



## Closing Time

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## Closing Time

Bruno Villalba<sup>1</sup>

***Abstract: Today, we face the looming threat of irreversible ecological meltdown (runaway climate change, biodiversity collapse, etc.), and technological disaster (in particular, the nuclear threat). To defer these dangers from being realised, a change of direction is needed in how political actors think and behave. The political apparatus as we know it has been built on a 'continuist' vision, which is typical of the modern era: time is thought of as being utterly limitless. However, we may now be facing a very real limit: in what is referred to as the 'End Times', humanity's time on Earth may very well come to an end – we may go the way of countless species before us, into extinction and obscurity. The image of a closing window facilitates a political perspective of time that is adjusted to take account of these all-too-real threats. It serves as a counterweight in the political mechanism. Taking a realistic view in light of the upheavals currently in progress, the options available to us for action become clear. Representing a relatively short time, the concept of a closing window highlights the need to reassess the aims of political action, from a balanced perspective integrating today's people, future generations and non-humans alike. This article presents the main features of the concept and the political prospects which it opens up.***

Philosophical and political thinking about time concerns how it is modulated, and, primarily, the alternating phases of continuity/progress and discontinuity/rupture (Hartog, 2016). Modern politics is founded on a perception of time which comprises the *entire duration* of human activities (Arendt, 2007). The temporal division of history helps imbue it with meaning. It is organised around the notions of *progress* (continuous improvement), *directionality* (the pursuit of happiness, notably in the form of material comforts), *linearity* (history runs in one direction only), *cumulativeness* (each passing step ushers in the next, right up to the final step), and *irreversibility* (once the wheels of development have begun to turn, there is no stopping them) (Rist, 2019). This widely held view is a universal way of looking at all of human history. Through instrumental rationality, technologies, and materialistic ideologies based on decades of growth-oriented politics, society has accepted this view of history as limitless. This results in time being seen as both *continuous and infinite*. In turn, this perception creates a certain political culture around time, which leads to the construct of *permanent* time (an unlimited window for political action to have an effect). The way in which we experience time feeds into the notion of *duration* as an everlasting period of time. In western democracies, the discourse and processes of political decision-making are traditionally rooted in the metanarrative of eternal human history. Politics facilitates the idea that humans are connected to the course of history, by giving *meaning* to the constant succession of events. Logical relations are essential in constructing our view of time, giving it direction and intelligibility (Arendt, 2007). The concept of duration represents the belief in political actors' unlimited ability to barter in relation to the goals and circumstances of their actions.

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## **Finitude becomes apparent. Ecological constraints and technological threats**

On the threshold between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, a series of questions emerged about the breakdown of coordination between the natural and social timescales. This leads us (or should lead us) to think about constructing a 'political culture of the limits of human fate' (Chesneaux, 1996: 48). Now, as increasing attention is being paid to *nature* and *matter*, we are beginning to see that the political view of time described above, in which human society is so firmly grounded, is inaccurate. This reveals the fundamental *chasm* between the way in which we think of politics (over the long term) and the material reality, which demands to be addressed in relatively short order. The material reality includes ecological phenomena (such as runaway climate change, energy shortages, resource exhaustion, a sixth mass extinction event, poisoning of the environment, and so forth), and social ones (burgeoning social inequality, widespread surveillance, wars over resources such as Iraq's crude oil, etc.). Precisely because of this misconception of time as infinite, based on the idea of humanity's continuous and infinite progression towards an optimum achieved through voluntaristic policy (on technical and moral levels), modern societies have overseen such alienation in the interactions between humans and the natural world that, now, the very conditions which support human life on this planet are coming under threat.

This observation leads us to propose a slight revision of the political construct of time, based on the concept of a *fast-closing window*. The underlying idea is that, for societies which so voraciously consume energy and materials, there will soon *no longer be* any long term to speak of. The concept stems from the realisation that our world can no longer be built on a succession of different ways of organising which, while one apparently gives way to the next, all ultimately have enduring consequences. Today's societies are paying the price for yesterday's decisions (nuclear threats, environmental pollution, etc.), whose *inertial* effects are placing increasing pressure on the Earth system. Thus, we need to reconsider our relationship with time, thinking of it as limited rather than infinite. The concept of a dwindling timeframe is the logical extension, when we accept the idea of finitude, and acknowledge the irreversible thresholds our societies have crossed. The limited timeframe is a more appropriate means of measuring time, in view of the ecological and technological pressures we face. The emergency looming over us has become an unavoidable point of reference (Villalba, 2016).

