the world (and now are reincarnated in the form of slogans to sell sneakers and mindfulness apps), it appears that at least three interesting principles emerge.. And, as often occurs with interesting concepts, these principles actually take the form of paradoxes.

First paradox: a successful utopia requires a core group of "prophets in the wilderness", true believers who are ready to make sacrifices to advance their uncompromising vision of what the good life should be. At the same time, however, in order to spread, utopia needs heretics and traitors who will adopt parts of it and modify others, adapting it to the moving realities of the external world, sometimes out of conviction, but also out of simple opportunism. The pioneers of Monte Verità would be horrified if they could witness some of the forms their ideas and practices have taken in the subsequent decades. Yet, only by corrupting the purity of the original vision - contaminating it with the logics of politics, fashion or the market, can it diffuse beyond the circle of the faithful and transform into a mass movement capable of producing a real impact on society at large.

Second paradox: a successful utopia must combine a bold vision of the future, like the horizon of the Endless Sea, with small and concrete steps that can give everyone the regular impression of heading in the right direction, giving a sense of tangible possibility that involves each and every one of its believers. Monte Verità's "followers" shared the dream of a general rebirth for humanity, but their daily life was made up of small rituals, from meditation exercises to dietary discipline, which - while waiting for the global rebirth - gave shape to their individual existence and transformed each one of them into a model agent of this new world.

³ Quoted in Stefan Bollmann, *Monte Verità: 1900, il primo sogno di una vita alternativa*, 2019, Torino, EDT, p.67.

⁴ W.Isaacson, *Steve Jobs*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2011.

Third paradox: the utopian impulse always stems from a radical critique of the existing world. It has within it the germ of subversion of the present order - and of the establishment that guarantees its perpetuation. The success of this impulse, however, always depends on its ability to reach beyond the negative reality in order to affirm a new positive model.

An interesting case of utopia that has turned into a mass movement today by making the most of the three paradoxes we have identified, is veganism. Monte Verità was one of its forebears, but the official foundation of the Vegan Society wasn't until 1944, when a woodwork teacher in a secondary school from the English midlands, Donald Watson, his wife Dorothy, and four friends, decided to turn their lifestyle into what would become a worldwide movement. Vegan stood for "the beginning and the end of vegetarian" because veganism carried vegetarianism to its logical conclusion⁵.

For several decades, veganism remained at the fringes of western society, practiced only by a tiny group of hippies and non-conformists: the prophets in the wilderness from which all utopias originate. To turn itself into a practice shared by millions around the world, which has become the basis of a food revolution that has just begun to unfold, however, the movement had to open up to the most varied forms of contamination.

It is not difficult to imagine the astonishment with which the founders of the small association in an English town in 1944 would contemplate the endless array of movie stars, business start-ups, cookbooks, YouTube channels, trendy events and polemical documentaries that claim today to be inspired by their teaching. Nowadays big chains such as Marks & Spencer and Prêt à Manger have introduced vegan ranges, Wagamama has a new vegan menu, Pizza Hut recently joined Pizza Express and Zizzi in offering vegan pizzas, while in 2017 Guinness went vegan and stopped using fish bladders in its brewing process, after two and a half centuries⁶. But the arrival on board of a whole series of unexpected travel companions, sometimes uncomfortable and difficult to reconcile with the original vision of the prophets, is the price to pay to allow a utopian project to become part of a broader reality.

Our second utopian paradox is also one of the strong points of veganism: although the movement's ultimate goal is to put an end to animal suffering by establishing a new relationship between humans and the ecosystem in which they are immersed, its action takes the very concrete form of an individual practice, a daily self-discipline that transforms each adherent into an actor and their daily life a model of the ideal world they wish to build.

Yet - and here is the decisive point - veganism remained a marginal practice as long as it remained associated with a negative agenda. A more restrictive, poorer diet is not, in itself, an attractive proposition. As long as the vegan practice was identified with a sacrifice, the removal of animal ingredients that condemned those who practiced it to eat roots and salads, its followers remained few. It was only when it acquired a positive, aspirational streak that veganism started coming out of the woods. Netflix documentaries played a role in this development, as did Internet sensation Ella Mills, better known as Deliciously Ella, who turned the vegan diet into a creative lifestyle. As Keegan Kuhn, a leading producer of vegan-inspired documentaries phrases it "whereas before veganism was viewed as giving something up, now it's being reframed in terms of what you gain, in terms of your health, having a greater sense of living within the boundary of your values, gains in terms of the environment".

⁵ Charles Leadbeater, *The Rising*, Draft paper, London, 2018.

⁶ Dan Hancox, *The unstoppable rise of veganism: how a fringe movement went mainstream*, *The Guardian*, Sunday 1 April 2018.

The Problem with The Big Switch

In general terms, it is quite obvious that as long as change is identified with a minus sign, its opponents will outnumber its proponents. At a seminar organized by Global Progress in Copenhagen in the fall of 2019, Dutch political strategist Hans Anker enumerated all the things that change advocates give the impression of wanting to take away from ordinary people. Here's the list:

Fire places - diesel cars - men's restrooms - women's restrooms - loud music in discotheques - soda machines at school - Easter fires - Christmas trees - steaks - dirty jokes - jokes about Belgians - cigarettes - borders - cowboy suits for kids - Indian suits for kids - air trips - salt - Easter eggs - fire crackers - candies - Black Pete - Santa Claus - fast food - light bulbs - fluorescent lights - halogen lights - cock fighting - barbecue - terrace warmers - goldfish bowls - female dolls - male dolls - sugar - white bread - carbs - foie gras - driving at 130 km/h - feeding wild animals - party balloons - and many, many more...

This idiosyncratic list, to which it would be easy to add many other items, gives an idea of the magnitude of the challenge.

By conceiving "The Good Life 2.0" project, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and communications giant Havas tried to imagine what would happen if marketing experts who have successfully fuelled consumer desires for about a century stopped promoting unsustainable lifestyles and started supporting "a world where better beats bigger, where smarter consumption beats excessive consumption and where more time beats more stuff⁷".

The problem with the big switch from negative to positive, however, goes well beyond the consumer realm.

If we look around, the prevalence of negative narratives seems overwhelming. This is not just a phase and not just about politics. It's the same in all fields: in the media world, bad news prevails over good news; in cinema and television, dystopias and catastrophic movies and series prevail over optimistic scenarios. This is not a cyclical fact, but a structural element.

For millennia, humans have inhabited a world teeming with deadly dangers, in which the fitness cost of overreacting to a threat was less than the fitness cost of underreacting⁸. That is the reason why, even today, our attention is spontaneously directed towards bad news and more pessimistic narratives, at the expense of positive visions.

⁷ Wbcsd, The Good Life 2.0 Playbook. Making a Healthier, Happier and Sustainable Lifestyle Aspirational, 27 March 2017.

⁸ Steven Pinker, The Psychology of Pessimism, in "Cato's Letter", Volume 13, Number 1, Winter 2015.

—— Producing positive messages and narratives is not particularly difficult in and of itself. What is difficult is making sure they contain enough energy to first capture attention and then actively mobilize the very people they are directed at.

Negative stories capture our attention more easily, they activate the reptilian brain, suggesting fight or flight. The big switch from negative to positive is necessary for whoever wants to generate a real desire for change, but the cruel truth is that, in the immediate, it almost always produces a drop in energy. Whether in a bookstore, a movie theatre, on Twitter, or in a political meeting, dystopian visions and negative narratives of the future trump optimism and positivity. And the risk for those who try to advance the latter is being met with polite indifference.

The dispersion of energy produced by the shift from negative to positive is, in my view,

one of the central problems we will face on our quest: the first of the many dragons we will encounter as we navigate uncharted waters.

