The Idea of Projects in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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What can we learn from futures that never happened? This question drives my research into projects—concrete yet incomplete efforts to advance British society in a period defined by revolutions of finance and agriculture, the rise of experimental science, and the establishment of constitutional monarchy. Then, as now, the word "project" meant a proposal for action and the possibility of action itself. By "proposal" I mean a document drafted to make things happen, while "action" signifies the happening of those things through events like the enclosure of land, the construction of hospitals, and the founding of colonies. The Long Eighteenth Century saw thousands of endeavors called "projects," but relatively few materialized, leaving scores of defunct visions, from Daniel Defoe's attempt to farm cats for perfume to Mary Astell's proposal to charter a college for women. When a small number of ventures succeeded in fields like banking and postal delivery, their project status—their ability to come or not come into being—was typically forgotten, as uncertain endeavor hardened into the empirical fact of achievement. The project, I contend, remains an elusive concept today because it is always turning into something else or into nothing at all.

This essay, a précis of my book *The Wreckage of Intentions: Projects in British Culture, 1660-1730* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), argues that even un-enacted words mattered to the extent they both tested new ways of being a society and endowed their readers with the agency to make, and not just describe or react to, the here-to-come. A project could "benefit the world even by miscarriage," according to Samuel Johnson, who praised authors for charting original courses in commerce and statecraft no matter how feasible.[1] For us belated readers of eighteenth-century culture, projection records a constructive thinking through of possibility, even when those possibilities ultimately remain shut. I argue that re-reading old proposals uncovers the strategies of rhetorical persuasion, publication, and embodied action that made projection a unique and controversial cultural practice during early modernity. Such interpretive analysis can tell us how writers sought to make speculative endeavor seem plausible in the context of the future, and how such argumentation was (and remains) vital to the functions of statecraft, commerce, science, religion, and literature.

By interpellating present-day readers as residents of eighteenth-century Britain, old proposals invite us to believe in a certain idea of the future that is by now historical (or, more likely, counterhistorical). The expired scheme asks us to not know what is to come or, as Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer put it, to "play the stranger" to a world of enterprise whose fate we today know.[2] In this attempt to shake off presentism and rekindle the eighteenth-century projector's long-extinguished imaginary, my essay recalibrates some of the interpretive practices that we often bring to bear on this period. Since the archives of projection generated so much obvious failure, it would be no hard task to pick apart their contents, ridicule their assumptions, disprove their expectations, and unmask their

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[1] *The Adventurer*, October 16, 1753.
[2] *The Leviathan and the Air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 6.

profit motives. In short, one could bring to bear the full forces of ideology critique to un-cover projection's submerged commitments and presumptions of mastery. And when it is illuminating, scholars should indeed do this. However, I contend that we can do more than simply critique projects: we can also revive their former possibility by re-imagining what once was dreamt as a sign of that culture's understanding of itself and its capacity to change. Mine is a hermeneutics of salvage that gathers historical evidence in order to re-animate old enterprise. What this resuscitation contributes to eighteenth-century studies and culture studies more broadly is a demonstration of how to think with the past's inad-vertent posterity in the moment it tried to build an unknowable here-to-come that we are used to viewing through hindsight.

The specific past futures that I study originated between 1660 and 1730, a period when "project" retained longstanding associations with Caroline monopolists and parliamentary state building while amassing new connotations derived from discourses of science, fi-nance, exploration, and technology. I argue that projects became ubiquitous in these dec-ades, assuming a foundational role in the making of Anglophone culture that they did not previously possess nor have since relinquished. It was after the Restoration that projec-tion engendered an adequately broad and self-reflexive discourse for Defoe to declare it the spirit of his age.[3] By the 1720s, projects came to seem less like a notorious invention than an inevitable practice and unquestioned social fixture. While authors continued to debate the value of particular schemes, they were less prone to attacking the project itself as a vehicle for ambition.[4] Defoe's "Age of Projects" never really ended, though we have grown oblivious to its experience over the last three centuries. This book scrapes away the sediment of familiarity to remember the project as an eighteenth-century inheritance we use and inhabit daily.