The concept of a closing window is rooted in the work of German philosopher Günther Anders (2006b, pp. 247-314). 1945 represents a definitive turning point in human history. Up until that point, time had the potential to be endless; thereafter, we have been living with the ever-present threat of annihilation (ever-present, but non-specific and unknowable). With the detonation of the nuclear bomb, the world moved into what is known as 'the end times': 'In "the end times" means in that age when, every day, we could bring about the end of the world. – "Definitively" means that, for all the time that is left to us, it will always be "the end times". No longer can another time come about: the end times will end only with our end' (Anders, 2006a: 116). The notion of *duration* becomes obsolete: humanity is labouring under a *deadline*, and can never more get out from under it (Anders, 2006a: 247-314). Thinking about time in terms of a closing window helps reconcile the need to make major decisions in the short term with the need to manage the long-term consequences of those decisions. The window represents a period of time that is *finite*, beyond which there is nothing but oblivion. Either annihilation occurs, or we somehow

manage to defer it, but the Sword of Damocles will forever be hanging over our collective heads.

This idea reveals one of the major temporal paradoxes afflicting modern societies. The emergency we now face has become something of a political leitmotif. Nevertheless, State authorities continue to think in relation to the long term, and act accordingly. Political authorities have recognised the skew between the timeframes on which nature and society operate; however, they still view it through a corrupting prism, failing to recognise the limitations of their own room for manoeuvre – their capacity to intervene. It is now imperative that we cease to view political timeframes through the lens of political projections (i.e. what we want). Rather, we must examine them realistically, in terms of the time remaining to us to enact policies which will ensure our own continued existence. We also urgently need a paradigmatic shift in the way democracy works: going forward, it must be *founded upon* and *integrated into* this new context (both temporal and material) of impending resource exhaustion.

### **Key features of the closing window**

- 1) The window of which we speak cannot be considered a hypothetical construct; it is a material *reality* in today's world. Reports on the threat of climate meltdown all emphasise that we have a very short timeframe in which to address the problem (less than a decade, according to the IPCC). The increased destructive capacity of the atomic bomb means that, at any moment, the very idea of time could lose all meaning.
- 2) The window does *not* represent a specific and inescapable *fateful day*, whose date is set in stone. Rather, it is the movable slice of time remaining before we pass certain points of no return. However, the clock is already counting down, as we face the threat of irreversible damage: climate change is part of our day-to-day reality.
- 3) The idea can also help us understand the *spatial* dimension of reality. In spatial terms, the shrinking of the timeframe is related to the material constraints on our world. Not only do we need to re-examine our relationship with time; we need to think of the sequence of time as a physical reality, in relation to a physical territory. In so doing, we can differentiate our responses to the narrowing window of time to take action; we can tailor those responses to what is appropriate in a given geographical context. Such a spatial interpretation could help tear down the barriers between planning and actually taking action. At international climate events, there is a tendency to push back any concrete action (instead, governments make commitments to make commitments!). Typically, island nations bewail this can-kicking, because for them, there is a very real physical significance to what is happening: their islands will end up underwater. Thus, they think of the timeframe for action in terms of the fate of their own territory.
- 4) The closing window represents a *reduction in the available options*. According to traditional political thinking, there are an infinite number of possible combinations of factors. For example, social contractualism (Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, among others) holds that the conditions in which actors associate with one another can constantly be renegotiated. In liberal democracy, all individuals have the ability to define themselves through their own unrestricted choices. However, faced with the threats of irreversible damage, we inevitably wonder whether that profusion of choice can possibly be maintained. We must implement realistic policies of choice, which take account of the

material world's capacity to sustain those choices. The implication is that gradually, as the window closes, the range of choices available to us is falling away. In turn, our reduced capacity for choice will limit the possibility for other choices to emerge.