Producing positive messages and narratives is not particularly difficult in and of itself. What is difficult is making sure they contain enough energy to first capture attention and then actively mobilize the very people they are directed at. For example, More in Common's research tells us that a vast majority of Americans agree with the statement "America can be both strong and compassionate. We can protect our borders from criminals and terrorists at the same time as we welcome immigrants who respect our laws and embrace American values", while this might be a useful message to defuse tensions, it doesn't mean that it contains enough energy to actually mobilize a majority of citizens. The same holds true for most of the topics that are now dominated by increasingly toxic narratives. Most attempts to replace them with more optimistic, positive visions lack the energy required to successfully mobilize large swaths of people.

For this reason, the first stage of our Endless Sea project explored a series of recent cases of groups and movements that have managed to overcome the problem of the drop in energy produced by the switch from negative to positive.

These cases⁹ are very diverse, ranging from a small Swiss association (Operation Libero) to a giant global movement (Fridays For Future), from a successful national electoral campaign (Jacinda Ardern 2017) to an alternative festival (Burning Man), passing through a municipal election (Istanbul 2019), a duo of activist pranksters (The Yes Men), a civic network (Nossas), a youth mobilization (Le Sardine), another environmental movement (Sunrise), to the transformation of a single-issue party into a political force capable of running for the government of Europe's most powerful country (Die Grünen).

Based on the analysis of these cases, we can formulate a list of six factors - which we have chosen to call "intensifiers" - that make it possible to achieve the big switch from negative to positive without losing energy, but instead generating a new form of it.

⁹ All of these case histories are available on www.theendlessea.com

Intensifiers

1—The Fun Factor

Play is a serious matter. When the British explorer Ernest Shackleton's expedition was stranded in Antarctica, its members managed to endure by keeping up their morale - and survive - thanks to collective activities that took their mind off the harshness of their situation and allowed them to interact freely and positively, such as games. American sociologist Nicholas Christakis believes that a shared sense of play is one of the decisive factors that allow an intentional community to thrive¹⁰.

Without necessarily being aware of the latest anthropological findings, authoritarian leaders are well aware of the importance of the fun factor in bringing people together. While their propaganda is usually based on negative emotions, which guarantee the greatest involvement, it also tends to have a cheerful, liberating face, too often misunderstood by those who emphasize only the dark side of the national-populist carnival.

In "*L'Étrange Défaite*", his classic book about the French débâcle of 1940, historian Marc Bloch notes that one of the missteps of the French Republic in the late 1930s was its failure to offer celebrations to its citizens. He compares the despondency that followed the Popular Front to the celebrations organized at the same time by the fascist states. This is not to say that Bloch regrets that the democracies did not organize the equivalent of the Nazi congresses in Nuremberg. On the contrary, he would have liked to see celebrations that would have strengthened the taste for freedom and equality, far from the cult of the leader that brought the German crowds together at the time¹¹.

Today like then, a true sense of play, a renewed ability to celebrate being together in a joyful way is an indispensable ingredient for anyone who wants to rebuild any shared vision of the future.

First, because, as we have seen, celebration strengthens social bonds. As philosopher Michael Foessel writes, democracy is not only a value, but an experience, a real sensation that must be possible to feel not only in formal situations, but also in the informality of a collective gathering¹². It is no coincidence that the latest research carried out by More in Common among the group of the so-called French "Left Behinds" has revealed a deep longing among them for gatherings and communal events (national festivals, school and village festivals, professional festivals), seen by all as an opportunity to "get out of one's daily life and meet different people, from different social and cultural backgrounds".

Games and parties, however, do not only serve to strengthen the collective bond in the present. They also serve, perhaps most significantly, from our point of view, to free the

¹⁰ N.A.Christakis, *Blueprint. The Evolutionary Origins of A Good Society*, New York, Little, Brown Spark, 2020, p.60.

¹¹ M.Bloch, *L'étrange défaite*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.

¹² M.Foessel, *Récidive 1938*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2021.

future. To shake off that sense of inevitability that governs such a large part of our lives, and to put imagination and desire back at the center.

Many of the most successful progressive movements of recent years, from Sunrise in the United States to Operation Libero in Switzerland, are based on the ability to mobilize their adherents in a playful way that releases positive energies. The same can also be said of some of the most successful conservative movements of recent years.

2— Prefiguration: A Future You Can Touch

One week after the election of Barack Obama to the White House, on November 4th 2008, New Yorkers exiting the subway found themselves with a strange copy of their favorite newspaper in their hands. An extraordinary (and free) edition of the New York Times, dated July 4, 2009, which announced the end of the war in Iraq, the establishment of universal healthcare, a cap on CEO's wages, and many other stories.

This was not a promotional initiative of the editorial group that publishes the New York Times, but a very sophisticated prank conceived by a couple of very sophisticated pranksters called "The Yes Men" who brought together independent writers, artists and activists and asked them to write the paper they wanted to read six months after Obama's historic election. Distributing 100 thousand copies, this collective act of imagination was intended to get people to stop and wonder instead of just registering the bleakness of regular news reporting. What if things could be different? What if change could be real?

If James Baldwin is right when he says that "The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world"¹³, this means that change requires first of all a considerable effort of imagination, not only to conceive the future, but also to make it tangible.

Conferring a physical dimension to the future, embodying it in collective and concrete objects and experiences, is one of the ways to overcome the loss of energy that accompanies the Big Switch from negative to positive visions of the future. Having the opportunity to "test-drive" the future, to experience different versions of the future, can help us feel they are possible (or, conversely, that we don't want to go there). And play is central to that. It can bring the future to life, to the extent where we can see it, feel it, taste it, smell it.

One of the fastest growing theme park chains in the world over the last few years is KidZania, a concept that, rather than offering the roller coasters and mirror tunnels of traditional parks, gives children between the ages of four and fourteen the chance to enact the roles of grownups in "a lavishly, scaled-down world". At the entrance, each child receives a check for fifty "kids" (the park's currency) and can supplement that with the "salary" they earn from participating in an activity. The most popular of them, like training to be a pilot on a simplified flight simulator, are not as remunerative as the less popular, like being a dentist.

¹³ Quoted in Silas F. Harrebye, *Social Change and Creative Activism in the 21st Century*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p.221.

Then children can spend their money, renting a small electric car, or in one of the many stores owned by the park's (real- world) brand partners.

Originally conceived in Mexico City, KidZania has won over millions of children, from Lisbon to Tokyo, via Cairo and Kuwait City, where it has become the most visited tourist site. Its appeal lies in the fact that it allows children to move independently in a mock-up adult world, interacting with each other and experiencing different activities. "You go to Disneyland and you see all those kids with their parents, very tired - notes the founder of the park - there are just two minutes of magic - the ride - and that's it, while here most of the time the kids are running, engaged, happy¹⁴."

But the power of future staging doesn't just apply to children. Over the past few years, a growing number of movements have tried to put into practice Gandhi's motto of "be the change you want to see in this world".

The "Extinction Rebellion" demonstrations held in London in April 2019 created occupied spaces full of trees, conversation, connection, food and song which had a profound effect on those taking part, those passing through, and on the police officers who policed it. Similarly, "Reclaim the Streets" considers that political ends must be embodied in the means you use. For this reason, when protesting against the destruction of a public garden, activists create a garden, when calling for the banning of cars from an area they pedestrianize it, in order to give people a glimpse of a possible future, something that will motivate them to act.

It is not always necessary to build physical examples of the future. Sometimes asking the right questions is enough to capture the imagination and spark a desire for change.

