



More in
Common

The Endless Sea

Imagining a Story
of Tomorrow

Executive Summary

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ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

The Endless Sea project is led by More in Common, an initiative set up in 2017 to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. Our teams in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government to connect people across the lines of division. For more information, please visit www.moreincommon.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With grateful thanks to our colleagues and friends for their assistance, insights and encouragement.

Conleth Burns, Elisa Colton, Luca de Biase, Theodora Delavault, David Djaïz, Stephen Hawkins, Jazmin Kreimer, Christiana Lang, Victoire Maurel, Noelle Malvar, Paul Oshinski, Taran Raghuram, Will Somerville, Daniel Yudkin

And with special thanks to Laurence Tubiana and all those at the European Climate Foundation who supported this project.

This paper, the case histories mentioned, and other resources are available at
www.theendlesssea.com



This project has been funded with support from the **European Climate Foundation**, who is not to be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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As the world reels from the impact of COVID-19, many long for unity, common purpose and decisive progress on issues from climate to inequality and democratic governance, but a majority of people don't believe that the current system can provide that. Part of what is missing to bridge this 'hope gap' is a new mobilizing narrative that can tap into people's desire for both unity and progress and restore a sense of agency in a time of increasing uncertainty. What is needed is a narrative moonshot able to make people "yearn for the vast and endless sea" to quote the author of 'The Little Prince': This is a vision of a fair and sustainable future that meets the aspirations of a wide majority.

If we look around, however, the prevalence of negative narratives seems overwhelming. Negative stories capture our attention more easily, they activate the reptilian brain, suggesting fight or flight. A big switch from negative to positive is necessary for whoever wants to generate a real desire for change, but the truth is that, in the immediate instance, it almost always produces a drop in energy. Whether in a bookstore, a movie theatre, on Twitter, or in a political meeting, dystopian visions and negative narratives of the future trump optimism and positivity. Those who try to advance the latter are often met with polite indifference.

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Producing positive messages and narratives is not particularly difficult in and of itself. The real challenge is ensuring that these messages have enough energy to first capture attention, and then actively mobilize the very people these narratives seek to engage directly. For this reason, the first stage of our Endless Sea project explored a series of recent cases of groups and movements that have managed to overcome the problem of that drop in energy produced by the switch from negative to positive.

While our goal with this project is to bring new voices into the conversation, we have drawn from a diverse set of cases

(all of which are available on www.theendlesssea.com) ranging from a small Swiss collective (Operation Libero) to a giant global movement (Fridays For Future), from a successful national campaign (Jacinda Ardern 2017) to an alternative festival in the US (Burning Man), passing through a municipal election (Istanbul 2019), a duo of activist pranksters (The Yes Men), a civic network (Nossas), a youth mobilization initiative (Le Sardine), another environmental movement (Sunrise), to the transformation of a single-issue party into a political force capable of running for the government of Europe's most powerful country (Die Grünen).

Based on the analysis of these cases, we have formulated a list of six factors, which we have chosen to call "intensifiers", that make it possible to achieve the big switch from negative to positive without losing energy, but rather generate a new form of it.

Intensifiers

1—The Fun Factor

Fun is a serious matter. A true sense of play and a renewed ability to celebrate being together in a joyful way are indispensable ingredients for anyone willing to build a shared vision of the future. It is no coincidence that the latest research carried out by More in Common, among the group of the so-called French “Left Behinds”, has revealed a deep longing among them for gatherings and communal events (national festivals, school and village festivals, professional festivals). These are seen as an opportunity to “get out of one’s daily life and meet different people, from different social and cultural backgrounds”.

Games and parties, however, do not only serve to strengthen the collective bond in the present but serve, perhaps most significantly, to free the future. To shake off that sense of inevitability that governs such a large part of our lives and to put imagination and desire back at the center. Many of the most successful movements of recent years, from Sunrise in the United States to Operation Libero in Switzerland, are based on the ability to mobilize their supporters in a playful way that releases positive energies.

2—Prefiguration: A Future You Can Touch

Change requires a considerable effort of imagination, not only to conceive the future, but also to make it tangible. Conferring a physical dimension to the future, embodying it in collective and concrete objects and experiences, is one of the ways to overcome the loss of energy that accompanies the Big Switch from negative to positive visions of the future.

We have reviewed a wide range of examples, from artistic activism practices (The Yes Men) to theme parks (KidZania), that have been able to produce a powerful impact on people’s imaginations by bringing the future to life.

3—The Energy Of Transgression

One of the main drivers of recent political developments in most European countries is rage. Rage against the establishment and, in particular, rage against traditional political ‘elites’. That’s why an element of transgression with respect to the rules and the established order is almost always present in the movements that have been more successful in recent years.

This is true of national-populist movements, but it is also true of movements that go in a completely different direction. Fridays For Future would not have been as successful, and Greta Thunberg would not have become a global icon, if she hadn’t made the radical choice to transgress the order of adult society, refusing to go to school on Fridays and instead taking to the streets to demonstrate for the future of the planet.