5) The concept implies that ultimately, we will find ourselves facing *inevitable* situations. Conversely, the hypothesis of *duration* implies that the emergency can always be deferred: we will always be able to renegotiate or develop a new solution. The idea of a closing window stems from a catastrophist – or at least alarmist – political standpoint. From such a perspective, it is crucial to reorder the priorities which guide political actions. What are the fundamental values which must be safeguarded, not only to ensure that future generations *have* a future of which to speak, but also to serve the ideals of democracy?

6) The image of a closing window inevitably creates *anxiety*. Our inability to escape the ecological and technical constraints underlines how limited our ability to intervene actually is. Our days may be numbered, but we must make important choices. In order to do so, we need to leave behind the view of time which appeared to offer limitless new possibilities (for growth, innovation, etc.). Instead, we must begin continuously reassessing the time available to us (in full awareness of the dwindling scope for action). However, that anxiety may stimulate productivity, helping guide us to an appropriate response to the catastrophe we face (Hans Jonas, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, 2002).

### **Political perspectives on the closing window**

When we view the time-window in this way, it may seem as though politics and policy are toothless. How can we possibly take effective preventative action if, at this point, the mechanisms of irreversible change have already been triggered? However, by recognising the urgency of the threat, we give freedom to public decision-makers to take action. Such recognition can help reshape the way in which we relate to the future, and define the possibilities for effective action.

To begin with, *recognising the diminishing timeframe available is a political act in itself*, because it forces us to abandon a *conditional* view of the future, and adopt a *present-tense* approach to managing the climate emergency and the nuclear threat. Once we recognise the danger, we can no longer base our actions on an '*if*', but must act on the basis of a '*when*'. Decisions are no longer shaped by a context in which the threat could potentially be controlled indefinitely (the aforementioned '*if*' scenario, which often leads to delay after delay in reaching a decision). Instead, recognising the irreversible mechanisms already at work, we labour to prevent the consequences from becoming even worse (the '*when*' scenario). Hence, political action is no longer a matter of our intention (what we want), but of what it is possible to do, within the time remaining, to defer the danger. Thus, the idea of a closing window reframes the time we have to take action, based on an understanding of what is *essential*. If we have little time left to make a decision, then we must focus on what is truly significant from a collective point of view.

Next, it should be noted that the window means we can still *continually regulate the threats*, and in so doing, keep the window open. When we acknowledge the reality of the irreversible threats, we see that by taking action within the time available, we can constantly wrangle the contributing factors and address the dangers, to push back the tipping points as far as possible. Thus, the concept of a closing window is a useful decision-making tool, because it forces us to integrate longer-term consequences into our short-

term thinking. It therefore prevents us from putting off, for some distant future, the responsibility for dealing with the harmful effects of our present decisions (such as management of nuclear waste over thousands of years).

Consequently, the idea helps *transform democratic debate*. How can we come to decisions that are fair – i.e. which conform to an ideal of justice and solidarity that we wish to see perpetuated and extended across the globe? How can we pursue an emancipatory political agenda (driven by liberal individualism) whilst ensuring that we do not exceed the limits of what the planet can offer? Answers to these questions need to be found, in short order. They must be fair, for future generations as well as the present ones, and non-humans must be taken into account. Thus, we must think about the conditions for establishing liberal democracy: increasingly, our choices will be constrained by ecological factors (Villalba, 2017). Awareness of the closing window allows us to get ahead of this potential clash, by taking it into account in political debate and decisions made today.

Finally, on a theoretical level, the threat of running out of time to act *liberates the political imagination*. It opens the door to a school of political thought based on the prospect of drastic shifts – i.e. political action that considers the looming spectre of irreversible harm. Our thinking is freed from the *continuist hypotheses* (the idea of the long term, the 'if' scenario, etc.), allowing us to construct a relationship with the world as it actually is. Thus, we can envisage a different way of relating, politically, with non-humans (Pelluchon, 2021) and with the planet (Serres, 1995).

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