In 2016, for example, a group of environmentalists advocating for the greening of London urban policies bought advertising space in newspapers and on the streets to ask some questions with the goal of moving from "what is" to "what if."

"What if you could swim safely in all of London's canals? What if all residential streets were play streets? What if every street had public art? What if birdsong drowned out traffic noise? What if there were more trees than people? What if a squirrel could get from one side of London to the other without touching the ground by jumping from tree to tree? What if you could see the Milky Way from every garden? What if we rewilded all of London's golf courses? What if every park in London were connected to all its neighboring parks by at least one green quiet way suitable for walking, cycling, and gardening too?¹⁵".

On their own, these questions have had a powerful impact on Londoners' imaginations. To the point that the three candidates for mayor that year had to commit, pre-election, to pursue the aims of the association.

——— The most enlightened local administrators know that sometimes the symbolic need to give a tangible form of the future must prevail over functionality.

¹⁴ R.Mead, When I Grow Up, in "The New Yorker", January 19, 2015.

¹⁵ Rob Hopkins, From What Is to What If. Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want, London, Chelsea Green, 2019.

The most enlightened local administrators know that sometimes the symbolic need to give a tangible form of the future must prevail over functionality. The image of the massive waste-to-energy plant in Copenhagen topped by an artificial ski slope has gone around the world and is a powerful symbol of the city's desire to become the first national capital to achieve carbon neutrality, even though the Danes are so good at recycling that they had to import garbage from other countries to power the plant.

"One of our strengths is that we have been very visible with our climate projects - says city architect Camilla van Deurs - such as Amager Bakke (the plant), but also the harbor baths, which are a symbol of the approximately 269 million euros we spent to clean up the water". These kinds of tangible benefits are crucial, she believes. "Saving thousands of tons of carbon dioxide, what does that mean? It's difficult to make abstract choices attractive to people, so the key is making them visible¹⁶".

In the past, the future was embodied by objects that made people dream, and that awakened desires. In his book, David Djaïz, a French expert on national narratives, underlines the role played in the past by means of transport such as the Concorde and the TGV bullet train.

Today, through an increasingly popular practice called "Design Fiction" architects and designers explore possible futures by creating speculative, and often provocative, scenarios narrated through designed artifacts. In practice, they give shape to the future by imagining non-existent objects that, as the writer Bruce Sterling says, "suspend disbelief about change".

One of the most striking examples of this kind of operation came from the Near Future Lab in Geneva, which in 2015 put together an Ikea catalog of the future, complete with smart mattresses and gardening drones. A favorite item being the low-network/no-screen activity bed canopy AVKOPPLAD, that "minimizes non-essential networks within a radius of 3 meters" while generating "pulsed Schumann electromagnetic fields at both 1.2 and 2.4 Hz producing therapeutic effects for longer, more lasting and palliative sleep".

3—The Energy of Transgression

The future, however, is not just about Scandinavian coziness.

As is well known, one of the main drivers of recent political developments in most European countries is rage. Rage against the establishment and, in particular, rage against traditional political elites. That's why an element of transgression with respect to the rules and the established order is almost always present in the movements that have been more successful in recent years.

Transgressive mockery has always been an effective tool to subvert hierarchies. During carnival, a liberating laugh punctures the pomp of power, its rules and its pretensions. Nothing is more devastating for authority, than the impertinence that turns it instantly into an object of ridicule. Faced with the programmatic seriousness of the McGuire-style politician,

¹⁶ Quoted in "Monocle", n.141, March 2021, pp.51-52.

the boredom and arrogance that emanate from each of his gestures, the transgressive buffoon, à la Trump, à la Bolsonaro or à la Grillo, brings a rush of energy. Taboos, hypocrisy, linguistic conventions collapse amidst the acclamations of a cheering crowd.

——— What's at play in the need to transgress is not just dissatisfaction with the status quo, which was the driving force behind the youth climate revolt, but something that goes to the very heart of the notion of democracy.

Those who say that 'once in power national-populist leaders fail to keep their promises' forget one thing. The central promise of these leaders is always one and only one: the humiliation of the establishment, which is renewed every time mainstream politicians and newspaper columnists cry out in scandal at the umpteenth provocation of the carnival king of the moment¹⁷.

Without getting to such extremes, transgressing the existing order and its underlying codes is also an essential ingredient for movements that go in a completely different direction.

Take the case of an apparently insignificant event that took place in Sweden during the summer three years ago.

On August 20th in 2018 a young schoolgirl decides to start a strike, alone, in front of the Swedish Parliament. On the day she is supposed to begin ninth grade, in Stockholm, she announces that she will not return to school until the general elections of September 9th, 2018.

Sweden has indeed just suffered through a strong heat wave that summer which caused serious forest fires. The schoolgirl challenges the government, when she sits in front of the Parliament, during school hours, with a sign "Skolstrejk för klimatet" ("school strike for the climate"), for strong measures to be taken to fight global warming. In particular, she calls for the Swedish government to reduce its carbon emissions in line with the Paris Climate Agreement.

After the September 2018 general election, the young girl, now joined by her schoolmates, announces that they will continue to strike every Friday. She then attracts the attention of the media and social networks, and soon students around the world begin, in turn, to organize school strikes for climate. In November 2018, huge demonstrations and school strikes are organized, especially in Australia where thousands of young people demonstrate on Fridays. In December 2018, more than 20,000 middle school, high school and college students participate in strikes in 270 cities from Germany to the United States, Australia to Japan. In 2019, the strikes and demonstrations continue, now gathering hundreds of thousands of young people: on March 15th in New York, Brussels, Sydney, Barcelona, Berlin, Paris, Moscow, Milan; on May 24th in over 1600 cities around the world. This is how the movement grew, bit by bit, spreading around the globe, and becoming a "planetary phenomenon" without precedent.

¹⁷ S.Kuper, The glee of punishment, in "The Financial Times", March 23, 2017.

Would the Fridays For Future movement have been as successful, and Greta Thunberg a global icon, if she hadn't made the radical choice to transgress the order of adult society, refusing to go to school on Fridays and instead taking to the streets to demonstrate for the future of the planet?

What's at play in the need to transgress is not just dissatisfaction with the status quo, which was the driving force behind the youth climate revolt, but something that goes to the very heart of the notion of democracy. Paradoxical as it may seem, it could be argued that democracy consists not only of autonomy: the possibility of being governed by norms that one has helped to form. But also, at least to a certain extent, in the freedom to break the rules: those that have been imposed on us by others, or that we have inherited, and even those that we have given ourselves. In this sense, transgression fulfills the intuition of Charles Baudelaire, who deplored the fact that among the human rights formulated in the nineteenth century, two, that were in his opinion fundamental, had been forgotten: "the right to contradict oneself and the right to leave".

4—The Narcissist as Changemaker

The latest publishing phenomenon in the field of non-fiction has become a bestseller despite containing nothing to read. The author of "Burn After Writing", in fact, simply asks questions - and leaves many blank spaces for her readers to fill in the answers: "The last time I cried? The last thing I thought about before I fell asleep? The first word that comes to mind to describe myself?"

In the world of Instagram and Snapchat, the unique selling proposition of "Burn After Writing" is that of a more private and therefore, according to the author, "truer" confessional. Ironically, the planetary success of the book, which has already sold more than a million copies, stems from a hashtag on Tik Tok, where more than a hundred million kids saw their favorite influencers open the book and immerse themselves in an intense session of introspection.

Since the late 1970s, when American sociologist Christopher Lasch first identified its main features¹⁸, the "culture of narcissism" has only progressed in our society, reaching paroxysmal heights with the advent of social networks. Today, statistics tell us that every year, in Europe as well as in the United States, risky selfies claim more victims than terrorism: more people lose their lives trying to portray themselves in a risky pose, than they do as victims of terrorist acts¹⁹.

