

Political Breakout

Situation, Need, Action

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Series Editors

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Political Imaginaries: New Imperatives



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Prologue

Everybody everywhere wants good news, rather than bad. But what is good or bad is relative to one's circumstances. A day labourer on a street in Kinshasa, Cairo, or Jakarta, living day-by-day, who gets seven days' work at that moment, feels relieved and lucky. A factory worker in Berlin, New York or Sydney who fails to get an annual pay rise is disappointed and angry. The gap between the dream of a good life, and its realisation, is subject to where you are geographically, socio-economically and historically, what you do, and how you are psychically and mentally. Yet there is a bigger picture continuously being created by forces outside of one's existential environment, knowledge and control.

The day labourer, the guy who hires him or her, and their client; the factory worker, his or her floor manager and the factory owner, like everyone else, are subject to worldly events—enviro-climatic, economic, geopolitical and national. They unfold rapidly or slowly, unnoticed, or they arrive dramatically, and so decide one's fate, be it good or bad. Those global events that are directing the collective future of all of us are of an enormous magnitude. Unlike the geological and natural traumas that have transformed planetary conditions, the critical events of the present are a result of the combined actions that 'we' unknowingly, at a general causal level, have collectively taken over time as 'our' numbers and material transformative powers have increased. This is to the extent that a moment has arrived wherein the consequences of our actions have become unavoidable, including the commencement of a process of extinction (for the planet, the sixth, but the first induced by 'us'). However, the moment could be pre-empted by an act of auto-destruction, if the geopolitical tensions that are now present increase and prompt a nuclear Armageddon. Here is a known background to life on Earth that every person who is well informed about world events confronts, or turns away from—retreating into their minimal self of comforting activities of illusionary life-world 'normality.'

Life on Earth will die long before the sun does, which it will. Between now and then is a terminal moment that will be decided by the intensity of 'our' destructive actions, by intent or default, of environmental, ecological, and climate systems (while equally being progenitors of conflict). Our collective fate, and that of many other species, is being decided every day. As a still-growing population of over eight billion, *Homo sapiens* is becoming more divided, differentiated and fragmented. It follows that the possibility of becoming one global body politic continually diminishes. So, at this level of generality, the news is bad. But knowledge of it creates a condition of

possibility: affirmative futural action can be taken. But for reasons of fragmentation indicated, this will not be universal. Transformative agency has to be of a significant scale and scalable. Bad news is unfolding, and will continue to do so. Good news will only exist if it is made. This overall situation frames the variable good or bad conditions, and news of our particular lives, according to the circumstances in which we find ourselves or that we create.

These remarks inform what *Political Breakout* argues, which is that all of the historically constituted political ideologies and institutions operative in the present are incapable of dealing with the current and emerging conditions, complexities and challenges.

An epochal change is underway. Some twelve-thousand years ago, nomadic ways of life started to transition to settled and agricultural forms of existence in a post-Ice-Age period of inter glacial climate warming. The developmental trajectory established at this moment marked the start of the epoch that is now ending. This is a result of the convergence of four terminal factors. The first is the phenomenal numerical growth in our numbers and corresponding material demands made on natural environments and resources of the planet, and the damage done during their extraction. Second is the historical and ongoing impact of unrestrained ways of life, unevenly exercised across populations, that greatly exceeds essential material needs, especially by affluent societies. Three is the most extreme expression of environmental destruction and excess: war. Number four is an escalating age of heat, in a protracted period of natural geophysical interglacial warming, amplified by the warming effects of anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases generated by industrial, commercial, and socio-cultural activities.

What is now opening is an epoch of organic life existing in an increasing condition of negation. How long this trajectory will continue is unclear, but it is evident that its duration and outcome are indivisible from the actions to be taken by 'us' in all our diversity. What is also discernible is that the impacts upon 'us' will be proportionate to the unevenness of 'our' worldly circumstances.

