



Covid-19 and the politics of hope: A comparative analysis of Greek and Ecuadorian letters from a desired post-pandemic future

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 forced changes in everyday life upon large sections of the world's population, with lockdowns and social distancing measures effecting conditions of work and leisure for billions of people. In this context our research created a space in which people living in countries in Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Africa were invited to imagine what the future could look like – beyond the pandemic – by writing a *Letter from the Future*. In this paper we examine what these letters show about one particular relationship between the present and the future: a relationship of hope. In the context of major crises, and the complex experiences of loss they involve, the possibilities for hope becomes an urgent issue. We analyse a selection of responses from participants between 18 and 35 years-old, from Ecuador and Greece, to address two questions: (1) Do these letters express hope? (2) If so, in what ways is this hope political? Our answers to these questions have implications for understanding the nature, possibilities and politics of hope at times of crisis. They also have implications for futures studies: indicating the potential value of embedding the *Letters from the Future* method in a range of research contexts.

1. Introduction

Covid-19 forced changes in everyday life upon large sections of the world's population, with lockdowns and social distancing measures effecting conditions of work and leisure for billions of people. There was much talk of getting back to 'normal'. This was the promise of the vaccine, and the reward governments held out to their populations in return for compliance with unprecedented public health measures. Yet the disruption to established ways of doing things also created the opportunity – and the need – for considering how life could be lived differently, and whether a return to 'normal' was desirable.

In this context, our research deliberately created a space in which people living in a range of countries in Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Africa were invited to imagine what the future could look like: in particular, to imagine a desirable future. As futures studies research demonstrates, imaginings of desired futures primarily tell us about the present, whilst potentially opening possibilities for new actions in the future. In this paper we are specifically interested in what these imaginaries show about one particular relationship between the present and the future: a relationship of *hope*. In the context of major crises, and the complex experiences of loss they involve, the possibilities for hope becomes an urgent issue (Gross, 2020).

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has a unique focus on *everyday* imaginaries, which is distinct from other foresight and visioning exercises currently undertaken by professional futurists. It offers a collection of papers to illuminate these everyday imaginaries from a deeply interdisciplinary approach. (For further details, see the special issue methods supplement and editorial essay.) Our research questions for this paper were: do personal imaginations of a desirable post-Covid future express hope, and if so, in what ways is this hope political? Based on our analysis, we reflect on the implications of our findings for understanding the nature, possibilities and politics of hope at times of crisis, and of young people's hope in particular. We also reflect on the implications for futures studies: indicating the potential value of embedding the *Letters from the Future* method in a range of research contexts.

2. The politics of hope

2.1. *The need to address hope*

In the context of the 2008 financial crisis, the political shocks and disruptions of right-wing populism, and the sustained threats of environmental crisis, a growing range of books and articles has addressed the difficulty – and the need – to imagine the future in new ways. Such texts are not only academic research but also more popular publications (Manson, 2019; Whyman, 2021). With Covid-19, the challenge and necessity of imagining new futures, and of telling new collective stories, only became more urgent. The question of how to 'Build Back Better', and what a 'post-Covid recovery' should look like were matters of wide public and political debate internationally: and within this context, the language of 'hope' – in some countries – took on a prominent role within political discourse (Gross, 2021).

Hope has been a concern of psychological research for some time (Snyder, 1994). Long before this it was a topic for theologians (Pope Francis, 2017). But whilst philosophers have examined hope (Bloser & Stahl, 2020), cultural theorist Terry Eagleton observes that "it has been a curiously neglected notion in an age which, in the words of Raymond Williams, confronts us with 'the felt loss of a future'." (Eagleton, 2015: xi) Moreover, as youth sociologist Julia Cook observes, "in contrast to fears and anxieties, the concept of hope has often been minimized in studies of the future" (Cook, 2016: 519). There has, however, been an increasing concern with hope within some areas of social science, with Kleist and Jansen going so far as to indicate a "veritable explosion" of interest in the topic since the turn of the millennium (Kleist & Jansen, 2016: 373). The reason for this, they suggest, is precisely because of an increasingly widespread experience of disorientation and despair: raising the need to understand what hope is, and what makes it possible. (See also Han & Antrosio, 2020).

2.2. *What Is hope?*

Much of the philosophical literature characterises hope as the combination of a desire for an end or object, and a belief in its possibility. Nancy Snow refers to this as the "'bare bones' conception or 'belief-desire' model of hope." (Snow, 2018: 409). However, Adrienne Martin adds a third component, suggesting that amongst philosophers and psychologists who take an 'analytic' approach:

a rough consensus has recently emerged, that hope has three primary component parts: first, a belief that the hoped-for outcome is possible but not guaranteed; second, a desire or preference for that outcome; and some third thing that amounts to a positively-toned "what-if" attitude toward a future containing that outcome. (Martin, 2020: 232)

Importantly, hope is premised upon uncertainty. Hope is located within the "realm of possibility and probability" (Govier, 2011: 242). In conditions in which a future is known to be either certain or impossible, hope is not an option. Desire for an imagined but uncertain future, however, comes in many varieties. Trudy Govier offers a series of dichotomies, including specific / general hope, high hopes / faint hopes, conscious hope / unconscious hope, and individual hope / social hope (Govier, 2011: 245–246). As these distinctions indicate, hopeful orientations towards the future can be experienced and exercised in many ways: sometimes consciously and actively articulated and pursued, at other times experienced quite passively, even unconsciously. Hope is a collection of orientations towards the future ranging from very specific and articulated visions, to very vague and 'felt' anticipations. In each case, however, a hopeful relationship to the future is one in which an anticipated future condition is taken to be desirable and possible, but not guaranteed.