Leaving aside these extreme cases, what is clear is that the permanent need to put oneself on stage has changed our position in the world. Hardly anyone photographs a panorama, a monument or a concert anymore: everyone photographs themselves in the foreground and the rest in the background.

¹⁸ C.Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism, American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1979.

¹⁹ A.Bansal, C.Garg, A.Pakhare, S.Gupta, *Selfies: A boon or bane?*, *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, Jul-Aug, 2018.

Scholars who observe this phenomenon tend to focus on its most deleterious aspects, but behind the generalized aspiration to be the protagonist of one's own film, there is a need for recognition, a desire to recover a form of agency over one's own life, which cannot be underestimated. It is basically "a vision of fullness, an effort to escape the bombardment of advertising by using it to one's own advantage, to transform oneself into the object of others' attention, instead of belonging to the crowd of those who pay attention²⁰".

That's why a top-down vision of the future, imposed by any form of overriding authority, is largely unthinkable today. On the contrary, movements that succeed in mobilizing energies around a project of change are those that first of all answer the questions of readers of "Burn After Writing": "What is my role in this story? What can I do, here and now?"

We have seen that the strength of the vegan movement - and more generally of the entire climate movement - lies in its ability to propose a life change, an individual and collective discipline that gives everyone, through a thousand small concrete gestures, the feeling of contributing to the achievement of a common goal.

One could actually argue that part of the success of climate-based movements among the younger generations, compared to the offerings of more traditional political parties, consists precisely in the user experience they offer their adherents. To the point that, even if the modification of individual behavior were not decisive enough to solve the environmental problem, it would still be worth keeping it at the center of the climate movement's program for the benefit it brings in terms of public involvement.

5—No Ordinary Heroes

The Niskanen Center in Washington is a think-tank whose objectives include turning climate skeptics into climate activists. A task that is not easy, considering the ideological fervor that the debate on environmental issues arouses in the U.S. capital. To accomplish its mission, however, the center has a major advantage. Its own president, Jerry Taylor, an energy and environment expert, had been a climate sceptic for most of his professional life. As director for the energy and environment task force at the American Legislative Exchange Council and vice president of the Cato Institute, Taylor had for years battled scientists and activists sounding the alarm about global warming. "I was absolutely convinced of the case for skepticism with regard to climate science," he says, "and of the excessive costs of doing much about it even if it were a problem²¹". The growing weight of material evidence changed his mind, and now, it is precisely his quality of former skeptic that makes him a particularly effective spokesman for the arguments in favor of climate action. The fact that he shares the starting point of so many other climate skeptics, and the journey that led him to change his mind, is precisely what is likely to lead others to identify with him, and take the same path.

²⁰ L.Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*, New York, Vintage, 1997.

²¹ Quoted in S.Lerner, *How a professional climate change denier discovered the lies and decided to fight for science*, *The Intercept*, April 28, 2017.

Those who want to inspire change know that it's not just the story you tell that counts. Nor is it just how you tell it. It is also, or perhaps, above all, who tells it. In a context of information overload, we use trusted messengers as mental shortcuts to decide whether information is worthy of our trust and attention²².

Moreover, in an atmosphere of strong polarization, while most people mistakenly believe that using facts in political discussions helps to foster mutual respect, research shows that personal experience is a much more effective tool. The problem being that facts - at least today - are themselves subject to doubt, while first-hand experiences have "an aura of unimpeachability²³".

That's why, on many issues at the center of today's debate, from immigration to climate change that are currently addressed only by the relatively ineffective arguments made by experts and other figures of authority, there is a pressing need to identify the most suitable "trusted messengers" in order to convey a message of change that is credible in the eyes of its public.

In France, the "Yellow Vests" movement has highlighted the crisis of traditional opinion leaders and allowed the emergence of some new figures, such as the initiator of the online petition that helped kick-start the movement, Priscillia Ludosky. When More in Common questioned the French "Left Behinds" about who were the actors capable of motivating them and inducing them to action, the answer was "the people close to them, those who look like us and share our same values". Not only political leaders and pundits, but celebrities too were found to be markedly less credible "unless a long-standing commitment demonstrated the sincerity of their commitment."

In all fields, "unlikely heroes", ordinary people confronted with sometimes extraordinary circumstances, became the most effective role-models. This is why, when he decided to put his talents at the service of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Richard Curtis, the director of "Four Weddings and a Funeral" and "Bridget Jones's Diary", refrained from turning to the stars, whom he would have had no difficulty in mobilizing, and instead made a series of short films dedicated to the exploits of ordinary people. His "Project Everyone" is based on a claim that could not be clearer: "Today we create heroes of ordinary people with ordinary stories. Heroes who are making other heroes every day".

6—A New Kind of Leadership

At first it appeared to be a coincidence. A few months after the Covid-19 crisis began, some observers began to detect a commonality among most of the countries that had fared better in managing the initial phases of the pandemic. Taiwan, New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Norway: all of these countries were governed by female heads of government. Out of curiosity, some researchers have tried to examine the situation in the United States,

²² S.Wright, A.Neimand, M.Steinman, Finding the Right Messenger for Your Message, Stanford Social Innovation Review, May 6, 2021.

²³ E.Kubin, C.Puryear, C.Schein, K.Gray, Personal experiences bridge moral and political divides better than facts, PNAS, February 9, 2021.

where the governors of individual states have broad powers to safeguard public health. Analyzing the data, they found that states governed by women had a lower average mortality rate than those governed by men²⁴. Research published by the Harvard Business School Review combed through a database of more than 60,000 assessments of business executives in the private sector, to find that in general women tend to outperform men, and in a crisis this difference grows larger²⁵.

A collaborative leadership style, able to leverage knowledge across teams with multidisciplinary expertise, allowing information to circulate and for mistakes to be promptly corrected, a well-developed aptitude for empathy, the ability to imagine how others are affected by the situation at hand, are all particularly useful in times of crisis.

Today it isn't just crises that put empathy at the top of the skills required of any aspiring political leader. In fractured societies, in which it is not just different opinions that clash, but radically contrasting worldviews (and facts), empathy is an essential skill to help build emotional bridges between different groups.

Psychologists who have focused on the theme of anger know that it usually arises from a sense of helplessness, from the feeling of being ignored, of not being taken sufficiently into account. It is first of all a need for recognition, for visibility, as demonstrated symbolically by the adoption of bright hi-vis vests by the French "Yellow Vests" movement.

That's why, even before putting forward solutions for the underlying problems, the first step for those who want to repair our societies is to put themselves in the shoes of the other, to recognize the relevance of the person in question's thoughts and emotions, from their point of view.

Unfortunately, the way it unfolds, political competition in our countries tends to select mainly narcissistic leaders, whose dominant characteristic is precisely the inability to feel empathy.

Research on gender and empathy has shown that women tend to be more empathetic toward others than men²⁶. In addition, Canadian cultural critic Sarah Sharma makes the case that the narrative of escape (e.g. *Doomsday preppers* and those eager to colonize Mars to leave earth) is fundamentally male, like "a fantasy of the autonomous patriarch who gets to withdraw from the world instead of reckon with it.". The approach of empathetic leaders, fostering solidarity to address crises is the opposite. For this reason, the rise of a

——— In fractured societies, in which it is not just different opinions that clash, but radically contrasting worldviews (and facts...), empathy is an essential skill to help build emotional bridges between different groups.

²⁴ K.Sergent - A.D. Stajkovic, Women's Leadership Is Associated with Fewer Deaths During the COVID-19 Crisis: Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses of United States Governors, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105/8, 2020, pp.771-783.

