

Competing temporal models.

From neoliberalism's expanded present to progressive transitioning time

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Part 1. Historicism and the time challenge

Time happens but compared with cosmological time our lives are but a flicker. Nevertheless, being human is a privilege because a sentient life can become consciousness of our place in history and through this a sense of the future. To fully exercise this criticality, it is important to problematise how we perceive time within the world and the universe in which we live.

This requires what Gramsci referred to as 'historicism' – an appreciation of the relationship of ideas to wider historical and societal contexts and the exercise of power. Our assumptions of the past, present and futures are therefore historical, economic, social and ideological constructions. In the early 21st Century much of the world is still dominated by neoliberal thinking and its version of history and time. Conversely, a very different temporal model is required to envisage change for transitioning to a more sustainable, fair and democratic society. Here the idea of competing temporal models – the neoliberal 'Expanded Present' and a progressive 'Social Ecological Time' - builds on Gramsci's historicism to help understand how they contribute to the development of dominant and subaltern historical blocs.

We have [15 years at best](#) to make significant progress towards carbon net zero. Time is running out of time to create a planet habitable for the Global South now and for future generations everywhere. Living on this kind of borrowed time is reflected in the ticking of the nuclear and climate '[Doomsday Clock](#)', now showing 90 seconds to midnight. Turning the clock back will involve the major nuclear powers (US, Russia and China) recognising the real nature of global threats and the unprecedented level of danger to Humanity. The depth of the poly-crisis and the scale of change required for a sustainable future is

historically unprecedented. It is within this context of historical urgency what we can analyse the potential collision between two temporal models.

Figure 1. Elements of regressive and progressive temporal models

Temporal element	Neoliberal expanded present	Social ecological time
1. Historical/ideological	End of history	Historicism and crisis as catalyst
2. Ecological time	Reluctance to embrace the time challenge and to engage in transitioning	Embracing the time challenge and support for Green and Just Transitioning
3. Economic chrono systems	Marketised time and generation/degeneration of entrepreneurial ecosystem cycles	Development of social ecosystems (connecting working, living and learning) as medium-term project
4. Political time	Electoral short-termism/policy amnesia	New Settlement as 'middle range time' beyond the electoral cycle
5. Social generation and futures	Social pessimism - no hope, no future	Social optimism - economic and social futures
6. Work, security and insecurity	Long hours, insecurity and the end of careers	Restoration of work security and decent work
7. Technological accelerationism	Accelerationism & distraction	Socially assistive technologies
8. Localities/communities	Sense of loss of the valued past in the form of local decline	Civic memory as part of inclusive regeneration
9. Organisational/policy amnesia and memory	Institutional and policy amnesia - constant change and inability to learn from the past	Institutional and policy memory as basis for learning from past experience
10. Personal concepts of time	Time poverty – exhaustion and distraction	Time nourishment – purposeful working, living and learning
11. Overall function	Dynamics of static equilibrium	Dynamics of progressive transitioning

Part 2. Regressive temporal model – neoliberalism's 'expanded present'

End of history - The previous period of capitalism - the Keynesian era - had a culture of progress. This came from the relationship between capitalism and the state - post-war reconstruction, the role of the state

planning and technological change, epitomised by the [1962 JF Kennedy speech](#) on the 'space race'. A sense of progress was underpinned by post-war optimism and of improved living standards, remembered as the '[Golden Age of Capitalism](#)'. In a bipolar world dominated by the West and the USSR, each system also had its version of progress.

The era of bipolar progress ended with the collapse of Soviet-style socialism at the end of the 1980s. This was followed by the short-lived triumph of neoliberal capitalism, famously captured by Francis Fukuyama in 1989 and the hubristic declaration that liberal democracy and free-market capitalism marked the final phase of human economic and political development and thus constituted the '[end of history](#)'. Capitalist determinist optimism replaced the socialist determinist conviction that socialism would automatically replace capitalism. However, the triumph of capitalism was short-lived, punctured by the 2008 Banking Crash and the onset of multiple global crises that in the years since have eroded a sense of progress, hope and future.

But here we must be mindful that this temporal analysis is Western-centric and that other societies may have differing perspectives. However, the global nature of the poly-crisis would lend support for a more general analysis of perceptions of time and future in the early 21st Century.

