

“We Have Colonised the Future”

Roman Krznaric / Public Philosopher, interview...

José Luis Fernández Casadevante 'Kois' / Nerea Morán

Roman Krznaric (Sydney, 1971) is a founding faculty member of The School of Life in London and an advisor on empathy to organisations such as Oxfam and the United Nations. Krznaric is a public philosopher who writes about the power of ideas to change society. His latest book is *The Good Ancestor. How to Think Long-Term in a Short-Term World* (Captain Swing, 2022). After growing up in his hometown and Hong Kong, Krznaric studied at the universities of Oxford, London and Essex, where he received his PhD in Political Sociology. He is the founder of the world's first Museum of Empathy, a research fellow at the Long Now Foundation, and a member of the Club of Rome.



Roman Krznaric, en su charla TED 'Cómo ser un buen antepasado'. TED.COM

(JLF-NM) Your book begins with the obvious and disturbing paradox that we are living longer and longer, while at the same time, we are thinking more and more in the short term. Our ability to project ourselves into the long term, to reflect on the future, has been eroded over the last few decades. Why do you find this change worrying?

I think it is evident to most people that we live in a tyranny of the now, the domination of the present time. This ranges from our gestures, as we look at our phones 130 times a day, to neoliberal capitalism as an ideology that advocates the now, as a way of maximising profit or growth, without valuing the long-term impacts on people and the planet.

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Early clocks used to strike once every hour. By 1700 most had a minute hand, and by 1800 they had a second hand. The clock became the essential machine of the Industrial Revolution, making factories work faster and faster, and the future came faster and faster. So short-termism is an old problem, made worse today. Never before in history have our actions had such potentially damaging consequences for future generations. This is partly due to ecological impacts, climate change or biodiversity loss, but also to the risks of new technologies, artificial intelligence or biological weapons. I think

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the key problem with this short-termism is that we have colonised the future, that we treat the future as a distant colonial property where we can freely offload ecological degradation and technological risk as if there were no one

there. And the problem is that future generations are not here to confront this plundering of their inheritance. They cannot take to the streets. We must do it for them.

(JLF-NM) From so much short-term thinking, we have ended up developing short-term memory. According to neuroscience, the future and the past are located in the same area of the brain and are closely related. How does your brain think about the relationship between memory and imagination?

That's a wonderful and fascinating question. My book is called The Good Ancestor, and being a good ancestor involves thinking about the future by linking it to memory, to the way we will be remembered and judged by future generations. But it also implies that we need to remember the past in the present. Good ancestors consider what we have inherited from the past and what we will leave in the future. We have inherited many positive things, such as the cities we live in or the medical discoveries we benefit from. Still, we are also heirs to very negative legacies such as slavery, colonialism or racism, as well as economies structurally addicted to fossil fuels and endless growth that we must now transform.

The danger exists if we forget the past, for then we will not know what we should or should not pass on to future generations. What do we keep from the present, and what do we want to give up? What neuroscience says is also relevant, for it tells us something about the importance of looking in both directions. The good news is that human beings have an amazing ability to dance through time with their imagination. One moment you can look at your phone, and the next moment think about the songs that will play at your funeral or think about your grandmother's smile when you were a child, which is something that all other animals do not do. Thinking through time is a key skill for survival in the 21st century.

(JLF-NM) In 2015 Sweden created the Ministry of the Future. The aim of this institution was to reinstate a long-term vision in political management so that it would be feasible to identify emerging trends, changes and challenges that lie ahead, as well as to strengthen the capacity to establish social consensus and political commitments that go beyond the demands of the immediate future. The Spanish government set up a Foresight Office a few years ago, and tools such as Climate Assemblies have been developed in several

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countries. Do you see an incipient change of trend?