²⁵ J.Zenger - J.Folkman, Research: Women Are Better Leaders During a Crisis, in HBR December 30, 2020.

²⁶ B.A. Gault - J.Sabini, The roles of empathy, anger, and gender in predicting attitudes toward punitive, reparative, and preventative public policies. *Cognition and Emotion*, 14(4), 2000.

new generation of female leaders, all of whom possess a core emotional intelligence, mixed with optimism and reliability, is a welcome antidote to the increasingly degraded political climate in many countries.

It is not by chance that most of the movements we've examined in our case histories, from Operation Libero to Nossas, from Sunrise to Fridays For Future are led by women. One example we've been focusing on is that of Jacinda Ardern, the leader of the New Zealand Labour Party, who managed to turn the tide of the 2017 elections in just weeks. During her first mandate as Prime Minister, Ardern's leadership style stood out for its simultaneously decisive and compassionate approach during difficult trials such as the Christchurch massacre and the Covid-19 health crisis.

In recent years, women with different political backgrounds have emerged in a variety of contexts and have been able to impose a different style of leadership in their respective countries: ranging from the Norwegian conservative Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, to the Taiwanese President, Tsai Ing-wen, without forgetting the extraordinarily important experience of Angela Merkel. All of these figures also share the common feature of having been triumphantly re-elected, in contexts that were challenging for incumbents.

The increasing role played by a leader's capacity for empathy in determining the success of his or her political trajectory does not, of course, mean that men are to be discounted. Another case of great interest that we have analyzed is that of the mayor of Istanbul, who was able to project his unique style - and an electoral campaign based on happiness and love - in a particularly difficult context.

What matters is that politics rediscovers, at least to a certain extent, the ability to produce that "tender narrator" of which Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk speaks in her wonderful Nobel Prize acceptance lecture. "Tenderness, she says, is the most modest form of love (...). It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our "self" (...). Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness that exist between us, and that we share. It is a way of looking, or way of seeing, that perceives the world as alive, interconnected, cooperative, and codependent²⁷".

²⁷ O.Tokarczuk, Nobel Lecture, Stockholm, Svenska Akademien, 2018, p.24



PART II

The Age of Existential Politics

— *“Who can tell the exact nature of what is happening to us and the human quality that the survivors of this year will later reveal?”²⁸*

Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke's question to his correspondent, Helene von Nostitz, at the end of 1914 is an enduring one. Blessed is he who has the courage to state with certainty what the consequences will be - not just in economic, but in political, social and human terms - of the crisis we have been through this past year and a half.

What is certain is that the Covid crisis has coincided with an unprecedented halt in human activity. This drastic slowdown might be read as the realization of an unconscious collective desire. What if we needed to stop? We needed to. The environment needed us to. Society needed to. Each of us, in some sense, needed to stop. To stop what we had been doing, and think. To simply stand still.

If we hadn't needed this, governments would have handled this one like all of the previous pandemics: keeping things on course and paying the price. Our need to pause this time was too strong.

According to German sociologist and philosopher Hartmut Rosa, contemporary burnout doesn't stem from overwork or excessive speed, but from a lack of horizon. The feeling of having to run faster and faster with the sole purpose of maintaining one's position: this, according to the German philosopher, is the real cause of widespread malaise²⁹.

The pause that has been imposed on us recently has allowed everyone to breathe again. The planet first of all, with the Earth Overshoot Day - on which humanity's resource consumption

²⁸ R.M.Rilke, *Correspondance avec une dame, Helene von Nostitz: 1910-1925*, Paris, Aubier, 1979, p.144.

²⁹ H.Rosa, *Remède à l'accélération: Impressions d'un voyage en Chine et autres textes sur la résonance*, Paris, Flammarion, 2021.

for the year exceeds the planet's capacity to regenerate those resources that year - that was postponed by over three weeks in 2020 (from July 29 to August 22). And many of its inhabitants, for whom, paradoxically, the fact of being in a state of physical lockdown has coincided with the reopening of their mental horizons.

To overestimate the importance of this shift would be naïve. It is clear that, at the moment of restart, the natural reflex of most individuals will be to return as quickly as possible to their former life. But, all things considered, it is not certain that this will be possible. If the contours of the world after the pandemic remain extremely nebulous, those of the world of yesterday seem to have been inexorably swallowed up by the crisis.

Borrowing the language of anthropologists, one could say that in our transition from one state of being to another, we are faced with a rite of passage. In some archaic patriarchal societies, boys were separated from their known world, cast from the village and into the wild, where they had to survive on their own for several days. This was the liminal state, where normal rules didn't apply and boys were forced to see the world in a new light, to face danger and find out what they were able to handle. If they survived, they were reintegrated into the community, but with a new status. They were now considered adults, finally being able to call themselves men³⁰.

We have also been separated from our known world and will be forced to reconsider a lot of what we are faced with in a different light, if we are to hope to develop the basis for a new settlement.

In politics, as we have seen, the Covid crisis coincided with a moment of real suspension. The rise of authoritarian movements and leaders was suddenly interrupted in most European countries, but the underlying causes they had based their success on have not gone away. Quite the contrary, it is possible that socio-economic consequences of the crisis will breath new life into their initiatives in the near future.

Our hypothesis, however, is that a window of opportunity does exist at present: the "Hope Gap" between the widespread desire for change, and the expectation that the system will not be able to provide that change, is the crack in which a new narrative of the future might be developed.

This first "Endless Sea Project" report has been devoted to the form such a project might take. Analyses of the first case histories, and the identification of our six intensifiers were useful to get away from the idea that it is enough to merely come up with a compelling narrative, that could impose itself in a Darwinian fashion. Instead, identifying the ingredients that serve to compensate for the drop in energy that inevitably accompanies the big switch from a negative to a positive vision of the future is crucial. From this moment on, however, the objective of our project will be above all to focus on the content that this new narrative might possess. No longer focusing on "how", but on "what".

Clearly this is an endeavor that goes far beyond the scope of a single research paper and will require more exploration. In closing, however, the temptation of outlining some of our first findings is irresistible, its aim: to open a discussion with all interested parties.

³⁰ A.Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961.

After the Pandemic, an Appointment with Ourselves

During the Nineties and up until the mid-2000s – some consider the 2008 financial crisis the turning point - political competition was essentially policy-driven. Leaders and movements with different policy solutions faced each other: the neoliberal policies of Thatcher and of Reagan, the third way of Clinton and of Blair, and so on.

This does not mean that the political struggle was purely “rational” at the time of course; factors such as personal leadership or reaction to unforeseen events played a decisive role even then, but the “program” and the policies proposed, were at the center of the debate. A context in which McGuire-style politicians found themselves perfectly at ease.

Since the end of the 2000s, however, the rise of “identity politics” has displaced the McGuires, bringing to the fore more demands for recognition from groups who felt that their nation or religion or way of life was being disrespected, neglected, ignored. This type of demand has relegated policies to the background, especially in view of the fact that much of what passes for economic motivation is actually rooted in the demand for recognition and therefore cannot simply be satisfied by economic means³¹.

With respect to these developments, the Covid-19 crisis is a potential turning point, it would be naïve, however, to think that it will coincide with a simple return to the golden age of the McGuires. For, after the policy-driven politics of the past and the identity-powered politics of the last few years, our belief is that the next phase will belong to those who will be able to articulate an “existential politics”, that is able to address the question of meaning and agency that mainstream politics has abandoned by taking refuge in technocratic answers, and to which identity movements consistently respond in divisive and often regressive forms.

The health crisis has put the emphasis back on our daily lives. Not on abstract principles, not on ideological divides, and not even on ethnic or religious identities, but first and foremost on the simple and complicated conditions of everyday life.