The Expanded Present - is derived from the work of Christopher Pollitt on institutional amnesia and what he referred to as the 'extended present'. Similar work has taken place analysing '[policy amnesia](#)' and the inability of policy-makers to learn lessons from the past. Building on these two literatures, the concept of the 'expanded present' (which can contain the very recent past and the immediate future) is elaborated to identify and relate 10 elements of the time dynamics of neoliberal capitalist society which serve to stifle social imagination and support constant restorations of static equilibria, what Gramsci referred to as 'passive revolution'.

- *Capitalist determinism and the end of futures* - capitalist determinism and the claim of no alternative to the mechanisms of the free market that, by definition, cannot be predicted. By default, this brings us back to the End of History thesis despite the poly-crisis. By the same token, it removes a concept of futures.
- *Rejection of ecological time*— rather than embrace the time challenge, this element of the regressive temporal model delays the future by placing economic priorities of the day (short-term capital accumulation) above medium-term aims of the green transition.

- *Economic market cycles* – in addition to the suspension of history by the market mechanism, the most advanced parts of Platform Capitalism – FinTech ecosystems – are conceived as generation/degeneration/spin-off cycles representing the constant evolution of capitalism.
- *Short-term political time* - political short-termism over-determined by the electoral cycle, leading to what might be termed 'political time'. This is combined with a lack of self-reflection that exaggerates the virtues of extant liberal democracies with little intention to deepen democracy.
- *Anxiety and despair* - the removal of hope and futures for society is particularly experienced by Generation Z (Zoomers) - young adults who live with student debt, high rents, poorly paid jobs, austerity and the experience of the COVID pandemic. Now trying to raise children with many seeing themselves as the first generation destined not to be as materially well off as their parents, they are understandably angry about the legacies of Generation X and anxious about the future. More broadly, the young are despairing about their ecological futures.
- *The erosion of work futures* - for many the experience of neoliberal work is long hours and insecurity. The idea of career as future has been seriously eroded.
- *Technological accelerationism* - neoliberal accelerationism of market rationality has combined with the constant and compulsive presence of 24-hour social media to speed up life within the stasis of the present. This is accompanied by dystopian concepts of technological futures – singularity – in which human intelligence is superseded by artificial intelligence.
- *Local and community loss of the past* - one of the most visible destructive effects of neoliberal capitalism has been the hollowing out of high streets and town centres have been brought about by a complex developmental mix - out-of-town shopping since the 1970s, the growing impact of online shopping over the past two decades, high local business rates and the 'supernova' concentration of services in global city centres. Town centres have historically been regarded as economic, social and cultural hubs by British communities and their decline is seen as symbolic of the loss of ways of living and working.
- *Organisational amnesia* – Pollitt in his study of institutional amnesia argued that organizational memory was undermined by a culture of constant change, thus removing any sense of the past from which to learn.
- *Personal time poverty*- work exhaustion, the struggles of poverty and distraction of social media are just some of the factors that combine to produce personal 'time poverty' - the lack of time for purposeful social activity, reflection and the imagining of futures.

Expanded present, static equilibrium and passive revolution - the 10 elements of the expanded present could also be viewed as the interlocking levels, from the macro to the micro, forming a static equilibrium that functions to lock out progress and bring about restoration, albeit with inbuilt contradiction and instability. The concept of the expanded present thus functions as 'weak ideological cement' within the neoliberal historical bloc in the sense that it lacks a sense of historical direction and the ability to resolve poly-crisis. But these weaknesses can only be exposed when confronted with a superior temporal model.

Part 3. Progressive temporal model - new settlement, transitioning and & social-ecological time

A central function of the progressive temporal model will be its ability to compete with the neoliberal model and contribute to progressive transitioning. This section outlines a parallel set of 10 temporal elements (summarised in Figure 2), organised through the relationship between three key concepts of 'middle range time'.

- 'New settlement time' as the medium-term period required for the establishment of a progressive equilibrium of economic, social, political and cultural relations.
- 'Transitioning time' – the short-medium period required to undertake the Green Transition to Net Zero.
- 'Social-ecological time' and the development of multi-level social ecosystem synergies to support new ways of Working, Living and Learning.