Across nations and cultures, there is a palpable sense of ending, unsettlement and uncertainty, which is differentially felt and widely experienced. The dynamic of change is increasing in speed; its causal forces implicate each other in interwoven relational patterns of material and immaterial cause and effect. Yet disciplinary divisions of knowledge disaggregate this complexity, and expand the domain of the unknowable. The resulting accumulation of unknowing has turned critical, and now, a moment of nemesis is arriving. As a result, the existing conditions and impacts of biophysical, climatic, and geopolitical instability are going to fracture what is deemed to be taken as reality.

There are two responses to this impending condition of global disorder that are barely recognized by global political and economic leadership. The first is the attempt to name the current epoch (one contender is the 'Anthropocene'—a geological age of ongoing enviro-climatic crises produced by industrial societies). The second is that of 'technocentric accelerationism'—a position that abandons attempts to 'save' life as it is known and to embrace a progressive transition to a totally technological future of 'our' becoming fully machinic conscious beings (singularity). While these two responses indicate real and substantial dangers, as said, they are almost totally unrecognised in the political sphere, which continues to oscillate between national and international crisis management, and striving to manage 'business as usual.'

Against this backdrop, *Political Breakout* will elaborate on the complexity of the situation. It will show that all existing political ideologies are constitutionally incapable of directing affirmative futural change. At the same time, the essence of the argument of the book is to assert the absolute imperative of constructively responding to the still wilfully accelerating critical circumstances that certainly cannot be resolved by a 'technofix.' The actual key to transformative response rests with political action. But for this to be possible, a new political imagination, one that takes the political beyond its historical limitations, has to be created. This task, this challenge, is beyond one person, and certainly one book—it is a collective process, yet one that one person and one book (this book) can aim to advance conceptually, analytically and practically.

The thinking that informs what is presented here is drawn from ten book books written over the past thirty years, all with an address to the political, two exclusively so: *Design as Politics* (Fry, 2011) and especially *A New Political Imagination, Making the Case* (Fry and Tlostanova, 2021) co-authored with Madina Tlostanova. The present book is equally informed by decades of practical experience, which has included directing an environmental design organisation for over ten years focussed on projects of natural and urban environments, climate change, renewable energy, sustainable product research and development, and professional development education in Australia and internationally. Likewise, the experience also includes working on cultural regeneration in post-conflict environments in Asia and South America. This history of research and practice also informed an academic career, which included professorial positions in Australia, the USA and Hong Kong.

Introduction

Political Breakout is totally preoccupied with the writing of ‘the next’ – the coming after. In doing so, it cuts across a sense of *the next* that, up until the present, most people would assume to be tomorrow, a next day, week, or year, and the inevitability of there being a future, be it good or bad. But this is no longer the case. No matter who or where we are, no matter if we know it or not, ‘we’ now live in ‘the end times.’ This is a moment of epochal change that overarches all cosmological differences of who or what ‘we’ are. However, the human is not one, ‘we’ are born as animals and are made other.¹ As such, ‘we’ dwell in worlds of difference, notwithstanding the intent of modernity to constitute ‘one world’ in its image.

Bruno Latour argued that the human has no ‘stable shape (Watkin (ed), 2016, pp. 171–201)’. Additionally, the human, as Erik Swyngedouw points out, reiterating Maurice Blanchot, has ‘no core’ (Swyngedouw, 2022, p. 16). ‘It’ is undone by the very absence of ‘humanity’ in ‘its’ history. ‘We’ have not, as Dipesh Chakrabarty and others would have it, become directive of an earth-system or a planetary force (Interview: (Saramago and Pádua, 2023, p. 671)). It’s true this judgment applies to *the many*, but not to *the all*. There is a ‘we’ that can make choices, and a ‘we’ that cannot. But what is true is that everyone, and unknowingly every living being in general, is increasingly becoming a victim of this force.