It is no coincidence that many have taken advantage of this phase to finally introduce changes they were longing for in their lives. In Paris, a survey revealed that 82% of residents who planned to leave the capital will to do so by the end of 2021. The health crisis has put an end to their hesitation, just as it has in many other contexts.

After the pandemic, we have an appointment with ourselves. What have we learned? What activities, suspended during the pandemic, do we want to cease forever? And which activities do we hope can be developed, or reinvented?

³¹ F.Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018.

It is philosopher Hans Blumenberg, who said that we have to ask ourselves again what it actually was that we promised ourselves. That is the starting question for politics, and for us as people.

Over the past few years, political parties and campaigns have developed an increasingly granular understanding of voters' preferences thanks to Big Data, but the kind of knowledge that comes from online political micro-targeting techniques has nothing to do with the ability to capture the lived experience of people. In a recent book, British political theorist Marc Stears describes the role played in Britain by authors such as George Orwell and Dylan Thomas, who thought that everyday life had a unique role to play in giving the country its purpose and its meaning³². Their lesson has been largely forgotten by political forces, in Britain as in the rest of Europe, who thought they could compensate for their increasingly scarce presence in the everyday life of society with a surplus of data analysis stemming from social networks.

If data allows us to grasp the contours of a situation, or a relationship, in quantitative terms, its ability to grasp the qualitative dimension, that which pertains to the deepest feelings and emotions, is limited. More so in a period, such as the current one, in which individuals and entire societies are going through an unprecedented existential crisis, which is leading us to question some of the premises upon which our pre-Covid life was based.

What form would a political program based on the "extraordinarily redemptive potential of everyday life" take today? We can only formulate some initial hypotheses that will need to be developed at a later stage.

——— If data allows us to grasp the contours of a situation, or a relationship, in quantitative terms, its ability to grasp the qualitative dimension, that which pertains to the deepest feelings and emotions, is limited.

Agency is No Gamble

Gambling has become too much of a big business to be left to chance. In Vegas, neon lights and scantily clad waitresses, free cocktails and limousines, Martin Scorsese and Nicholas Cage are there to keep up appearances. They fuel the myth of vice and the frontier, the desert oasis and bachelor parties, Hunter Thompson and the mantra 'What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas'.

³² M.Stears, *Out of the Ordinary: How Everyday Life Inspired a Nation and How It Can Again*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2021.

Imagining a Story for Tomorrow

In reality, there too, behind the glamour, lurk the accountants and the advertisers, the psychologists and the Big Data analysts: all the professionals of boredom who are able to translate even the most unpredictable of Dostoevsky's characters into a perfectly controllable algorithm.

By studying gamers, a surprising fact appeared to the above-mentioned group: as much as they love to gamble, casino goers also love its opposite. Those who play dice, for example, want to roll the dice themselves. And they are willing to place much higher bets before they are rolled, rather than afterwards, in case the outcome is kept covered. The same is true for all other games. Someone who buys a lottery ticket wants to choose it. Someone who flips a coin in the air prefers to do themselves.

It's the importance of control. An instinct that runs so deep, in man, that it does not abandon him even when he plays roulette. In a far more tragic context, Bruno Bettelheim discovered that those who survived concentration camps were above all those who had managed to establish an area of control, even if it was only in their imagination, over the circumstances of their daily life in the camps. This is more or less the same conclusion that was reached by psychologists who study the elderly in nursing homes. If they are given the ability to even choose a picture or move a piece of furniture, the nursing home residents live better - and longer - than those who submit to rules which completely remove their will³³.

This is the essence of democracy as well. A system that allows members of a community to take control of their own destiny, so they do not feel the mercy of events or some superior force. Rising to the dignity of autonomous individuals, responsible for their own choices and corresponding consequences.

That's why it isn't possible to pretend that nothing has happened when, all over the world, voters feel they have lost control over their own destinies, due to powerful currents that threaten their wellbeing while the ruling classes barely lift a finger to help them. The new authoritarians all promise to return voters to a greater degree of control over their lives, even if the means they put forward to achieve that goal generally end up having the opposite effect.

According to a regression analysis carried out by Daniel Yudkin, a social psychologist, a sense of agency is the most significant variable in determining the distribution of the population among the seven "Hidden Tribes" identified by More in Common in its US research.

For this reason, agency must be the running theme of Existential politics. What we need is a narrative that goes beyond abstract policy objectives – such as 'fighting climate change' or 'reducing inequality', 'regulating big tech' or 'reforming democratic institutions' - and instead focuses on the existential perspective of individuals and communities, shaped by the constant and obsessive goal of restoring a sense of control over their lives. An issue that does not only concern the left-behinds of globalization and other peripheral subjects, but has to do with each of our modes of existence in an age of hyper-stimulation and uncertainty.

³³ L.Mlodinow, The Limits of control, The International Herald Tribune, June 17, 2009.

1— From Climate to Home

Contrary to what one might have feared, the pandemic has contributed to further increase our awareness of our need to place the climate transition at the heart of the reinvention of the way we live. Existential politics coincides with a new way of inhabiting the world, by overcoming the founding dichotomy of modernity: the separation between man and nature.

As French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour writes, those who see themselves as the only conscious beings in the midst of inert things are surrounded by death. They consider only themselves, their cats, their dogs, their geraniums and perhaps the park where they go for a walk from time to time to be alive, without realizing that on planet Earth "everything is alive: the agitated body of the termite as well as the rigid body of the termite mound, the crowds passing over Charles Bridge as well as Charles Bridge itself, the fox as well as the fox's skin, the beaver as well as its dam, bacteria and plants as well as the oxygen they emit."³⁴

It may seem like an abstract discourse, with strong new age accents, suitable at best for some contemporary descendants of the Monte Verità's utopic commune. In truth it is a far more concrete argument - and far more necessary than we may at first imagine.

It's about being at home in the world. Why is it, Latour wonders, that we have left the soil to the likes of Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini?

The need to land somewhere, at some time, is shared by all. To preserve - or rediscover - a place where things respond to us and welcome us... Home, in other words.

The answer that authoritarian movements give to this issue is always regressive. It consists in circumscribing a territory and raising - or pretending to raise - barriers that separate it from the rest of the world. In doing so, they act like the billionaire who, in Kenya, had his game reserve surrounded by high barriers so that his wildlife could not escape, and found himself within a few years owning a piece of desert.

Landing does not mean becoming "local." On the contrary, it means taking into account all the relationships and ties upon which our existence depends. That's why, according to Latour, "a territory extends as far as the list of interactions with those on whom it depends, but no further".

Taking into account what we really depend on, the creatures and conditions on which our survival and that of our children depends. Assuming our responsibilities, without being condemned either to always move forward or to necessarily go back. Re-establishing a relationship with the world that allows us to resonate with it, without assuming that there is only one way to go about it but allowing for different sensibilities to experiment with different approaches: this is the starting point of an Existential politics worthy of the name.

What is crucial to make this happen is to go beyond the climate dimension to forge a narrative that speaks to much broader segments of the population than those currently engaged and in favor of environmental change.

³⁴ B.Latour, *Où suis-je? Leçons du confinement à l'usage des terrestres*, Paris, La Découverte, 2021, p.94.

2—From Inequality to Dignity

More in Common's research tells us that throughout Europe, concern over the environment has become a powerful potential unifier which has, so far, dodged the culture wars. It has the potential to become a catalyst for change, capable of mobilizing a new generation of politically engaged citizens. What is needed now is a broader holistic narrative, with climate ambition at its core, to engage wider audiences and help people envisage a better future.