2.3. *In what ways can hope be 'political'?*

Philosopher Stan van Hooff suggests that we can only hope for outcomes that we cannot bring about "entirely by our own efforts" (Van Hooff, 2011: 20). This is a variation on the point that hope is premised upon uncertainty. However, there are many potential reasons why an outcome may be beyond the powers of our own efforts to bring about. The outcome may be dependent on luck, such as buying a lottery ticket; or on the choice-making of specific other people – such as a job interview. Or the outcome might lie beyond the scope of one's own efforts because the desired future is a shared, social or political situation, which necessarily involves and requires the actions of many different actors. As philosopher Titus Stahl indicates, it is for this reason that politics is a domain of human activity in which there should be no surprise that hope is a significant consideration. The philosophical literature on hope often focuses on people's desires for outcomes that affect them personally, he suggests. But people's hopes frequently extend far beyond themselves, and "social outcomes are typically achievable only by collective action and are therefore constitutively beyond the control of the individual" (Stahl, 2020: 265). Hope, then, is an attitude towards the future which, although experienced within many contexts of life, has a particular relationship with politics as a domain in which outcomes are far beyond the agential powers of individual actors alone.

As noted above, in recent years there has been a growth of interest in hope within the social sciences. This is partly due to the prominent role that hope has played within political rhetoric. From Obama's *Yes We Can* to Trump's *Make America Great Again*, and from the Brexit campaign's *Take Back Control* to the "grand story" of The Green New Deal (Klein, 2019), hope is central to political storytelling (Gross, 2019). It is partly the degree of uncertainty that attends large scale political projects that explains "the regular appearance of the language of hope in political rhetoric" (Stahl, 2020: 265). Moreover, as Stahl observes, rhetorics of hope seem to be "especially powerful in situations where public trust in the expertise of purely technocratic policymakers is in decline and where there is a feeling that citizens themselves must effect the change they are seeking" (Stahl, 2020: 265). Stahl offers the first presidential election campaign of Barack Obama as the most high-profile recent example of this, along with subsequent "post-crisis" European election campaigns in the wake of the 2008 credit crunch, in which the edifice of technocratic neoliberal governance was shattered. In situations in which existing modes of political process appear to have broken down, the language of hope may come to the fore as part of an attempt to renew faith in politics as such, via the mobilisation of new modes of political action: such as grassroots involvement, or populist leadership and policies.

There should be no presumption, however, that rhetorics of hope only serve 'transformational' goals. Why politicians might employ rhetorics of hope is indicated by anthropologist Lia Haro, writing, "Hopelessness never mobilises. All power relations that are not purely structures of total domination and oppression must stimulate and strategically channel individual and collective hopes somehow" (Haro, 2010: 188). She indicates that this makes hope a key site of political struggle, drawing a distinction – building on the work of Ernst Bloch (1986) – between hegemonic hope and insurgent hope. Within the conditions of late capitalism, she argues:

The 'thieves of hope,' to borrow a Zapatista phrase, must direct the common tendency to look toward the horizon and dream about different futures in ways that support the profitable order of things. In the process of chasing the canned futures promoted on commercial breaks, our hope is a willing captive to the future that is for sale. The promotion of a better, but not fundamentally different, world (through a myriad of different means) ensures the docility of subjects who will perpetually strive for improvement but only within the norms of the defining order. (Haro, 2010: 188)

Hope can close down as well as open up possibilities (and actions). This is part of its political significance. It can be "offered to those to whom the world is unable or unwilling to offer anything else" (Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019: 645), being used to subdue opposition, as, in some instances, "with hope, one can endure dispossession today in anticipation of a reward tomorrow" (Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019: 646). Rhetorics of hope lead people towards particular political possibilities, and away from others. In doing so, they can lead people away from their best interests, individually and collectively. For this reason – although by no means only for this reason – understanding the socio-political *conditioning* of hope, "why we hope differently, and what sorts of things influence how we come to hope" (Stockdale, 2019: 28), is highly consequential. Ethnographic work on "the political economy of hope" (Jansen, 2016: 448) has examined the conditions that influence what people hope for, and the extent to which they are able to hope at all. The political 'production' and 'distribution' of hope (Hage, 2016) can take many exploitative forms, and Ghassan Hage's anthropological work (Hage, 2003; Hage 2016) highlights the need to address how one group's hopes can be grounded in the exploitation of another's.

Hope, then, is far from politically neutral – and in understanding the possibilities for imagining desirable post-Covid futures, we need to pay close attention to hope's political dimensions. Drawing on the preceding literature review, in what follows we examine our participants' personal future imaginations to understand whether hope is expressed in these imaginations, and, if so, in what ways this hope is political. In doing so, we employ Martin's (2020) summary definition outlined above, operationalising the view that hope is constituted by (1) *a desire* – for an outcome, (2) *uncertainty* – a belief that this outcome is possible but not guaranteed, and (3) *imagination* – a positive 'what if' orientation to that possible future.