I think there is a crisis of democracy. One symptom is the rise of the extreme right, but the second sign is that we have designed a democracy that does not see beyond the short term. Most politicians do not see beyond the next election or

the incumbent. What do we do about it? One strategy is to create a Ministry of the Future or an Office for Forward Thinking. In Wales, they have a Future Generations Commissioner, a public office whose job is to look 30 years into the future in different aspects such as employment, education or the environment. That's one model. The problem is to end up like Plato, demanding to have a wise philosopher who makes complex decisions.

My daughter is 13 years old, and she asks me why I should trust a minister of the future to make decisions for me? This raises a second way of solving this problem by developing initiatives such as citizens' assemblies. Strategies to involve people directly in political decision-making, where they are much more likely to take a long-term view.

I have been involved as an expert in the UK Citizens' Climate Assembly, and I am convinced of the effort made to develop such a long-term vision. But you could go further, as is being done by the Future Design movement in Japan, which is developing locally based participatory methodologies to guide decision-making. It is an initiative inspired by the Native American idea of taking into account the consequences of our decisions up to seven generations from now. To do this, they invite a cross-section of citizens and divide them into two groups where one half thinks from the present and the other half as residents of the year 2060, and these are the ones who, in the end, propose much more radical plans. So the Climate Assemblies are a good idea, but if we can also include some of this imaginative work of thinking collectively about the future, it would be even better.

(JLF-NM) A difficult question. When working on these issues with social movements, one gets the feeling that for some of them, thinking about the future means losing valuable time to act on the present.

Yes, it is a problem. People have urgent problems in the present - think of those who have lost their jobs during the pandemic or refugees. One might conclude that thinking in the long term is an activity for privileged people, but I don't think so. This concern draws from indigenous cultures that are not the richest sectors of society yet are engaged in many social struggles. My father is 89 years old, and he was a Polish refugee in Australia after World War II. And he always says that many refugees who come to Europe are thinking very long term about their children's future. They are taking risks today to try to make life better for their families tomorrow. What is really interesting is that there is a growing activist movement of concern for the Future, the Time Rebels. Fridays for Future has it in its name. There are more and more legal cases where organisations are prosecuting governments for failing to protect the rights of future generations. I am part of an organisation in the UK that proposes to have a permanent commission for Future Generations. The present and the Future are not always in conflict with each other. Of course, you know, if you invest in green and electric transport, you're doing something for current and future generations, or if you're investing in health care or education for the poorest people, it's a long-term investment. Movements must deal with the present problems while incorporating a concern for the future we want to build, expanding our moral universe.

Movements must deal with the present problems while incorporating a concern for the future we want to build, expanding our moral universe.

(JLF-NM) Faced with the multidimensional crisis we live in (political, economic, environmental, war...), we risk falling into authoritarian or technocratic temptations to solve our problems. Why do democracies work so much better in terms of intergenerational solidarity?

I used to be a political scientist, and I taught at universities a long time ago. I have always been interested in these political questions. While researching the book, many people said to me: "We can solve all these problems with a good dictator, a benign dictator or an enlightened despot. Look at Singapore or China. For many people, there is this doubt

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about the best systems for delivering long-term public policy. However, after much quantitative research, it is clear that democracies are far more effective in environmental, economic, social and equality areas. We studied 122 countries, and of the 25 countries with the best long-term policies in the Intergenerational Solidarity

Index, 21 were democracies, and of the bottom 25, 21 were authoritarian governments.

Why are democracies more effective in general? I think it is because authoritarian governments are very fragile and do not necessarily respond well to the demands of their citizens. Accountability allows democracies to be more responsive to long-term problems. Sometimes, a dictatorship may be interested in environmental planning or other long-term issues.

At the same time, they might be doing more. Modern representative democracy was invented in the 19th century to deal with long-term problems such as the transition from imperialism and feudal society. There is also excellent evidence that decentralised political systems perform better on this Intergenerational Solidarity Index. So the more decentralised the power structure, the better the politics in the long run. For example, in responding to local problems, cities are often better at taking a long-term view than national governments.