It follows that there can be no appeal to a unified global ‘we’ to act against those forces that are negating planetary futures. Making such an appeal (Wilder, 2022, pp. 81-82) is now gestural and misplaced. Besides the evident global geopolitical disunity of nations, a far more serious condition of fragmentation of ‘humanity’ is underway. Which, as will be shown and shortly discussed, is another marker indicative of the termination of the current epoch of our species’ earthly habitation. A new epoch has commenced in which pluriversal difference will be reconfigured within three very different divided lifeworlds, each with porous boundaries. What this situation makes clear is that

¹ The notion that ‘we’ (and ‘our’) are one has always been problematic—we are all born and remain an animal, but also are created as a cultural being. That being has been formed in cosmological difference, and as such has been posited with varied identities. Western colonialism, in the name of a Christian God, and the bringing of ‘civilization,’ imposed Anthropos—the human—as a claimed universal being. Difference remains, and in new ways is now increasing as the “value” of the human becomes fluid and as a nexus between our species being and technological protheses increases.

global appeals to ‘humanity’ or to ‘global political change,’ while never ‘realistic,’ are now hollow and not even notionally possible. The fiction and the contestable fact have fractured.

At some distant point all life will end, this being long before the planet finally itself dies—both events linked to the death of the sun. In addition to knowing that life on our planet will cease to exist as it is, an increasing number of people have realised that the collective actions of a large segment of “humanity” are foreshortening the time of its duration, diminishing life’s finitude, and thus are ‘wasting’ the future. Hence, this moment is named as ‘the end times.’

To know this, is also to know that the situation can be changed for the better or the worse by what, in difference, empowered populations do in coming decades. But for such change to happen, people who have the freedom to act have to become organised in diverse groups *en masse* in situated contexts; they have to become informed and then mobilise to take corrective action. There is only one way such a massively difficult change can happen, and that is political. However, existing politics, without exception, is incapable of doing this. It lacks the means to extend the possibility of a future, so another paradigm of politics has to be created. This requires an ability to think beyond how politics is currently thought and enacted. This, in turn, requires the creation of a new political imagination able to provide a politically grounded directive of social, cultural, and economic life across worlds of crises and differences. Again, such action cannot be universal, but it can have agency if situated and of sufficient scale and momentum.

So positioned, *Political Breakout* is a response to the huge disjuncture between the inability of existing political ideologies, regimes, institutions, policies and practices to recognise and act against the combined crises and changes that face the continuity of life on planet Earth. The complexity of the current unfolding globally-situated critical compound crisis of coming conditions of disaster, fragmentation and polarisation is beyond the capability of existing politics – epistemologically, conceptually, organisationally and practically. This condition of delimitation cannot be resolved pragmatically or by any available means of reform. Rather, there has to be a fundamental transformation of ‘the political’ itself. Hence, the creation of a ‘new political imagination’ is vital.

For this to happen a process has to be created from which it can emerge, be constituted, and mobilised. There are two vital preconditions: a substantial critique of the futural impotence of the political status quo; and the establishment of intellectually fertile and protean conditions from which a process able to constitute the ‘ground’ of a new political imagination can be

spawned.² Such action comes from an exercise of committed thought and labour rather than from a flash of light and a brilliant revelation. The ambition of *Political Breakout* is simply to make a contribution to the initiation of the transformative process of the formation of such a ground.

The argument will be supported by detailing the complexity of the inter-relational crises that constitute the plural current moment and the political conjunctures that, in difference, are unsettling individuals and populations with what will be increasing intensity. The enfolding crises span environmental, biological, economic, technological and life-security impacts. As such, they constitute a compound problem, and as all available data indicates, increasingly acts to negate futures (defutures).

The Voice

One chooses a position of speech within the conditions of limitation of one's life. In doing so, more is left unsaid than said. The narrative of how a voice is claimed ever remains silent.

...