When he presented his \$2 trillion green infrastructure proposal before Congress, Joe Biden did not put an emphasis on the environment. "For too long - he argued instead - we failed to use the most important word when it comes to meeting the climate crisis: jobs, jobs, jobs."

Then he spoke directly to blue-collar workers and rural communities, who often feel left behind in the push toward a clean economy and promised them that they will play a critical role in the transition. His message was clear: embracing renewable energy — which will create economic, political, and employment opportunities for the United States — is downright patriotic. Biden pointed out that nearly 90 percent of the infrastructure jobs created by the American Jobs Plan do not require a college degree, and 75 percent don't require an associate's degree, dubbing the proposal a "blue-collar blueprint to build America." He identified construction workers and electricians as those who would usher in the country's green future by building the power lines needed to transport renewable energy across the nation and installing electric vehicle charging stations in cities, homes, and along highways. He gave kudos to farmers planting cover crops to capture more carbon dioxide and posited that the blades for wind turbines could be manufactured by workers in Pittsburgh, rather than Beijing.

"So many of the folks I grew up with feel left behind or forgotten," said Biden, who is from Scranton, Pennsylvania. "Our economy is so rapidly changing, it is frightening. I want to speak directly to you. Because if you think about it, that is what people are most worried about. Can I fit in?"

To get an idea of the European narrative deficit, just compare this argument with Ursula von der Leyen's big idea to connect the European Green Deal to ordinary people: the New European Bauhaus. An intellectually fascinating project, certainly, that has aroused a certain interest in architecture faculties across Europe. But not exactly a narrative likely to change the minds of Europeans who think the Green Deal is a thing for urban creative classes.

The strength of Biden's argument - and of similar ones that have made inroads, for example, in Scandinavian countries - is that his is no mere lip service to the need to restore dignity to blue-collar jobs. The current situation really represents a unique opportunity for a redistribution of dignity in our societies. Not just because the pandemic has highlighted the centrality of certain occupations: from the care professions to industrial production, which assume a strategic value in times of crisis. Not only because correctly understood, the Green Deal means more work for the working class. But also because the growing dematerialization of our lives is paradoxically lending new value to manual activities and to everything that implies a contact with reality that is not mediated by screens.

It is probably too early to tell whether the Covid-19 crisis will contribute to a better balance between what David Goodhart calls "aptitudes based on Head, Hand and Heart"³⁵. What is clear is that Existential politics should be about finding one.

3— From Online to Onlife

When we talk of the loss of agency, we almost always put forward social, economic or cultural considerations, ranging from immigration to the development of economic inequality to the spread of political correctness in Hollywood series and films. Factors of this kind have clearly played a role in the rise of the feeling of loss of agency that has spread in large sections of the population, and it is certainly not my intention to question their relevance.

If data tells us that each person now spends an average of just under eleven hours a day in front of a screen, however, it's hard to imagine that such a radical change in our habits, in our very way of inhabiting the world, has not produced an equally radical effect on our perception of reality, and of our own role within it.

In terms of agency, the great promise of digital technology, the slogan with which Steve Jobs launched the first iPhone – "It's like having your life in your pocket!" – articulates a vision of empowerment and control. But the concrete uses of digital tools also produce the opposite effect on the users' sense of agency.

The digital world imposes on us a way of life from which no one can escape. Each of us must increasingly conform our behavior to the indications that come from all kinds of electronic devices and no one has the slightest idea of how the blackbox, on which our ability to act in the world depends, actually works.

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In these conditions, as we have said, the sense of agency that comes from the ability to actually understand one's own tools, as in the case of craftsmen or mechanics, is certainly destined to be revalued. But, beyond the issue of the redistribution of dignity within our society, there is the wider issue of the human condition in a context in which most of our relationships are mediated by electronic devices.

What does it mean to be human in a hyperconnected era? For now, apparently, it means above all being at the mercy of new economic potentates that spy on our every gesture and use casino tricks to capture an increasingly large share of our time and attention.

³⁵ D.Goodhart, The Left's obsession with subjectivity, UnHerd, November 23, 2020.

What is interesting from a political point of view is that, even if they have been abundantly documented - and have been the object of a wide critical literature - the excesses of surveillance and attention capitalism do not seem to arouse even the slightest stir among users.

All surveys show that the vast majority of people are relatively indifferent to being monitored, as well as to the use that is made of their personal data. Not only and not so much because of ignorance of the phenomenon, and of its modalities, but really for another, far more decisive reason. Convenience. The comfort guaranteed by the new digital tools is the supreme good in exchange for which the renunciation of privacy and a degree of autonomy appear as very modest sacrifices. The fluidity, the pleasure guaranteed by a life without friction, in which one glides, as if on ice, guided by algorithms that smooth out the rough edges and gently lead the way, constitute the central promise of digital life.

That's why their hold is so powerful and resists all criticism: because, as well explained by philosopher Mark Hunyadi, "the engine of the extension of the digital is fundamentally libidinal, in the broad sense: it goes in the direction of desire, it aims at pleasure³⁶".

For this reason, it's useless to mobilize moral arguments in the hope of generating public awareness. Critical theory appears, not for the first time, powerless in the face of the evolution of techno-consumerism.

It is, however, difficult to deny that a society in which each person spends most of their days in front of a screen is giving rise to entirely new issues, as well as a widespread malaise that, although it has not yet found an outlet, nevertheless exists and is waiting to find political interpreters who are able to voice it in a way that is not purely regressive, avoiding the pitfalls of both techno-enthusiasm as well as moral panic.

What is needed to beat the appeal of the new comfort-based, frictionless digital serfdom is not yet another academic critique, but the invention of a fuller, more compelling lifestyle that is more attractive than the current model. A new art of living that incorporates the merger of our offline and online lives and puts it at the service of the human project, not of increasingly uncontrollable potentates or of some form of post-human intelligence destined to replace us in the scale of evolution. Philosopher Luciano Floridi calls it the "onlife"³⁷. What's essential is to give it a concrete meaning.

Of course, for this to be possible, rules are needed that reject tech exceptionalism in order to affirm, even in the digital field, the values that are the basis of our democracies. But beyond that is a positive, joyful practice that demonstrates that surveillance capitalism tricks are like junk food for our brains, superficially satisfying, but fundamentally damaging. And so much less rewarding than a meal based on natural ingredients and real culinary savoir-faire.

The art of living has always been the antidote to all forms of totalitarianism. Because the totalitarian aspiration - be it religious or technological - is to control time, to standardize behavior. Its dream is man reduced to a machine, predictable, uniform and transparent. While quality of life is exactly the opposite: freedom, delight, whim and even wasting time.

³⁶ Mark Hunyadi, Du sujet de droit au sujet libidinal, in "Esprit" N°452, Mars 2019, p.118.

³⁷ L.Floridi (ed.), The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era, Heidelberg, Springer, 2015.

Existential politics should be about protecting everything that makes the individual unique and allowing it to flourish in the new dimension of the onlife.

4 — From Representation to Power

Starting in the late 2000s, animal welfare volunteers in Britain became aware of a strange phenomenon. The proportion of dark-colored felines landing in their shelters had increased dramatically. As if, in a fit of superstition, British citizens had decided to reject black cats en masse.

In reality, however, medieval superstitions had nothing to do with it. Black cats were victims of selfies. Apparently, they are not very photogenic and therefore, not only in Britain but everywhere, they are increasingly abandoned, and rarely adopted.

In the age of mass narcissism, representative democracy finds itself in more or less the same situation as the black cats. Indeed, its fundamental principle, intermediation, contrasts radically with the spirit of the times and with the new technologies that make disintermediation possible in all domains. Thus, its slow procedures arouse the indignation of consumers accustomed to see their demands satisfied in a click.