JLF-NM) When thinking about eco-social transitions, we must undoubtedly understand them as an intergenerational project. A process in which we engage on the assumption that we will not see the end, as was the case with cathedrals in the Middle Ages. This vision is currently only found in the field of art. Faced with the tyranny of immediacy, what keys do you think would help to accelerate this cultural change?

Spain is an interesting country historically because you have these examples of cathedral thinking, such as the Sagrada Familia, which was started in 1882 and is still under construction, or the Segovia aqueduct built by the Romans in the 1st century and used for almost 2,000 years. I don't think we need more cathedrals, but we need to apply similar thinking to ecological alternatives. And that has to do with culture, partly with politics and partly with economics. In a way, we have talked a little bit about the political side with the future generations commissioners or the citizens' assemblies. On the economic side would be the city of Amsterdam, which has adopted Kate Raworth's doughnut economy for urban planning and moving toward a circular economy. These kinds of economic changes are fundamental to deal with the tyranny of the now and short-termism, moving toward post-growth economic models. They are redesigning our economies.

But a cultural change is also needed, capable of transforming the ideas floating around in society. And part of that cultural work comes from art and literature. Scottish artist Katie Patterson has created a project called the Library of the Future, where every year for 100 years, a famous writer writes a book that cannot be read until the year 2114, and it will be printed with one of the thousand trees planted for this purpose. A fantastic initiative. We need things like that. Or more novelists like science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, who recently wrote a book called The Ministry of the Future, about how humanity overcame the challenges of the Paris Agreement.

We also need radical changes in our education systems for long-term thinking to be included in our school curricula. On the other hand, I am not religious, but I recognise that historically religion has played a very important role in changing culture. The Catholic Church is an interesting example; on the one hand, it is incredibly conservative, but on the other hand, if you look at the encyclical Laudato si, you find fantastic language about intergenerational solidarity.

Ultimately though, I think cultural change is about changing the conversations in society. It doesn't mean they have to dominate the discussion, but they have to be given a voice. We are at the beginning, shaping the idea of giving rights to future generations—one of the most radical ideas in the history of human rights since the French Revolution.

(JLF-NM) Following the thread of your reflections, it would also not be wrong to argue that we enjoy an ever longer life expectancy and, at the same time, suffer from a diminished hope in life that we can make the future better than the present. Can thinking and acting like good ancestors help us to regain a necessary utopian impulse?

I have mixed feelings about utopias. The creation of images of the future has been a fundamental motivator of social change throughout history. Thomas More, Marxism, religions... have all had an idea of heaven or paradise.

My goal would be to meet the needs of all people and future generations within planetary boundaries. One utopia is to recognise that our economies are a subsystem of the biosphere, the opposite of what most economists teach their students.

Ambition is important to become good ancestors because we need to have a vision of the world we want, the ancient Greek notion of a Telos or goal for Humanity. My goal would be to meet the needs of all people and future

generations within planetary boundaries. One utopia is to recognise that our economies are a subsystem of the biosphere, the opposite of what most economists teach their students.

On the other hand, I believe in dystopian visions as motivators for change, as when Greta Thunberg said our house is on fire. I want you to panic. Crises can be useful to change the minds of those in power. We are on trajectories that lead us towards a world on fire. I close my eyes and imagine what my children's lives will be like, and it is terrifying.

I think balancing those dystopian visions with the more utopian ones is important. They need to work together like a knife and fork.

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- ❖ **About the authors: Roman Krznaric** (Sydney, 1971) is a founding faculty member of The School of Life in London and an advisor on empathy to organisations such as Oxfam and the United Nations. **José Luis Fernández Casadevante 'Kois'** is a sociologist and international expert on food sovereignty for the UNIA. **Nerea Morán Alonso** has a postgraduate degree in architecture from the Polytechnic University of Madrid. She has participated in several projects and research networks on agro-food systems, neighbourhood regeneration and sustainable and long-lasting cities.
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