In distilling my book manuscript's overarching claims, this essay attempts three things: first, it shows how project proposals present scholars with an opportunity to read the past through the futures its writers imagined. When read in light of their former po-tential, old plans, blueprints, and solicitations reveal a past in process. These writings can vitalize our conception of history by showing the impact of undertakings that were in-tended but unachieved. Even fantastical schemes for draining the Irish Channel and rais-ing silk worms in Middlesex challenge what Michael Andrew Bernstein calls the "tri-umphalist, unidirectional view of history."[5] Such teleological perspectives underwrite not only much-questioned "Whig" narratives positing constitutional monarchy as the zenith of British civilization, but also the tendency of eighteenth-century scholars to find in their period the birth and rise of empire, capitalism, the novel, the self, the public sphere, the nation, and enlightenment. It is not my aim to contest these claims of origin and upsurge, but to suggest that their preponderance reveals our desire to make the past a history of modernity—to find prefigurations of ourselves in the 1600 and 1700s. This pursuit

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[3] See *An Essay Upon Projects* (1697).

[4] One late eighteenth-century author still riled by the idea of projects was Adam Smith, who condemned projectors as fickle arbitrageurs, "a corn merchant this year, and a wine merchant the next, and a sugar, tobacco, or tea merchant the year after." *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: The Mod-ern Library, 2000), 131. Smith's friend, Jeremy Bentham, would refute this characterization by praising projectors as "a most meritorious race of men, who are so unfortunate as to have fallen under the rod of your displeasure." *Defence of Usury* (London: T. Payne, and Son, 1787), 132.

[5] *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 3.

founders upon projection, and the many thousands of schemes that failed to create recognizably modern institutions and practices. While the proposals I examine invariably aspire to progressive ideals (to rise, discover, enlighten), their history is riddled with commercial busts, epistemological cul-de-sacs, and abandoned infrastructure. Projects simultaneously harbored the possibility of improvement and debris. They manifested forward-looking intention but also anticipated a form of wreckage incongruous with the grand historical narratives we have constructed to explain this era.

The archives of early modern projects reveal a society simultaneously making and unmaking itself through the ongoing generation of chancy schemes. I suggest that this unmaking has a rhetorical form and material history. Failed enterprises encapsulate what Reinhart Koselleck calls "since-superseded future," a never-experienced temporality that can ventilate a past thick with multiple possibilities, including un-enacted plans that undercut progressive accounts of human development.[6] Projects not only instance since-superseded futurity, but constitute one of this imaginary ontology's most fundamental and observable units. Old projects reframe the past as an ongoing "present" brimming with former potential. Inhabiting this past is, according to Michael Bernstein, "not merely to reject historical inevitability as a theoretical mode . . . it means learning to value the contingencies and multiple paths leading from each concrete moment of lived experience, and recognizing the importance of those moments not for their place in an already determined larger pattern but as significant in their own right."[7] Bernstein and Gary Saul Morson use the term sideshadowing to refer to interpretive modes that admit not just "actualities and impossibilities," but also "a *middle realm* of real possibilities that could have happened even if they did not."[8] In this spirit, my research surveys some of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain's paths untaken or not fully taken. It traces what Herbert Butterfield, arch-censor of teleologies, calls the "crooked and perverse . . . ways of progress," while rejecting the notion that progress need always be found.[9] In dwelling upon what Morson calls the "presentness of the past," I propose the project's evocation of past presentness as a means of unstreamlining the histories we inherit and make.[10]

Secondly, my essay argues that project writing spurred the innovation of eighteenth-century literary forms. Projectors' conjuring of the future engrossed poets, playwrights, and novelists in the late 1600 and early 1700s, whose creations usually illuminated the fissures between the conception and realization of schemes. An itch for projects afflicted literary personas ranging from Milton's Beelzebub, who upbraids the Congress of Pandemonium for "projecting Peace and Warr," to Richardson's Clarissa, who begs "that I may not be sacrificed to projects," but succumbs to Lovelace, who exclaims "success in projects is every thing." Literary authors made projection a salient theme at the same time they derived from proposals rhetorical strategies for depicting the future in its uncertain potential. I demonstrate how projects furnished writers ranging from topographical poets

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[6] *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), xxiv.