4—The Narcissist As Changemaker

Statistics tell us that every year, in Europe as well as in the United States, risky selfies claim more victims than terrorism: more people lose their lives trying to portray themselves in a risky pose, than they do as victims of terrorist acts. Leaving aside the most extreme cases, what is clear is that the permanent need to put oneself on stage has changed our position in the world. Scholars who observe this phenomenon tend to focus on its most harmful aspects. But behind the generalized aspiration to be the protagonist of one's own film, there is a need for recognition, a desire to recover a form of agency over one's own life, which cannot be underestimated.

This is why movements that succeed in mobilizing powerful energies around a project of change are those that answer the questions of readers of the unlikely bestseller "Burn After Writing": "What is my role in this story? What can I do, here and now?"

5—No Ordinary Heroes

Those who want to inspire change know that it's not just the story you tell that counts, nor is it just how you tell it. It is also, or perhaps, above all, *who* tells it. In a context of information overload, we use trusted messengers as mental shortcuts to decide whether information is worthy of our trust and attention. Moreover, in an atmosphere of strong polarization, while most people mistakenly believe that using facts in political discussions helps to foster mutual respect, research shows that personal experience is a much more effective tool. The problem being that facts – at least today – are themselves subject to doubt, while first-hand experiences have "an aura of unimpeachability".

In all fields, "unlikely heroes", have become the most effective role-models. These are ordinary people that have been confronted with sometimes extraordinary circumstances. This is why Richard Curtis, director of "Four Weddings and a Funeral" and "Bridget Jones's Diary", when putting his talents at the service of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, refrained from turning to celebrities, and instead made a series of short films dedicated to the exploits of ordinary people. His "Project Everyone" is based on a claim that could not be clearer. "Today we create heroes of ordinary people with ordinary stories. Heroes who are making other heroes every day".

6—A New Kind Of Leadership

In fractured societies, in which it is not just different opinions that clash, but radically contrasting worldviews (and facts), empathy is an essential skill to help build emotional bridges between different groups. Unfortunately, the way it unfolds is that political competition in our countries tends to select mainly narcissistic leaders, whose dominant characteristic is the inability to feel empathy. For this reason, the rise of a new generation of female leaders, all of whom possess a core emotional intelligence, mixed with optimism and reliability, is a welcome antidote to the increasingly degraded political climate in many countries. It is not by chance that most of the movements we've examined in our case histories, from Operation Libero to Nossas, from Sunrise to Fridays For Future are led by women.

After the Pandemic, an Appointment with Ourselves

During the 90s and up until the mid-2000s – some consider the 2008 financial crisis the turning point – political competition was essentially policy-driven. Leaders and movements with different policy solutions faced each other: the neoliberal policies of Thatcher and of Reagan, the third way of Clinton and of Blair, and so on.

This does not mean that the political struggle was purely 'rational' at the time of course. Factors such as personal leadership, or reactions to unforeseen events played a decisive role even then. But the 'program' and the policies proposed were at the center of the debate, a context in which mainstream politicians found themselves perfectly at ease.

Since the end of the 2000s, however, the rise of 'identity politics' has displaced the mainstream, bringing to the forefront more demands for recognition from neglected groups who felt that their way of life was suffering. This type of demand has moved policies to the background, especially in view of the fact that much of what passes for economic motivation is actually rooted in the demand for recognition, and therefore cannot simply be satisfied by economic means.

With respect to these developments, the Covid-19 crisis is a potential turning point, it would be naïve, however, to think that it will coincide with a simple return to the golden age of mainstream politics. For, after the policy-driven competition of the past and the identity-powered politics of the last few years, our belief is that the next phase will belong to those who will be able to articulate an 'existential politics'. This will be able to address the question of meaning and agency that mainstream politics has abandoned by taking refuge in technocratic answers, and to which identity movements consistently respond in divisive and often regressive forms.

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The health crisis has put the emphasis back on our daily lives. Not on abstract principles, not on ideological divides, and not even on ethnic or religious identities, but first and foremost on the simple and complicated conditions of everyday life.

After the pandemic, we have an appointment with ourselves. What have we learned? What activities, suspended during the pandemic, do we want to cease forever? And which activities do we hope can be developed, or reinvented? It is German philosopher Hans Blumenberg, who said that we have to ask ourselves again what it actually was that we promised ourselves. That is the starting question for politics, and for us as people.

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What is needed is a narrative that goes beyond abstract policy objectives – such as ‘fighting climate change’ or ‘reducing inequality’, ‘regulating big tech’ or ‘reforming democratic institutions’. Instead, it must be focused on the existential perspective of individuals and communities, shaped by the constant and obsessive goal of restoring a sense of control over their lives. An issue that does not only concern the left-behinds of globalization and other peripheral subjects, but that has to do with the modes of existence of each of us in an age of hyper-stimulation and uncertainty.

What form would a political program based on the “extraordinarily redemptive potential of everyday life” take today?

In the last part of our report, we propose four threads (From Climate to Home / From Inequality to Dignity / From Online to Onlife / From Representation to Power) as a starting point for further discussion.

