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Against the age of cynicism

From Trump to climate breakdown, the future looks bleak. But it is this despair that can become a force for change

We live in a world of senseless suffering and impending catastrophe, where it would seem the idea of moral progress has become unintelligible. Two epochal crises afflict contemporary society: the rise of anti-democratic forces and climate change. But what if today's tragedies turn out to be a source of hope?

The authoritarian drift fuelled by right-wing populism threatens democracies around the world, including even long-standing ones like the United States, where President Donald Trump's abuse of power seems to know no limits. Even Trump's more moderate European allies constantly attempt to undermine the rule of law. Most recently, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni tried to limit the judiciary's independence through a national referendum. Fortunately, Italians turned out en masse to protect their Constitution.

The crisis of democracy feeds the climate crisis. Trump withdrew the US from the Paris climate agreement and has weakened or dismantled myriad environmental protections. Meloni reversed course on several commitments under the European Union's Green Deal and opposes stricter emissions targets. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has repeatedly blocked or delayed EU-level climate legislation.

The need for a renewed sense of possibility

Policymakers' unwillingness to address the crisis has left the fate of the planet in the hands of private investors and their (often limited) desire to adopt sustainable technologies. At most, governments incentivise such investors, but rarely replace them. This is why, apart from China, there has been insufficient funding for renewable energy, even as AI investment by Big Tech giants has skyrocketed.

The irrationality and violence of Trump's politics in recent months – from the brutality of the Minneapolis killings and his absurd plan for the reconstruction of Gaza to his imperialistic invasion of Venezuela and the jaw-dropping folly of his war against Iran – have reinforced our era's tragic character. Politics appears dictated by sheer force, while moral ideals, from a healthy democracy to environmental sustainability, seem ludicrous. The space for principled action seems to have vanished.

But we have been here before. Albert Camus famously argued that even in a senseless world, we can create a form of hope through rebellion. Hannah Arendt found hope in the human capacity to start anew even in the face of genocidal events. Martin Luther King, Jr., emphasised that suffering could lead to moral progress and collective transformation. My recently departed colleague, the philosopher Jonathan Lear, explained how loss can be the source of 'radical hope' for a good future, even without being able to specify or imagine what that good future would look like.

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Recent events seem to vindicate such thinkers. Consider the reawakening, however embryonic, of civil society: democracy's beating heart, and its most precious bulwark against authoritarianism. We saw this in the US with the 'No Kings' protests that involved millions of people. We also saw it in the exceptionally high turnout for the Italian referendum, especially in the participation of a significant number of young people, who in the past would have stayed home.

Such awakenings cannot be attributed solely to the gravity of today's conditions or the authoritarian character of today's right-wing governments; even in the face of egregious acts that highlight the importance of politics, apathy can persist. Awakenings require something more: a renewed sense of possibility.

In the decades preceding Trump, a feeling of stagnation and powerlessness had spread in the US and Europe. Many people began to believe that it did not matter who governed, because nothing would change. Right-wing and left-wing governments would all end up doing the same things, adhering to the dictates of neoliberalism. The ability to change course seemed limited by external and internal constraints, from constitutional to fiscal.

There were, of course, moments that spurred hope for change. Barack

Obama's election as US president in 2008 was one. But it ended in disappointment. Under Obama, Wall Street banks received large bailouts following the global financial crisis, while millions of Americans lost their homes. Drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia were expanded. More immigrants were deported than under any previous president. Obama, like Europe's center-left governments, ultimately governed within the same framework as his predecessors.

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Trump, on the other hand, is living proof that one person holding political power can change the fate of the world — and in the blink of an eye. It is therefore worth fighting to ensure that power ends up in the right hands, or at least not in the hands of dictators or madmen. The ease and arbitrariness with which an autocrat can transform domestic and foreign affairs has given rise to a new democratic activism, and the hope that comes with it.

The same is true for the climate crisis. Who would have thought that the only hope for completing the energy transition could emerge from a senseless war? And yet that is exactly what is happening. Although the outcome of the Iran conflict remains uncertain, among its greatest beneficiaries may be green technologies and renewable energy. After all, Trump's war has revealed the fragility of economies heavily dependent on fossil fuels, with the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz causing energy prices to soar.

As other commentators have noted, China would do well to convene a coalition of willing countries to launch a global push for green investment, boosting demand for its industries. European countries would find it appealing, as would many others (including even the Gulf states). Thus, the hope for a cleaner atmosphere and a more sustainable environment emerges from the tragedy of a senseless war.

Ironically, tragedy – not faith in linear moral progress through which humans learn from past mistakes and avoid their repetition – has become the source of hope for moral and political progress. The rebirth of democracy and the salvation of the planet now depend on it

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