This concept of the relatively near future or 'middle range time' falls between the expanded present and the distant future and involves transitioning that starts now and stretches out. The very movement of transitioning involves making the future - the imagining and actions leading to significant changes to the ways in which we conduct politics, work, live and learn.

1. *Historicism and crisis as catalyst*- as part of his explanation of the development of hegemonic ideologies, Gramsci integrated history and social theory to provide a theory of causality and a methodology he referred to as [integral history](#). Also understood as [absolute historicism](#) in that human ideas and activity could be viewed through the lens of hegemony and by their relationship to wider historical and societal factors. If ideologies and social formations can be historically located and their

power relations understood, therein lies the possibility of moving to a different type of society. Historicism as analytical quality sows the seeds of possibility but does not in itself produce historical change. By the same token, crisis can be a destabilising catalyst but does not act as the 'hidden hand of history'. Futures need to be constructed by the envisaging of a society beyond the current condition and a politics of transitioning. The complex nature of poly-crisis, however, demands not a single catalytic factor but a comprehensive array of strategies that can act synergistically; what is referred to elsewhere as a 'political-economy-ecology ecosystem'.

2. Ecological time and transitioning – in contrast to neoliberal denials of the depth of the ecological crisis and the priority for making profit in the expanded present, ecological time can be related to the timespans required for the Green and Just Transitions.

3. Social ecological developmental system time – compared to Fintech cycles, social ecological time can be regarded as slower and more developmental in the building of multi-layered social ecosystem synergies (micro-macro). Creating synergistic relationships between economic, political, social and cultural system levels can be seen as the most effective way of constructing a progressive historical bloc.

4. New settlement time- a progressive settlement can be conceptualised as a 'medium-range' period, referring to the achievement of a new set of stable societal relations that take more than a term of Parliament to be built but can be reached within a generation. [Progressive new settlements](#) can leave their mark on history, notably the post-war 'Spirit of 45' that gave birth to the welfare state and much of the public fabric we still have today despite the ravaging effects of successive conservative governments. The stability of a new settlement would be underpinned by two factors in particular - a public 'settled will' reflecting a sea-change of popular attitudes and a new institutional formation that collectively strengthens the economic, political and social realms. At this juncture, it is painful to observe that Starmer's Labour does not possess a vision of a new settlement; finding it difficult to see beyond the prow of the electoral ship.

5. Decent work time – in contrast to neoliberal insecurity and burn-out, a progressive concept of work time would involve national legislation to increase job security (job futures), expand skills training and work expertise (vocational purpose), decent quality work (satisfaction) and reduction in the working week (improved work/life balance).

6. *Hope and futures for the young* – the social experience of the expanded present is not uniform – it differs according to how far a social group is economically struggling. Being on the sharp end of capitalism can radicalise and this is reflected in the voting intentions of young adults in the UK. At the same time, it is necessary to support social groups so they can experience a 'life well led' and to see a future worth working for and in which to bring up their children.

7. *Conservation/restoration of place and progressive nostalgia* - Marx famously remarked on the sweeping effects of capitalism on traditions and stability - '*all that is solid melts into air*'. 150 years on capitalism continues to reinvigorate itself by finding new ways to innovate, but also to destroy. This begs the question as to whether it is possible to undertake rapid innovation for sustainability without further dissolving the solidities upon which we depend for purposeful living. This can be understood by way of another question. Is it possible to combine major social and technological change with progressive forms of conservation/restoration?

However, in the context of a discussion of history and time, we can approach the issue through ideas of 'civic memory' - nostalgia for something valuable that has been lost with the hope that restoration and remaking of the social fabric can lead to better and more sustainable lives. This is not about recreating the past but capturing the timeless spirit of community and social solidarity in a new era. What might be termed 'progressive nostalgia' points to the particular importance of urban regeneration to remake town centres as places for working, living and learning; places where people gravitate for social activity. Reclaiming urban spaces could also be seen as a juncture of radicalism and conservatism, in which the transition to more sustainable living becomes attached to the 'little traditionalisms' of conserving and restoring. In terms of UK city regions, this combinational approach would not be on global city centres as such, but more on the peripheral towns in the city region that have lost their urban energy.