[7] *Foregone*, 70.

[8] *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 6.

[9] *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965), 23. Walter Benjamin offers a similarly useful metaphor when he rejects the singular thread of universal histories "bound up with the notion of progress," in favor of a "frayed bundle unraveling into a thousand strands that hang down like unplaited hair," until gathered up by the historian ("Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History," IV.403).

[10] *Narrative*, 6.

to prose satirists with generic models for advocating and repudiating new ways of being a society.

A number of literary authors conceived of their compositions *as* projects, acknowledging their participation in the speculative economies that resembled those they mocked. Jonson's *Devil is an Asse* (1616) appears to condemn project-crazed Jacobean court culture when it renders Meercraft a contemptible villain. But then, in the epilogue, Jonson refers to his play as "a Project of mine owne," framing his dramatic authorship as its own enterprise of public entertainment, social reform, and profit potential."[11] Of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Andrew Marvell reflected "I lik'd his Project, the success did fear."[12] Projects in the 1600 and 1700s were both a popular theme in writing and a metaphor for understanding authorship as its own enterprise for accruing fame and righting an imperfect society.

Finally, my essay models a practical approach to investigating projects, a concept so ubiquitous in western society that it resists historical particularization and cultural analysis. I demonstrate that the project is most readily grasped as a history-bearing idea when divided into four stages: the articulation, circulation, undertaking, and reception of ideas for new enterprise. Project authors composed persuasive arguments to render their schemes plausible and attractive. They worked alongside stationers to disseminate new proposals through print. They enacted written designs through performances known as undertakings. Finally, these attempts at reforming society stimulated public response. The eighteenth-century idea of projects encompassed acts of writing, print, performance, and literary invention. Therefore, my approach combines techniques of rhetorical analysis, book history, performance theory, and genre criticism to illuminate the multi-faceted phenomenon of eighteenth-century projection, from some of the era's most ephemeral schemes to a few of its most enduring.

Although I focus on eighteenth-century Britain, my research poses questions that also pertain to the present. My book manuscript pursues an idea of discrete design and futuristic forecast that is omnipresent today in the form of art projects, dissertation projects, housing projects, infrastructural super-projects, and countless projects in private self-fashioning. The term is undeniably vital to modern society but also often ungraspably abstract, proliferating within managerial modes of thought as well as philosophical discourses ranging from Heideggerian ontology to Freudian psychoanalysis. Projection's idiom has proven so resilient that it threatens to impede investigation by conflating the object of study with the instruments of its analysis.[13] In this vein, Georges Bataille grudgingly conceded that projection had become an insuperable employment of modern philosophers when he described his *Inner Experience* as a "projet contre projet," a manifesto for "existence without delay" that ironically (but inevitably) took form as a book project.[14] Given this problem of immersion, a theoretical goal of my research is to establish the project as an investigable form. In looking back to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, I seek to dislodge an aspect of present experience so given we hardly no-

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[11] (London: 1641), 66.

[12] *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 192.

[13] The word "system" poses similar challenges of ubiquity to Clifford Siskin, who claims that "we have forgotten that system, like the novel, *is* a genre and not just an idea - it's a form of writing that was crucially important to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries." See "Novels and Systems." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 34.2 (Spring 2001), 202.

[14] *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Ann Boldt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), xiii.

tice it. My goal is to show how "project" became the primary term for endeavor-in-progress during the 1700s, and an idea that continues to shape possibilities of thought and experience today.