Taking Responsibility for Tomorrow: Remaking Collective Governance as Political Ancestors

Lily L. Tsai

In learning from older and past collective governance practices, we must design new institutions with an ethos that underscores our roles not only as descendants from past innovators but also as ancestors who have a responsibility to provide such legacies for the future. Governance archaeology can only realize its full moral and generative potential when it is practiced in a way that acknowledges our responsibility to future humans as well as past ones. This essay thus argues for the need to include future humans in the "we" of collective governance for distributive equity as well as procedural justice.

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We are in the process of failing to learn from history and to connect across time. As we wring our hands about the collapse of our institutions and the fraying of our social fabric, rather than putting our finest minds to work on analyzing the repertoire of ideas and practices that societies have crafted over centuries so that we may rejuvenate the ways in which we understand and organize ourselves, we instead steer our undergraduates toward "practical" majors. The Department of the Interior no longer has enough archaeologists to carry out its statutory responsibilities for stewarding the cultural resources contained in the lands they manage.[1] Doctorates awarded in history declined 15 percent in the five years between 2014 and 2019, a trend, which if linear, would entail the disappearance of history as a discipline in the next few decades.[2]

To arrest this collective atrophying, Federica Carugati and Nathan Schneider propose a new way of learning from the past, designed intentionally to support innovation for the future.[3] And to their credit, they have done far more than simply propose. Beyond these pages, Carugati and Schneider have spent several years creating a functioning prototype to embody and test their approach of *governance archaeology* in action. This prototype includes not only a database of collective governance practices but also a community and a process: a residency of innovators who interact with practices from the past to develop new and recombinant ideas while cultivating relationships of accountability to our political ancestors.

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https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_01986

Carugati and Schneider's emphasis on this ethos of ancestry, the acknowledgment of debt and responsibility that present humans have to past humans, paves the way for us to consider our relationship to future humans as well. As we seek to renew our institutions and practices for collective governance, the question I raise here is how should we include future humans in the "we" of the collective? Our tendency is to focus on the distributive justice of resource allocation across groups right now in the present. But, as the economist Robert Solow has reminded us, we have "an obligation to conduct ourselves so that we leave to the future the option or the capacity to be as well off as we are." We cannot "satisfy ourselves by impoverishing our successors."[4]

But just as we care less than ever about the past, we literally discount the future. At the institutional level, governments apply a discount rate to calculate the benefits and costs of different policy options that take place over time. We use this rate to adjust for resources that we think are more valuable today than in the future because we either prefer to consume them today rather than wait, or because we could be earning a positive return on invested resources. What this means is that we make decisions primarily on what we as present humans find more valuable, something that discomfits even our politicians and bureaucrats. As guidance to federal agencies under the Obama administration noted, "Special ethical considerations arise when comparing benefits and costs across generations. Although most people demonstrate time preference in their own consumption behavior, it may not be appropriate for society to demonstrate a similar preference when deciding between the well-being of current and future generations."[5]

For many, a sense of the future is eroding at the individual level as well. When we are optimistic about what the future looks like, it is easier to value it more highly. But even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a 2015 Pew survey found that fewer than half of Americans expressed "quite a lot" of confidence in the future of the United States, substantially lower than in the 1970s.[6] Increasingly, people are tired of moving fast and breaking things, of fetishizing disruption and novelty, of devaluing the incremental creation of long-term value.[7] In our everyday lives, on top of global crises and social dislocations, the ephemerality of content and communication through social media – where interactions exist for a moment and then are gone – reinforces a feeling that things are fleeting. When we do not know what we can count on in a year, to say nothing of what things might look like in twenty years, how do we ask people to sacrifice even more of what they have in the present for an uncertain future?

Here, I argue, Carugati and Schneider's governance archaeology stands to play an important role in cataloging and characterizing examples of societies that have answered this question. Can we expand their approach so that it also includes data on when communities have created institutions that allocate resources to future humans? Can their database include whether communities with collective gov-

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ernance have defined the collective to include future humans, or given future humans a representative voice in decision-making about the community's resources? Such data can help us understand how to design collective governance that upholds distributive justice across *time* – justice in terms of whom the governance is *for* – and whether to do so by creating a kind of procedural justice representing multiple generations – justice in terms of whom the governance is *by*.