3. Methodology

This paper belongs to a larger project, to which this special issue is dedicated. The overall data consist of 277 letters from writers residing in 33 countries that were collected between April and July 2020, by deploying the *Letters from the Future* method. This is a creative writing exercise that aims to elicit a personal narrative in which a possible and desirable future is imagined as if realised (Sools, 2020; Sools, et al., 2015). Participants are instructed to imagine travelling to a desired future in a time machine, and to write a letter back to the present. Originating in health promotion, this approach was adapted by an interdisciplinary team with backgrounds in the humanities and social sciences, and affiliated with universities across Europe. Early in the pandemic, members of the team recognised Covid could be a double-edged sword. Alongside huge loss and suffering, the disruptive implications for health, social, and economic systems also seemed to open possibilities for making personal and systemic changes towards a more sustainable, equitable, and flourishing life on Earth. The project therefore asked: what is considered a possible and desirable future by lay people from various backgrounds, and how do they envision the pathway to (individually and collectively) reaching those futures? We regard this type of approach – data collection open to multiple contexts and scales of participants' desired futures, and multiple possible routes to achieving them – as specifically well-suited to investigating the political characteristics of people's hopes.

In this paper we focus on respondents between 18 and 35 years of age, and on a selection of letters submitted from two countries with contrasting political histories and contrasting experiences of Covid-19, Ecuador and Greece. We focused on this age group due to the particular challenges young people faced in exercising hope in the context of the pandemic (Nunn et al., 2021; Ravn, 2022), and in doing so build on the research team's previous work on young people and their capacities for hope (Verhoeven, et al., 2007; Gross, 2019). 'Generational' politics (Milburn, 2019) and how contemporary youth can imagine and shape their own futures (Gallagher, et al., 2020) is a matter of ever-growing significance – and the pandemic only exacerbated this trend. 35 years was chosen as the cut-off point for two reasons. Firstly, survey age-range categories typically have the second youngest group ending in the mid-30 s (e.g., 18 –

25, 26 – 35), and secondly for pragmatic reasons – as this threshold provided a suitably sized data set for the purposes of our analysis. Of the total letters written in Greece ($n = 67$), 31 were written by people aged 35 or younger: 26 female, four male, and one person identified as ‘other’. Of the total letters written in Ecuador ($n = 38$), 12 were written by people aged 35 or younger: all female.

Whilst these letters could be analysed in many ways, the two overarching research questions for this paper are, do these letters express hope? And, if so, in what ways is this hope political? For the purposes of analysing the data, the first of these questions was divided into two sub questions (1a and 1b), and the second into four (2a, 2b, 2c, 2d). “In what ways does this letter...”

1a)...demonstrate hope?

1b)...demonstrate despair, fatalism or hopelessness?

2a)...demonstrate hope for a return to ‘normal’, or the status quo ante?

2b)...demonstrate hope for change?

2c)...indicate how the desired future will be brought about? What are the processes, mechanisms or actions?

2d)...indicate who are the ‘actors’ by whom the desired future will be achieved?

We read each letter as a whole, and used Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software to code phrases, sentences or paragraphs. The data was initially analysed with six codes, corresponding to the questions above: ‘hope’, ‘despair’, ‘return to normal’, ‘change’, ‘mechanisms’ and ‘actors’. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then conducted within each of the six code groups, to draw out key themes. The findings from the Ecuadorean and Greek letters were then compared.

In presenting the following results, it is important to emphasise the kinds of knowledge claims we are making. Firstly, we are not making claims regarding the psychological states of the participants. We are analysing the letters as texts. As discussed further below, there is potential for combining *Letters from the Future* with other modes of data collection – including interviews, focus groups and ethnography – making possible different kinds of knowledge claim to those we are making here. Secondly, whilst we recognise there is, in principle, the possibility that participants approach the task ‘simply’ as a literary exercise, there is no reason to believe that our respondents treated the letters as a game – in which they produced content bearing no substantive relation to their actual views on the world. Previous uses of the method demonstrate how it generates data in ways that reflect people’s real experiences and views whilst also enabling creativity (Sools, et al., 2017; Triliva, et al., 2020). Indeed, the method deliberately invites creative – even playful – responses. The exercise is meant to open up possibilities, different ways of being in the world. For the preceding two reasons, in what follows we are not treating the letters as evidence of individual psychological states, but neither are we treating them as ‘simply’ literary exercises bearing no relation to the participant’s actual experiences and views. Instead, the letters are treated as imaginatively generated data offering a specific, carefully designed window onto participants’ creative relationship with post-Covid futures.

4. Findings

4.1. Do the letters demonstrate hope?

If hope has three components – a ‘what if’ or imaginative orientation to a particular future, belief in its possibility (but without certainty), and a desire for that future to come about (Martin, 2020) – to what extent are our sample letters hopeful? Applying Martin’s definition to the twelve Ecuadorean texts, we found ten contained depictions of a desired future, whilst two presented futures absent of desired aspects. However, even amidst the ten letters containing expressions of hope, almost all adopted an *ambivalent* orientation to their imagined future, “the simultaneous existence of positive and negative beliefs or emotions with regard to the same object” (Jonas, et al., 2000: 41). A desired future is imagined, but good outcomes are presented as inseparable from experiences of struggle and loss.

We can observe this, in the first instance, through the prominence in the Ecuadorean letters of hope for a future in which the authors and their loved ones have simply survived the pandemic. The writers often imagine a world in which they, their family and wider populations have come through, but at some cost. For example, a 19-year-old participant represents a future in which the world is now better placed to handle public health challenges as “[t]echnology has evolved in the medical field, and more time and resources have been invested in researching new diseases”. But people continue to wear masks, out of “fear” of catching diseases. (19 F) [19 F = 19-year-old female. F = Female; M = Male; O = Other gender.] Another participant writes to her daughter, “I can tell you with certainty that [...] the difficult [time] is over.” However, “there are things that were planted in our hearts such as mistrust and the thousand ways to keep ourselves clean, things that [...] have made this world something crazy but [which are] ultimately valid, because it keeps us safe.” (34 F).