8. *New institutions and democracy as historical markers* – as an antidote to institutional amnesia, civic memory can be stimulated by the historical arrival of new institutions and new ways of exercising public power. This was the case with the 1945 settlement with the foundation of the welfare state, including the totemic NHS. The intervening years have mainly seen Conservative Governments and the Labour interludes did not see the same type of institution-building. This was particularly the case with New Labour. Its period of government lasted 13 years, the end of which had relatively little to show institutionally. Apart that is from democratic devolution to the smaller countries of the UK, the historical

effects which cannot be underestimated even though it was the exception to the rule for New Labour. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland now have historical markers from which they can measure the evolution of their countries. In this sense, they live to a different tick of the historical clock compared to England. The largest country in the UK looks relatively stuck. Following the institutional logic of democratic devolution, a similar process in England might become expressed by the historical strengthening of regional and local government to develop and integrate public services, economic development and green infrastructure. In parallel, experiments in local democratic participation could be initiated. Together these too would become pillars of a new democratic settlement in England.

9. *Technological futures* – the expanded present is not necessarily a total future fog; it can contain popular cultures of future. Interestingly, these appear overwhelmingly dystopian and backward-looking, whether it be out of control technologies as part of surveillance capitalism, future apocalypse or galactic battles between emperors and insurgents. The progressive temporal model needs its technological narrative of ‘assistiveness’; how technologies can assist humanity in addressing the climate crisis, heralding medical breakthroughs; developing new food sources – the list of is endless. Other sections of the website discuss ‘socialised artificial intelligence and machine learning’, informed by a ‘technological general intellect’.

10. *Nurturing purposeful time* - we must address the issue of time starvation in everyday life caused by overwork, market accelerationism and the culture of distraction. Here, two actions could prove decisive - introducing a four-day working week and the reinvigoration of lifelong learning for all. [UK four-day working week trials](#) in 2022 showed that reductions in the working week offered social benefits without damaging productivity. In the context of the greater affordances of non-work time, a new era of [lifelong learning opportunities](#) could also bring not only labour market benefits, but also personal cognitive growth without detracting from family time. These time-related measures could also have reciprocal social benefits in other areas of life with the possibility of increases in volunteering and political engagement. As such the nurturing of purposeful time would constitute an important part of the New Settlement.

Part 4. Conclusion

The analysis of competing temporal models reveals that the central struggle of the early 21st century is not only political or economic, but profoundly temporal. Neoliberalism's *expanded present*—a mode of life that suspends both history and future—has generated a static equilibrium that is incapable of confronting the poly-crisis or imagining routes beyond it. Its temporal logic repeatedly restores itself through short-termism, market determinism, ecological denial, and the erosion of social and personal futures. This is the structural backdrop to social pessimism, political fragmentation, and institutional exhaustion.

Yet the very depth of crisis makes possible a different historical orientation. The progressive temporal model—organised around the interlinked concepts of *new settlement time*, *transitioning time* and *social-ecological time*—offers a pathway for rebuilding the capacity to act collectively, democratically and imaginatively. This model re-introduces the future as a practical horizon - one that is neither utopian nor distant but grounded in medium-range timeframes in which ecological transitioning, democratic renewal and social-institutional reconstruction can unfold.

Crucially, such a temporal shift does not simply infer technological change or new policy instruments. It requires the rebuilding of civic memory, the restoration of institutional learning, and a revitalised sense of purpose in everyday life. By integrating historicism with ecological realism, the progressive model allows crises to become catalysts of transformation rather than symptoms of decline, enabling the emergence of new social ecosystems that link working, living and learning; it cultivates hope and futures for younger generations. Moreover, it promotes forms of technological development that enhance humanity rather than overshadow it.

If the expanded present represents a form of passive revolution, then the progressive temporal model aspires to an active and democratic reconstruction of the future. Its success will depend on whether political actors, social movements, localities and institutions can align around a shared sense of *middle-range time*—a temporal commons in which the future becomes visible and collectively achievable. In this sense, the struggle between competing temporal models is ultimately a struggle over the historical direction of society itself. Put simply: how we understand time will determine how we change the world.

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