Even in its smallest details, representative democracy gives the impression of having been designed to mortify the ego of the compulsive selfie taker. How can it be, for example, that when the new global etiquette requires each one of us to take a pic on every occasion, from a rock concert to a funeral, that if you try to do so in the voting booth, they cancel your vote? This is not the treatment to which Snapchat and social networks have accustomed us!

An essential part of Existential politics should be to seek out new forms of citizen engagement that will help restore a sense of agency among those sections of the population who feel they have lost it over the last few years. To do so, it will be essential to move away from academic platitudes, however, in order to confront reality in its raw materiality.

This is not to say that the democratic reversal underway in many parts of the world finds its root exclusively in the spread of smartphones. One must admit to being a bit surprised whenever, faced with the emergence of a new social phenomenon, be it the disappearance of black cats or the decline of representative democracy, analysts resort to complex socio-economic analyses instead of considering the most likely hypothesis: it's the smartphone, stupid!

If a device that was still unknown fifteen years ago has become the interface through which most of us relate to the world and to others, the consequences for our participation in public life are bound to be deep. For this reason, anyone who wants to propose solutions to the crisis of representative democracy today must pass what one could baptize "the smartphone test".

Let us take the case of deliberative democracy, a very fashionable term in political science faculties all over the world. Its main idea is that by selecting a relatively small, but representative, group of people, one can constitute a microcosm of society and produce a

high-quality deliberation on any sensitive issue, by weighing evidence and examining different perspectives that can lead to the formulation of legitimate and consensual solutions.

In theory, the idea is interesting, but in practice does it pass the smartphone test?

It is not likely, at least not on its own.

With respect to point one, disintermediation, the instruments of deliberative democracy offer no solution: they merely replace one form of intermediation, that of professional politicians, with a different one, that of citizens who are more or less representative of the social body as a whole. This may be progress in terms of representativeness, but it doesn't really address the core issue.

With regard to the second problem, timing, deliberative democracy does not, in itself, offer any improvement, since its basic principle is, precisely founded on taking time to build the necessary consensus, just as traditional parliaments should do.

In terms of narcissistic rewards (the selfie issue...) deliberative democracy offers some kind of answer, because it puts 'ordinary people' center stage, thus increasing opportunities for identification. But it is again a mediated response, giving the citizen the chance to be at the center of the picture only virtually, not in reality.

All this, of course, does not mean that deliberative democracy experiences are not useful or that they do not produce benefits. It does mean, however, that they do not provide an answer to the 'smartphone gap' that has arisen between the expectations of the average user and the procedures that govern the functioning of democracy as we know it.

In order to have a chance of escaping irrelevance, and of truly involving a citizenry that now spends an average of 4 hours and 12 minutes a day on its smartphone, the tools of deliberative democracy must necessarily be combined with something else. And this 'something else' can only be the much deprecated and feared direct democracy.

The mere mention of this term horrifies most political scientists, for whom direct democracy is synonymous with plebiscitary rule (and very politically incorrect decisions: the rejection of the European Constitution! The vote against minarets in Switzerland! Brexit!).

Unlike deliberative democracy, however, direct democracy passes the smartphone test with flying colors. First: it is a true form of disintermediation. Second: it produces a binary and immediate response. Third: it puts the citizen at the center of the picture.

It is no coincidence that the movements that dream of making democracy as we know it go the way of the black cat almost always point to the instruments of direct democracy. In Italy, the establishment of an electronic direct democracy to replace the old parliamentary system is at the heart of the political proposal of the 5 Star Movement, the country's leading party today. In turn, the French Yellow Vests have placed citizens' initiative referendums on all subjects at the heart of their demand.

In the face of this drive, the tools of deliberative democracy can be valuable, but only if combined with the much more compelling tools of direct democracy.

To be convinced of this, one need only compare the French case with the Irish one. In France, President Macron has used the tool of deliberative democracy to address the issue of climate transition in an atmosphere made incandescent by the Yellow Vests demonstrations, which originated in protests against a tax increase on fossil fuels.

The French Citizens Assembly for Climate involved 150 French people drawn by lot, with the task of formulating proposals to reduce greenhouse gas emission by 40% by 2030. Between October 2019 and June 2020, the convention worked hard, setting up five thematic groups and consulting 140 external experts, but the final impact of the initiative was much smaller than it could have been, because Macron, who had initially pledged to adopt the convention's proposed measures "without a filter", or to submit them to a referendum, decided not to give any concrete outlet to the initiative, which was therefore interpreted by public opinion as a mere rhetorical tool. Now the proposal for a constitutional change has died a silent death in the French Parliament. The whole initiative thus left a sense of bitterness and missed opportunity in most participants, and a sense of indifference or increased distrust of the government among the wider public.

In contrast, the case of the Irish Convention on the Constitution has produced a considerable impact, both in terms of participation and policy change, because it has combined the finesse of deliberative democracy with the power of direct democracy.

Launched in 2012, the Irish convention was mandated to explore different aspects of the constitution, such as voting age, the electoral system, same-sex marriage and blasphemy. Ninety-nine people took part, of whom thirty-three were politicians and sixty-six were selected from across the country, representing the country's demographics. One of the key recommendations that emerged was a referendum on marriage reform to include gay marriage. The referendum was held in May 2015 and carried by 62 percent of the vote, "with only a fraction of toxic divisiveness the Brexit discourse generated"³⁸.

In 2016, the newly elected government set up the Irish Citizen's Assembly to explore more key issues, such as the Eighth Amendment (on whether Ireland should legalise abortion), fixed term parliaments and how Ireland could become a world leader in action on climate change. This assembly met twelve times between October 2016 and April 2018. In May 2018, a referendum to repeal the constitutional amendment outlawing abortion went to the people, passing by 66.4 percent.

³⁸ R.Hopkins, 2019, p.235



CONCLUSION

Preventing democracy from going the way of the black cat is one of the aims of our endeavor, but for this to be possible, the forms of political participation must be redesigned to take into account the material reality of the changes that have transformed people's lives.

More generally, to formulate an Existential politics today means to follow the advice of Lord Keynes, according to whom, to invent new wisdom for a new age, "we must, if we are any good, appear unorthodox, troublesome, dangerous, disobedient to them that begat us³⁹".

During the Sixties, in order to give an answer to the questioning of Dustin Hoffman's character in *The Graduate*, the new generations gave birth to a protest that was born for the first time out of abundance, rather than scarcity. One that aimed to revolutionize daily life, rather than make one power-point slide prevail over another. What we need now is not to take up the outdated slogans of that generation, whose achievements and mistakes are still with us. But to pick up the thread of a project that is focused on quality, play and the enlargement of human life.

Today, the relationship between generations is once again taking center stage. The vague sense of guilt that animated the older generations before, aware of leaving their children an exhausted planet and a future made of diminishing expectations, has become the real elephant in the room of European politics.

The *ver sacrum* (sacred spring) is the ritual with which, after a calamity, ancient Romans entrusted a part of the flock to young people and spurred them to go and establish a new city. What form could a *ver sacrum* take today that aims to repair the relationship between generations, unleashing the energy of our youth?

This is one of the many unanswered questions that will be central to any future attempt to articulate a high positive / high energy narrative for our societies. But, however radical the final goal may be, we must keep in mind that, as sailors know, the only way to rebuild a ship on the Endless Sea, when there is no possibility of landing in a dry-dock, is to replace the beams one by one, until, using old beams and driftwood, the ship can be shaped entirely anew.

³⁹ J.M.Keynes, "Am I A Liberal?", *The Nation & Atheneum*, August 15, 1925.

This paper and all the case histories mentioned
and other resources are available on



theendlesssea.com