The ambivalent hope of the Ecuadorean letters is also manifested in the incompleteness of the fulfilment of their wishes. In some cases, the positive characteristics of the imagined future are quite straightforward: surviving the pandemic. But in other letters the ambitions are greater, imagining, for example, a future Ecuador in which there have been largescale changes in social attitudes to the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities:

I am living in a slightly more conscious society but nevertheless we have not managed to completely abolish machismo and pollution, the two biggest problems in our current society, but I am hopeful that this generation will fight for its ideals as people who are not afraid to speak their mind. (18 F)

The country has only partially moved in a direction the author wishes. There is further to go, and big challenges remain. Moreover, aside from these developments, this author describes how the pandemic has created social and economic “havoc”, with the price of goods increasing and the minimum wage decreasing. Here, then, as in several of the letters with ambitions beyond mere survival, the imagined future is shaped by a mixture of benefits and losses brought by Covid.

In some letters, hope is located in the ‘lessons’ learnt as a consequence of the pandemic. Bad experiences and good possibilities are

intermixed – as it is in the challenges and sufferings of Covid that new options for the future are opened up. One participant writes to her daughter,

It was a very hard learning process in all aspects but we took some lessons. The important thing was to appreciate the best lessons. The children had to receive classes online and from here we could understand the value of a teacher. Of the professionals who are in charge of the future population to promote in them principles and passion for science. We learned that society took excessive advantage of nature and we learned that there is always a balance, and animals and natural resources are an important part of the planet just like us. The ingenuity of the human being can be infinite, but it must be known how to be used for good. (29 F)

Just two of the Ecuadorean letters offer a view of the future without any features presented as desirable. One is set in Rome, in which the city has lost all joy and vibrancy (35 F). The author explains they have set the letter in Rome “perhaps because that city is an accumulation of history”, implying that, in the context of Covid, human history itself has run out of vitality. In the other letter devoid of hope, the future is characterised by deteriorated environmental conditions, diminished social connection, and increased unemployment (35 F). With these two exceptions, each of the Ecuadorian letters imagines some possible, desired future. But these are *ambivalent* expressions of hope: imagining futures that are desired, but which are also marked by experiences of dissatisfaction, diminishment and loss.

Of the 31 Greek letters, 25 depicted the future as containing desirable features. As in the Ecuadorean sample, however, the hope in the Greek letters is characterised by ambivalence. This is manifested, in some cases, in the presentation of the human strength to withstand and recover. One author, for example, depicts herself telling tales about the pandemic to her future grandchildren:

It is a story that takes place in a shocked and devastated social milieu, full of masks and fears, yet love found its role bringing light, hope, and promoting connection. [...] I'll tell them about the moment the masks were removed, and people hugged tighter... Don't stop believing in a better world! Hope and love with your soul. No crisis can deprive you of love, dreaming and connecting. (27 F)

This letter anticipates the capacity of humans to survive and to recover, emphasising resilience grounded in human connection, whilst locating this within a “shocked and devastated milieu”. A similar future is imagined by a participant who says that human hearts are “soft” yet strong, and as such, “can withstand the blows and shocks of life” (25 F). In another Greek letter, resilience is located not only in the human heart, but in humanity’s place within nature. The author exits the time machine and walks through dense vegetation of “tall plants and flowers”, and is surrounded by “sounds of insects, especially bees”. The green oasis marks her departure from the pandemic: “in front of me, there is life and behind me, death” (20 F). In the context of great loss, here hope is expressed in the vitality of the natural world that characterises the future into which the author is moving.

Alongside these themes of resilience and revival, five Greek authors depict futures devoid of hope. Each of these imagines a future characterised by economic problems, pernicious technological incursions into human relationships, and limitations to human connection. For example:

The police are on every corner of the city, and monitoring is everywhere. [...] The movements of people are spasmodic and almost robotic. Everything is done with the help of technology, and human relationships have broken down, people live on their cell phones. They do not notice the poverty and misery of other people. Nature has been destroyed, and there are holograms of trees and animals. Life is miserable, depressing, odourless. (34 F)

But even in their pessimistic content, some of these letters do contain textual evidence of a specific mode of hope. They offer a warning “for the evil that is coming” (34 F), so that such a future can be avoided. As one participant puts it, writing to her younger self, “you knew the future would definitely not be rosy”, but “now you have the knowledge to change it for the better” (24 F). Consciousness-raising of this kind is as an expression of hope: highlighting the possibility and the need to change course. Even in some of these negative visions, then, the Greek letters point towards the possibility for desirable futures – through re-evaluating who we are, what we could be, and taking action.

4.2. Hope for change, or for a return to ‘normal’?

One of the Ecuadorian letters is written from a beach, a setting evoking a calmer, positive future. Addressing her younger self, the author says:

I know you must feel pretty trapped by the pandemic situation but try to hold on a bit. In the end a vaccine will be successful and will reach the family. A big relief for everyone. The whole family remained healthy thanks to the confinement and now two years later everything is as before. (35 F)