The dominant Eurocentric literature on imagination leaves the imagination of so many others mostly unacknowledged and silent. The notion of a decolonial imagination does not address this situation, as expressed by/in a project of sociology and/or anthropology. Historically, this failure poses many problems, not least from epistemological colonialism's uneven exercise of crushing imagination and imposing new imagined futures, in the colonial and so-called post-colonial era. This action presents significant questions about whose decolonial imagination for creative practitioners and academics in the global 'North and South' is being considered, and where? It's a problem already partly played out in the literature, for example, in Tayeb Salih's (Salih, 2009) *Season of Migration to the North*, and in David Diop's (Diop, 2020) *At Night All Blood is Black*. It's a live issue, and an ongoing political conflict, evident in the destruction of imagination embedded in indigenous cosmologies and accompanied by ontological violence of an imposed other lifeworld and ways of knowing. A concrete example will make this clear.³ However, as will become

² 'Ground' is understood here as an epistemological foundation, contextually situated, and rhetorically expressed, as a place from which to take a position, as will be discussed in a later chapter

³ The example is drawn from my experience in numerous visits to Timor-Leste between 2008-2012.

apparent, present political, intercultural and geopolitical conditions of transformation are rendering past ways of understanding the division between and the status of a neatly divided global North and South problematic.

The inability of the International Order to deal with serious conflicts between nations evidences a longstanding breakdown of, especially the United Nations Security Council. The UN has become what Gary Wilder has called an ‘international dictatorship by the powerful (Wilder, 2022, p. 43).’ Against this backdrop, new forms of global fragmentation are arriving.

Historically, the attempt to create an International Order was underscored by a modernist/Enlightenment model of conflict resolution which was heavily influenced by the philosophy of Kant. This was seen in the founding of the League of Nations (1929–1946) and thereafter the United Nations in 1945. Both were based on Kant’s institutionalised notion of a single unified world at peace, realised by conformity to a single economic model of ‘development’ with compliance to a global norm of ‘human rights’, notwithstanding the fact that Anthropos was a colonial imposition. These ideas epitomised German Idealism, and its limitations. They are expressed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’ or ‘The Idea of a Universal History on a Cosmopolitical Plan’ 1784 (Beck (ed.), 1963), and in 1775 in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (Kant, 1917). Notwithstanding, the UN’s history is replete with failures, like those in Rwanda, Bosnia and more recently in the Ukraine and Gaza. The institution’s concept of ‘One World’ was never fully realised, and is now more distant than ever.

Humanist idealism has been a colonising instrument, and it survives, notwithstanding its demonstrable history of failures. All this is indicative of, and a testament to, the problematic agency of Kant, colonised imagination, and the ongoing directive power of Eurocentric thought. It is sobering to consider that every major global political ideology and its variants (democracy, liberalism, conservatism, socialism, communism, fascism, and anarchism) are the product of the universalisation of Eurocentric epistemologies that prefigured associated political ontologies. While there have been historical examples and conditions that have run counter to this dominant Western propensity, their agency has not been significant in redirecting global consequences.

Currently, available political ideologies are demonstrably showing themselves to be temporally disjuncture from the speed, rate of change and impacts of those conditions that constitute the ‘complexity of complexity’ of this moment. In actuality, the reverse is true, the political trend is toward authoritarian populist politics that offers ‘simple solutions’ and ‘firm leadership’ in the face of negated deep and multidimensional crises. Nationalism, in its various guises, converges with this trend and makes it even

more dangerous. Meanwhile, the fragmentation of extant power blocs is producing global structural change and exposing the inability of the world's governments to make those fundamental directional changes that would enable them and their populations to respond to coming economic, environmental and global security crises. Dominantly, and irrespective of political ideology, to retain power, they strive to reach or maintain accelerated levels of consumer-led economic growth. At the same time, they deflect seriously dealing with problems that threaten, like climate change (Fry and Tlostanova, 2021, pp. 2-17). So contextualised, neoliberal economics retains its ability to strive to shape a particular future economically and technologically. A new political imagination cannot avoid passing through the sameness of the differences of this conceptual, political obstacle course.