There is evidence that people can do and have done better at creating practices and institutions that consider future humans as part of the collective they govern. We have examples that exist now, which can help us understand the political processes that lead to solutions. Norway's Petroleum Fund invests significant parts of its North Sea oil rents explicitly for future generations.[8] In Wales, the 2015 Well-Being of Future Generations Act established a Future Generations Commissioner.[9] While not as powerful as the fictional Ministry of the Future imagined by Kim Stanley Robinson, this office is charged with monitoring and assessing government agencies on whether they are compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.[10] The political philosopher Dennis Thompson has proposed a system of "democratic trusteeship" with mechanisms such as posterity impact statements that governments would be required to issue to justify any adverse effects their actions might have on the democratic capacities of future citizens.[11]

But these ideas are only realized when present people actually care about future people. How have societies built a regard for and a relationship between present and future people? Some societies, interestingly, seem to have done so through language, with research showing that speakers of languages in which there is little distinction between present and future verb tenses show behaviors with lower discount rates for the future. Compared with speakers of languages with a clear difference between present and future tenses, they are more likely to save for retirement and less likely to smoke. Countries where the majority of the residents speak languages such as Finnish, Japanese, and German save on average 6 percent more of their GDP per year.[12]

In collecting data on the mechanisms and culture of collective governance, we need to expand Carugati and Schneider's conception of governance archaeology to include the practices humans have used to inculcate emotional connections to future humans as part of the collective that they govern. What narratives and norms lead farmers in the *dehesa* system of southwestern Spain to plant oaks that will never produce an acorn in their lifetime?[13] "Cultural services," a team of environmental scientists concludes, "are the key ecosystem services of *dehesas*."[14] Reflecting on the Canterbury Cathedral, 365 years in the making, sociologist Robert Scott notes that "the long time required to build Gothic cathedrals added to the depth of the collective identity they engendered. It almost seemed to serve

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their purpose that they should not be completed too quickly."[15] Cathedrals built communities, Scott argues, not the other way around. Lineage and temple organizations in southern China oversee, on one hand, public works such as irrigation infrastructure and road construction that are built over generations and, on the other hand, rituals to reinforce communal obligations to ancestors and descendants. It is not clear which activities serve which. There is often a temptation to view these organizations as primarily religious and traditional. But some villages that never had them in the past invented them anew in the 1990s and 2000s in order to develop institutions for maintaining infrastructure that requires investment over multiple generations, manifesting a kind of layperson's governance archaeology.[16] Can we bring this spirit of invention to our own contexts?

It may be that caring for a physical place – managing its common pool resources or maintaining infrastructure built over multiple generations – enables people to feel a part of something bigger than themselves or their immediate group, bigger not across space but across time, and motivates them to design the cultural traditions and governance institutions that sustain this feeling. Indeed, the global commons of collective governance practices envisioned by Carugati and Schneider could itself become one of these infrastructures or common resources that fosters in us a sense of community spanning time as well as space as we maintain and contribute to it. Behavioral scientist Trisha Shrum has also experimented with ways of encouraging people to see themselves as caretakers for future generations. Her nonprofit, Dear Tomorrow, enables people to send a letter to someone important in 2050 – a child, say, or their future self – about the actions they have taken today to make the world safer and healthier. For those who believe climate change will negatively impact their children, Shrum finds writing a letter to the future increases donations for climate change mitigation by 22 percent compared with those in a control group who hold the same beliefs.[17]

The danger of exploiting the cultures providing inspiration for governance innovators today is among the thorniest of challenges with which Carugati and Schneider wrestle. What does it mean for us to benefit fairly from the work of past humans? Carugati and Schneider advocate for recognizing our indebtedness to these political ancestors, for acknowledging their labor and the value of their work to ourselves, as well as to their direct descendants. This is certainly part of the answer. We should indeed seek to avoid cultural appropriation by cultivating relationships of accountability to the legacies from which we learn.

But we can do more than that. We can also cultivate relationships of responsibility to our own descendants. We can strive to be worthy of their indebtedness to us. If ancestors, as Carugati and Schneider note, should be an "active source of meaning," we must make ourselves such sources of meaning for people in the future looking back at us and our institutional artifacts.[18] Upholding a norm of reciprocity allows us to respond in kind and avoid exploiting past humans for our

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own personal gain. We cannot give back directly to our ancestors, but we can contribute to a system of generalized reciprocity by investing in innovations, practices, and physical and social infrastructure that enrich not only ourselves but our descendants.

Carugati and Schneider are right that we need our political ancestors more than ever. But we must also recognize that we have more of an obligation than ever to provide for our descendants. Unless we use the legacies from the past to create wealth, health, and justice for the future, we squander our inheritance and reproduce the problem of privilege. Only by acknowledging our responsibility to future humans as well as past ones can governance archaeology fully realize its moral and generative potential.

Unlike other animals, humans have the ability to imagine the future, to "pre-experience" it "by simulating it in our minds."[19] Innovation for collective governance in which the "we" spans across time as well as space requires policy and political will, as well as processes of imagination. Speculative fiction, as Ursula K. Le Guin observes, enables us to see that, "It doesn't have to be the way it is."[20] Governance archaeology can show us that there have been, and therefore can be, different ways not only of how we govern ourselves but of defining who "we" are.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am grateful to Edward Young for comments on an earlier draft and to BreAnne Fleer for invaluable editorial assistance.

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ENDNOTES

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