Here is the most direct statement within the Ecuadorian letters of a desire to return to the status quo ante. More common is an emphasis on change, and on one particular type of change in particular: *reassessing values and priorities*. This is a key theme across the letters from both Ecuador and Greece. For example, we saw in [Section 4.1](#) the extract from (29 F) emphasising that one of the central “lessons” of the pandemic is the re-prioritisation of what is valuable: re-appreciating teachers, science, loved ones and the natural world. As with several of the texts, here there is an emphasis on human relations with nature, and hope that the experience of the pandemic will recalibrate this relationship. Another Ecuadorian participant describes a series of changes in societal attitudes and priorities. People have:

changed their way of behaving and thinking, my generation no longer thinks about having children and prefers to adopt, and yes, finally the law passed which allows gay couples to adopt. Although the procedures are very long, at least there is hope, today's society is much more open-minded, we no longer discriminate against people because of their skin color or way of thinking, and this has been given thanks that, little by little, we have eliminated the social stigmas that have marked us for centuries. (18 F)

Whilst a small number of the Ecuadorean letters explicitly express a desire for a return to 'normal', most – such as this one – articulate desire for change. As discussed further below, although in a few Equadorean letters the desired changes focus on particular policies or government agencies, more commonly it is reassessing human priorities and values, without explicitly relating this to political institutions.

A return to normal is articulated by seven Greek letters. Yet, only one depicts a return to normal as unambivalently positive. This writer explicitly states her desire to go back to how things were before the pandemic.

I sit on the balcony, and the city is full of life, of sounds. Cars, horns, children's laughter, adult voices arguing at the traffic light, and chirping of swallows can just be heard in the distance. I see the sun hitting my room hard and warming it, and the sky is blue. Spring is here. Everything seems to be working as usual. Like the coronavirus never existed. (27 F)

By contrast, the other participants who express desire for a return to the status quo ante indicate that such a return only exists partially, or on a surface level – and there are indications that a return to normal might not be for the better. In each of these seven letters, however, the authors emphasise that the pandemic is a great lesson that leads to positive changes in society. As one puts it, "When you lose things, you appreciate them more, and this is an excellent lesson that coronavirus left behind" (18 F).

Re-evaluation of what matters most in life is a key theme in both the Greek and Ecuadorian samples. In some texts, this centres on the author themselves and their sense of self-worth and self-understanding – resulting from more time to reflect during the pandemic. In other cases, processes of re-evaluation take place at a broader societal scale. For example:

We have become better people. Through all this, we have learned not to take anything for granted, no matter how small and insignificant it may seem to us. We have all learned to work together to prevent the worst. We learned to respect the people who worked hard while we were home. People in the health sector who struggled to save lives or those who continued to work tirelessly, exposed more than us, to better serve us. We also learned to respect nature, which was admittedly very happy with our absence. (18 F)

Many of the Greek participants imagine a future in which the pandemic has led to greater appreciation of nature and the need to preserve it. In some cases, this is accompanied by explicit statement of a new sense of shared responsibility and mutual care. As one puts it, "collectiveness has bolstered" (26 F).

Although most Greek letters situate themselves in the near future, six participants write from at least ten years beyond the present. (For detailed analysis of temporality in the *Letters from the Future*, see contributions to this special issue by [Grishakova, et al., 2022](#), and [Sools, et al., 2022](#)). In each of these six letters, the authors explore more radical and overtly political forms of change. While most letters displayed ambivalence, a text set in 2030 depicts a uniformly positive future in which there will be no war, love will triumph, and social inequalities, poverty and hunger will diminish or disappear. Everything changed with the help of "public bodies, nations, organizations, governments" (21 F). In another utopian letter, set in 3020:

Governments don't exist anymore. Humans have reached higher levels of consciousness, so there is no "stupid crowd" to be deceived by anyone. [...] Wealth is shared, the land provides what we need, technology and science are shared. We have what we need. Knowledge spreads faster than light. New planets, new species of animals, new forms of art are continually being discovered. (31 O)

Another participant expresses hope for a more democratic future, characterising the politics of the present day, 2020, as excessively authoritarian (19 F). In this letter, set one hundred years into the future, nature flourishes, food is shared, people live in harmony – and the Cuban political system, known for its communist commitments, is praised without any reservations. Other Greek letters from the far future, however, display more apocalyptic political projections, as in the following, from 2045:

Five years later, the vaccine was found to cause massive sterilization in 12 different countries. In charge of these vaccine batches, Bill Gates was not prosecuted because he escaped and was never found. Not to mention, as expected, the economic crisis that ensued is not over yet in Greece. Of course, especially if you consider that the European Civil War of 2026 has not stopped simmering. According to reports, Kim Jong-Un died. His sister allied and collaborated with the Chinese. They detonated nuclear weapons against the United States that, in turn retaliated. None of these countries exist anymore as you know them. (24 F)

Whilst the situations imagined through these far-future Greek letters contain some very 'negative' contents, they thereby sound a warning to the present. As indicated above, such consciousness-raising methods, highlighting the need to take action, can be understood as a particular mode of communicating hope. But whilst in those far-future letters there tends to be a more explicitly political and radical vision of change (both positive and negative), hope for change in the Greek sample – just like the Ecuadorian – does not primarily focus on reforming or revolutionising existing political institutions.

4.3. How will desired post-covid futures be achieved?

In many of the Ecuadorean letters there is an emphasis on the actions and agency of a specific person being addressed – often the author themselves. One text, for example, emphasises the actions the author’s younger self can take in preparing for the future: setting aside money in case needed, looking after her physical health, and ensuring that she is able to change jobs if needs be (35 F). The author is the sole actor in this letter, with no mention of other agents, be they particular individuals, organisations, or (as in two of the Ecuadorean contributions) God. Several other letters encourage the younger version of the author to adapt and change.