The directional sum of these forces and trends are well underway and make certain a continued confrontation with conditions that prefigure the 'end of the World.' Knowingly and unknowingly, the issue before us all is can they be arrested and reversed? The most immediate response to this question is to say, 'not until the situation is fully recognised and engaged,' which is certainly not the case at the moment. Notwithstanding endless references to 'the future,' it remains predominantly unthought. It is not a technologically produced shooting star blazing a way to a glorious tomorrow. Techno-futures are just one kind of future among many. For huge numbers of people, the future is going to be regress not progress. The discourse of the future is plural and contradictory, as the literature on the future affirms.

Consider this instantly created sample, starting with nineteenth novelists like Jules Verne, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backwards* (1888), and William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890), to Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell, *Nineteen-eighty-four* (1949), to William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984), Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, (2006). Then there is a great swathe of scientific literature on the future from James Lovelock (1919-2022), *Gaia* (1979) to Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction Event* (2015), Michael Kaku, *Physics of the Future* (2012), and Caren Irr, et al. (eds), *Environmental Futures An International Literary Anthology* (2024). Next, are philosophical/quasi-philosophical works, like Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (2013), David Roden, *Posthuman Life* (2015), Jennifer Huberman, *Transhuman* (2020), Elise Bohan, *Future Superhuman* (2022). My own work contributes to this field: *Defuturing* (1999/2020), *Design Futuring* (2009), and *City Futures in the Age of a Changing Climate* (2015).

Existentially, the future is who you are, how you are, and where you are circumstantially in conditions of change. Geophysically, the future is an intersection of variable determinate forces. Geopolitically, it is an increasing

arena of contestation and prospective disorder. Enviro-climatically the future is an unfolding condition of crisis for organic life, thus also for 'us.' Indivisibly for 'us', the future is in danger, and the plurality of futures directly correlates to the forms of 'our' responsive actions.

Situating cosmological complexity

The world arrives for everyone as an empirical reality mediated by an induced cosmology that posits what is materially encountered, and constituted performatively by action, with meaning. Dominantly, cosmologies are lived, and as such, frame perception and direct practices—they are not consciously expressed. Cosmology is also the locus of the imagination as shared by the collective, and as such, is the enacted form of an ontology—one in which a particular being-in-the-world-in-common is constituted as a reality wherein identities are understood, and conditions of possibility and limitation are perceived. But the degree of difference of situated, and experiential individuation clearly produces specific rather than common imaginaries. At the same time, an exposure to a commonality – like 'the end of the world which is everywhere' (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 170)—forms a cosmological imagination with commonalities of the imagined evoked. What happens here is *the imagined* meets an *ecology of knowledge* (de Sousa Santos 2014) and connects back to epistemology, wherein an ecology of mind (Bateson, 1973) exposes an environment of circulating ideas. Effectively, the 'imagination of the individual converges with the 'imagination of the collective' (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 130), this as it exists as elemental to an induced cosmology and its everyday practices. Imagination so understood is not just expressed in inventive, expressive creative forms but is continually pre-figuratively present and active in almost everything we do.

Reality is mediated by the nexus of knowledge and imagination as the passage between the seen, the imagined and the 'to be imagined.' Viveiros de Castro puts before his readers Amerindian mythology that inverts 'our own' scientifically validated notion that humans evolved from animals, whereas for Amerindians, the reverse was true—animals evolved from humans, as the common generic condition (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 205). The observation also affirms Roy Wagner's conclusion in this book's afterword that 'we have no perspectives that are not completely imagined ones,' and that 'we know that animals did not evolve from humans does not hold in check a fleeting moment of imagining it to be true. But then a realisation arrives: biologically we remain animals who, as it were, put on the enveloping skin – the outer clothing of 'humanness'—that expresses our cultural being. Again, Amerindian mythology inverts the same and the different (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 296).

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