One is addressed to the whole population of Quito, the capital of Ecuador. This contrasts with most of the letters, which are addressed either to the author themselves, or to the author’s child, and this text names politicians and political institutions as part of how a desirable future could be achieved. At the same time, there is uncertainty as to whether established political processes will deliver:

We suffered so much in the pandemic, the country’s rulers stole so much that now we only have a slight hope that in the elections citizens will know how to choose correctly so as not to fill us with people who in the harshest situations do not know how to help those who need it the most. (34 F)

By addressing the whole population of a city, this letter is unusual. But it is also typical, in that it does not express a strong hope in political institutions to deliver a desirable future. Whilst some letters identify electoral processes and the actions of politicians as key to achieving desirable futures, more focus on the actions and agency of individual people – particularly the authors themselves, and members of their family. When established political institutions are discussed, the authors often express doubt that these mechanisms will deliver desired change. One writes that in the upcoming presidential elections “there are not many options”, and yet “the corruption after so much struggle seems to be diminishing little by little which makes me very happy” (18 F). Here there is both scepticism about the efficacy of existing political processes, and an indication that they will be an important part of how positive change can happen.

Another Ecuadorean letter, set in 2035, presents concerns about climate change, future pandemics, public services, employment, inequality, collective values (and their opposites, such as competitiveness and “individualism”), and holds the government to account for failures of leadership. It concludes:

There is increasing competition and less access to well-paying jobs. The country’s governments, characterized by triumphant and widespread corruption, have ended up benefiting a few and have forgotten the vast majority of Ecuadorians. The government’s health policies failed to contain Coronavirus infections at the time, and neither did that of subsequent epidemics. As a community, by maintaining continuous quarantines, we have been able to stop, in some way, the spread of disease. (35 F)

The future is difficult – and with its emphasis on government corruption, the text communicates little expectation that the established institutions of Ecuadorean political life will function effectively in the interests of the country’s people. However, in the letter’s final sentence, the author does indicate that collective action to meet challenges is, to a degree, possible.

Some of the Greek letters place emphasis on the actions of the author themselves in facilitating the change needed to overcome the pandemic, and to live healthier, happier lives. One participant, for example, writes that a positive change is a transformation within oneself, as the pandemic taught her to become more conscious of how she relates to herself, others, nature and the things that matter to her (18 F). A mixed – individual and collective – approach to change-making is indicated by some contributors, such as a participant who says no change would happen, “if all of us, one by one, did not fight to be better for [our] people and humanity” (21 F). In many of the Greek texts there is emphasis on individuals’ growing social awareness, with one explaining that after the pandemic “most people have become more socially responsible and more aware of social issues”, which is needed to generate a “brighter future” (18 F). Another says, “I want everyone to listen and understand; otherwise, we will cease to exist. We exist only with others and others only with us. We must finally learn to live with our planet” (22 F). Whilst also featuring many examples focused on the actions and agency of individuals, in comparison to the Ecuadorean texts the Greek letters place greater emphasis on actions and agency of collectives, including ‘society’ as a whole.

Some Greek contributions explicitly mention the involvement of government bodies and institutions in facilitating social change. One imagines a future in which the national government has reformed its overall approach to public health, now taking “measures to protect its constituents by improving the health system for everyone and taking care of people financially and not to leave them to their fate” (26 F). This is echoed by another who sees that state responsibility for its people has increased (19 F). This overlaps with several Greek letters communicating desire for a more egalitarian state, expressing hope for reduced social inequalities via the efforts of both government bodies and wider populations. In these texts there are expectations – and demands – for governments to change their priorities. One participant writes, “I would advise all nation-states to invest their money for a good cause for the health and emergencies of the people rather than to buy weapons and ammunition” (27 F). Imagining futures in which their governments re-prioritise, these letters directly or indirectly criticise current priorities and practices. In some cases, criticism is vehement, such as the letter just quoted, which condemns the Greek government for corruption during the pandemic. In another, frustration with existing political institutions is depicted in anticipated rebellion against government officials, as people have come to realise how reckless governments have been towards their citizens during the pandemic (26 M). Alongside Greek letters that involve government bodies in achieving desirable futures, there are many such expressions of doubt or suspicion, too. Whilst, then, within both the Ecuadorean and Greek samples there is widespread emphasis on reassessing priorities and values – presenting this as central to desirable post-Covid futures – overall, the letters are characterised by uncertainty, and sometimes strong scepticism, as to whether existing political institutions will play a key role in such processes of re-prioritisation.

5. Discussion

What, then, has the preceding analysis of letters from young people in Ecuador and Greece shown us about hope, and about the politics of hope, in the specific context of the first few months of the pandemic? The brief we provided to our participants was designed to be deliberately ‘open’ in the range of post-Covid futures that could be imagined – and as is observable from the examples presented above, our contributors did indeed envisage a broad diversity of futures. One way in which the exercise was normative, however, was that participants were invited to imagine a desirable future. Desirability was built into the brief. This makes it all the more striking that the hope within most letters is so strongly marked by *ambivalence*. As shown in [Section 4.1](#), these letters are typically characterised by “the simultaneous existence of positive and negative beliefs or emotions with regard to the same [future]” ([Jonas, et al., 2000](#): 41). These are futures in which people have survived but suffered loss or diminishment; in which desires are only incompletely fulfilled; in which hope is located in the lessons learned from the suffering and difficulties of the pandemic; or in which hope is found in resilience, and thereby inseparable from the difficulties being endured. We also observed a particular form of ambivalent hope – consciousness-raising warnings – identifiable within some more ‘pessimistic’ visions. These warning letters appear aimed towards processes of ‘conscientisation’ ([Freire, 2014](#)) – people coming to understand the (unjust) systemic conditions in which they live, in order to change them.

A second key feature of the letters, established in [Section 4.2](#), is the centrality of *reassessing priorities and values* within the achievement of positive post-Covid futures (see, also, [Hänninen, et al., 2022](#), this special issue). Whilst a small minority of the letters express desire for a return to ‘normal’, most seek change. Specific policy, legal or institutional developments are described in some letters, but the central change emphasised across the data set is re-evaluating what matters in life. A third key feature of the data, presented in [Section 4.3](#), is *uncertainty – or overt scepticism – about the role of existing political institutions* in the process of achieving a desirable future. In only a small minority of the letters is it established political institutions through which desired futures are achieved. Instead, the tendency within the sample is towards individual action, or, in some cases, the actions of groups of people outside of institutional forms. Existing political institutions are given greater prominence within the Greek letters, but even here, the involvement of these institutions in achieving desired futures is marked by strong ambivalence.

How should we understand these three key features of the data in combination? As discussed in the literature review, uncertainty is a constitutive condition of hope. But why might ambivalence be central, too? Many processes of seemingly positive change can engender complex ‘mixed’ feelings, including experiences of loss, especially at times of crisis ([Gross, 2020](#)). But our analysis here indicates that when the desired future is located at a collective scale – or dependent on collective processes, such as societal or government action – there may be additional reason for hopes to be ambivalent. Within such conditions, what is desirable and what is possible may be especially complex to determine, and subject to intensely competing perspectives. For this reason, in contrast to more domestic or private hopes, those which are more explicitly dependent upon large collective undertakings may be distinctively susceptible to ambivalence. This connects closely to the second and third key features of the data.

Uncertainty (or outright scepticism) with regards to the role of existing political institutions in achieving desirable futures, may derive from a variety of sources – not least, as some of the letters indicate, pre-Covid experiences of government corruption. But there may be specific experiences during the pandemic which provide further explanation. Laura Robinson’s comparative analysis of Brazil and the USA provides evidence of “institutional trauma”, characterised by a widespread loss of trust in “foundational institutions” ([Robinson, 2022](#): 473) including journalism, public health agencies, and democracy itself.

Contrary to early collective unification in the face of Covid-19, as the data show here, all too soon crumbling faith in institutions has given rise to division, fear, and loss of confidence. [...] Significantly, unlike responses to previous disaster events in which tragedy is leavened with collective hope, the data here fails to reveal strong confidence in collective action or solidarity across ideology to continue to meet the challenges of the pandemic and its secondary effects on civil society. ([Robinson, 2022](#): 473)

Such loss of trust in foundational institutions helps explain the third key feature of our letters, uncertainty – or scepticism – regarding the role of established political institutions in achieving desired futures. But here we also need to recognise the sheer complexity of Covid-19 as an event. Paul Frosh and Myria Georgiou ask:

what is Covid-19 a crisis of? This is difficult to delimit, but it appears to constitute a *meta-crisis*, a *crisis-event* which makes visible modernity’s general historical character as a perpetual *crisis-condition*. As such it reveals and catalyses pre-existing potentialities for catastrophe or transformation, enabling the widespread visibility of conflicts which were already endemic: systemic crises of wealth and welfare inequality, scientific expertise, knowledge and truth (the ‘infodemic’), political leadership, racial discrimination, domestic violence, social isolation, mediation and civility, migration and borders, religious faith, moral care, and environmental disaster. It is a crisis of the universality of risk, its inequitable distribution globally and locally, and of our capacities to reflect upon and develop a politics capable of addressing it ([Beck, 1992](#)). For vast numbers it is a personal and collective anxiety, of varying intensity, about their, and their world’s, immediate and longer-term future. ([Frosh & Georgiou, 2022](#): 240)

If we are persuaded by this account of Covid as a “meta-crisis” (see also the notion of “syndemic”, [Long, et al., 2022](#)), exposing a multiplicity of underlying crises and the lack of a politics adequate to the challenges of universal but inequitably distributed “risk”, it is entirely understandable that some of our research participants should harbour uncertainty – or outright scepticism – with regards to the role of existing political institutions in achieving the post-Covid futures they seek.

But we may suggest one further potential explanation for this third feature of the letters, which links back to the preceding two: namely, what if we consider that one of the inadequacies of existing political institutions to realising participants’ post-Covid hopes

lies, precisely, in the ways that existing modes of political discourse and action tend to actively suppress ambivalence? Within the cut-and-thrust of political debate and contestation, in which there is often a premium on the solidity of one's position, ambivalence is an experience that rarely speaks its name. How might political discourse – and the contestations of the future that it involves – be changed by a greater recognition of the ways in which people's relationship to desired, possible, but uncertain futures can involve mixed feelings? And to the extent to which hope is central to political storytelling (Gross, 2019), what might be the implications – for how public figures communicate – of expanding appreciation of the ambivalence that can attend positive anticipations of the future? In the context of the recent rise of populist politics – in which there is a premium on authenticity (Montgomery, 2017; Fieschi, 2019), and authenticity is established, in part, via the performance of passionate confidence regarding how the future should be (however vaguely described) – there is an argument to be made that giving the ambivalence of hope greater recognition, and greater legitimacy, would be democratically beneficial. Our findings indicate that there is potential value in highlighting this disjuncture between the ambivalence that can characterise people's hopes for the future, and the lack of ambivalence that may be central to the power of some modes of political communication. What possibilities might be enabled by doing so?

Within the letters the focus on reprioritisation lays emphasis on a process – re-assessment of values and priorities – as much as on the outcomes of that process. There is, in that sense, an important openness to the hope presented in many of the letters – a creative openness that existing political institutions and discourses appear unlikely to offer. This points towards the value of modes of democratic practice in which there is more room for generative uncertainty. How such practices could be developed cannot be fully addressed here, though the increasing interest in models of participatory democracy, such as citizens assemblies, appears a move in this direction. What we can suggest, however, is that in a small way at least, the further expansion of creative research practices may be able to contribute to the development of such creative democratic practices. This could include variations on this project's use of *Letters from the Future* – or, to give another example, the methods of participatory, verbatim theatre used by Gallagher et al., (2020) in researching young people's capacity for “radical hope” – used in a variety of contexts. These creative approaches to research, to which many others could be added, each have their own specific affordances for holding open a “space for political imagination” (Gross, 2021).

Resonant with these possibilities, John Urry calls for the democratisation of futuring practices. He argues that how power operates in societies “should be viewed as significantly a matter of uneven future-making” (Urry, 2016: 189), and that there is a pressing need to “‘mainstream’ the future, which is too important to be left to states, corporations or technologists.” (2016: 7). A key issue is “how a productive way of developing ‘democratic’ futures thinking and practice can emerge and become embedded.” (Urry, 2016: 191) This is a big question, also too big to fully address here. But in our analyses of these everyday imaginaries, and our discussions of their potential implications for creative democratic practice, we intend this paper to make one contribution to the combined efforts needed for an adequate response.

Finally, what does the preceding analysis indicate regarding the specific position of young people in imagining desirable post-pandemic futures? As Frosh and Georgiou indicate above, Covid has not only been socially uneven in its consequences – it has thereby made newly visible existing systemic challenges and inequities. In a paper examining students' experiences of the pandemic, the authors comment that “young people have been disproportionately affected by the policies and practices implemented by governments to limit [Covid's] spread.” (Nunn et al., 2021: 430) These disproportionate effects are compounded by the fact that “young people, who will live with the legacies of and inherit the responsibility for these intersecting crises, are dramatically under-represented in public discussions of their impacts and the strategies required to address them.” (Nunn et al., 2021: 430) Within these conditions, however, they observe modes of “precarious hope” embedded, precisely, within the uncertainty of the moment – as young people's experiences of precarity can give rise to “a sense that conditions should and could change.” (Nunn et al., 2021: 430) This combination of experiences resonates with the preceding analysis of our letters from 18 to 35-year-olds in Ecuador and Greece. The lack of confidence in existing political institutions to enable desired post-Covid futures may be conditioned, in part, by the age of the respondents, and their comparative disenfranchisement. Simultaneously, the letters are not devoid of hope. They evidence a range of desirable futures our participants can imagine: in many cases, premised on the new possibilities for re-assessing values and priorities opened up by the pandemic.

Before concluding, we wish to emphasise that in our letters there is little explicit reference to the vocabulary or narratives of existing politicians, parties of governments. In this respect, the data does not directly connect with those parts of the literature concerned with ‘political rhetorics of hope’. This is, in itself, an indication of the resources our participants are *not* drawing upon in imagining desirable futures. But it also points towards further research. A limitation of our study has been the restricted insight our data can provide regarding the specific conditions, resources and experiences that have influenced our participants' hopes. Studies building on the approach taken here could valuably combine a version of *Letters from the Future* with methods including focus groups, interviews, ethnography and social media analysis. In doing so, such research has the potential to make valuable contributions to the emerging body of literature on the ‘political economy of hope’ – by combining detailed analysis of the conditioning of present hopes, with creative explorations of possible and preferred futures. This work could be developed in relation to specific issues, such as people's trust in existing political institutions to enable desirable futures; or by addressing more open-ended questions regarding the conditioning and possibilities of hope within particular communities or populations.

6. Conclusion

The method employed within this study, *Letters from the Future*, made an open invitation to non-specialists. It has thereby enabled a series of contributions – across this special issue – to expanding the knowledge base regarding ‘everyday imaginings’ of Post-Covid futures. But it also indicates possibilities for the further use of such creative futuring practices in other contexts. Enabling

opportunities for people to explore desired futures within deliberately ‘open’, creative spaces, such as those offered by the *Letters from the Future* approach – and perhaps particularly when used in groups, in combination with more dialogic and deliberative methods – has the potential to make distinctive contributions to understanding people’s hopes in more nuanced ways, including the ambivalence that may characterise them. This could include (though should not be reserved to) use within the explicitly ‘political’ context of electoral politics, in which the classic methods employed for gleaning political attitudes and preferences – opinion polling and focus groups ‘market testing’ policies and politicians – offer only very limited insight into the texture of people’s hopes for the future.

Part of the value of the *Letters from the Future* method is precisely the creative possibilities it offers. It does not seek to merely solicit currently and consciously held beliefs and attitudes, as an opinion poll might; but invites responses through which participants may find out about themselves and their ideas. Understanding – and supporting – the conditions through which people discover and articulate what matters to them is an extremely important task, and one which receives surprisingly little attention (Wilson et al., 2022). Futuring practices such as the method presented here – involving a broad range of participants who are not “specialists of the future” (Urry, 2016: 18) – offer possibilities for people to creatively explore what matters to them, expanding what Arjun Appadurai (2004) famously calls “the capacity to aspire”. This has the potential to be valuable personally, as well to contribute to democratic processes at a range of scales – opening up new ways of understanding citizen perspectives, including their (ambivalent) hopes.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.futures.2023.103115](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2023.103115).

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