

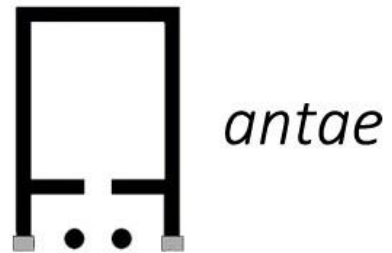
Open Utopia: A Horizon for Left Unity

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Open Utopia: A Horizon for Left Unity

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Across the U.S. explosive social movements abound. Prisoners are calling attention to their conditions of modern-day slavery, students are asserting their authority against formal university leadership, First Nations people are leading massive decolonisation efforts in North Dakota, service workers are demanding respect and livable wages, and a continually forming re-emergence of Black Liberation is exercising disruptive tactics against routine indifference and complicity toward their situation of oppression.¹ All of this reveals a potential opening in the pathway forward for those of us on the left who are anticipating the potential for radical social change and a revolutionary movement against capitalism. Yet one factor impeding this possibility, and well within our control to resolve, are internal debates amongst the left where we probably locate ourselves against one another upon unstable (but heated) lines of where we should go from here.

From multiple angles one finds the markings of an ongoing polemic concerning the nature and form of revolution often pitting revolutionary perspectives as oscillating between two camps: the strategic versus the prefigurative.² In brief, strategic proponents argue that social movements must remain politically grounded and materialist in form; therefore, pragmatic in their use of available resources and technologies. From this viewpoint, strategic proponents emphasise the need for a party organisation typically led by a vanguard. Prefigurative proponents, conversely, are more idealist in philosophy, calling for a transformation of ourselves in simultaneity with broader society.³ Advocates are more concerned with the creation of community as opposed to capturing political victories, and reject parties as they feel they develop into bureaucracies which stifle spontaneous and organic methods of practice. Therefore, what these camps have primarily battled over is a theory of transition beyond capitalism. Chief among my aims in what follows is to demonstrate how these dual orientations have created a false dichotomy. Strategy and prefiguration are complementary processes for future liberation, and in order to overcome their

¹ For a short list of online resources for these various social movements, see, for instance, <www.blacklivesmatter.com>; <www.standingrock.org>; <www.fightfor15.org>; <<https://itsgoingdown.org>>. [Accessed 20 April 2017]. Information on student resistance is vast and scattered, and therefore no single website claims to represent a unified student movement. However, the inability to point directly at tangible resources does not mean no student movement exists.

² See Barbara Epstein, 'The Politics of Prefigurative Community: The Non-Violent Direct Action Movement', in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. by Steven Duncombe (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 333-46.

³ I invoke here the characterisation of "materialist" and "idealist" standpoints as common within philosophy and anthropological theory, which argues that the social world either begins from the fundamental (or central) position of the mind or the material world. My claim is not that the strategic or prefigurative camps hold strictly to either perspective, but that in general they are marked by tendencies to prefer one over the other.

false dichotomy I will attempt to craft a framework which embraces the radical imagination moving everyday toward an open utopia.

Since at least the nineteenth century the left has squabbled over revolutionary perspectives, where politically-minded followers of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels registered their disdain of 'exercises in utopian speculation'⁴ without programmatic designs on how to undertake a revolutionary project.⁵ Conversely, opposing segments from the left⁶ rejected what they viewed as authoritarian political strategies which would amount to 'nothing more than the conquest of existing state power rather than its supersession'.⁷ Today, these opposing views have been adapted and expanded theoretically through complex developments far beyond the scope of this examination. However, it is useful to point out that the views of how to tell *when* a revolution has happened are rooted in two 'strategic and kinetic' interpretations.⁸

Thomas Nail, in direct reference to the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, labels these opposing interpretations as the uppercase and lowercase R/revolution.⁹ Uppercase Revolution inherits its philosophical basis from the Aristotelian conception of revolution as a 'revolving' around a central stasis (the state). Revolutions, then, involve a constitutional or internal change in identity of the state. Such historical legacies of this interpretation of revolution were updated following Marx to incorporate strategic views of seizing the state, employing a party, the using of a vanguard, and centralisation.¹⁰ Thus, it is a centralised state-bound view of revolution where motion returns to the centre and the state is seen as an instrument capable of being wielded for maintaining revolutionary energies.

Lowercase revolution, according to Nail, is a decentralised, anti-state perspective where intersectional analyses, deeply democratic processes, and horizontalism shape strategic pursuits of implementing revolution. Prefigurative processes also distinguish Nail's characterisation of lowercase revolution, which Barbara Epstein explains are marked by consensus decision-making and commitments to non-hierarchy, sometimes called 'leaderless structures'.¹¹ Motion for lowercase revolution is a trajectory like an outward line, external from the state instead of a circular return.¹² While not always the case, uppercase Revolution has generally been associated with the strategic camp (revealing in part the consistent willingness to directly contest or use the

⁴ Carl Boggs, 'Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power', *Theory and Society*, 4(3) (1977), 359-393, p. 361.

⁵ Here I refer mainly to communist revolutionary leaders such as Lenin, Mao, Castro, and their followers.

⁶ Most popular among these were anarchists such as Bakunin, and council communists given voice by figures such as Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek.

⁷ Boggs, p. 363.

⁸ Thomas Nail, 'Revolution', in *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, ed. by Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, and A.K. Thompson (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016), pp. 375-81, p. 380.

⁹ See *ibid.*

¹⁰ Marx himself wrote little on the subject, but did seem to subscribe to certain vague notions of "seizing the state" in his rebuttal to Bakunin, posthumously published as 'After the Revolution' (See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'After the Revolution: Marx Debates Bakunin', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert Tucker (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), pp. 542-8).

¹¹ Epstein, p. 334.

¹² See Nail, p. 378.

state as a site for political struggle) whereas lowercase revolution is cast into the prefigurative camp.

To reiterate, my claim is that these positions are superficially presented as polarisations, and a possible pathway forward in overcoming these dual categories is through engaging the notion of an open utopia. Both strategic and prefigurative proponents harbour utopian ideals. Shared amongst them is a desire for utopia to be egalitarian, liberating, and humane. However, the perceived possibility of attaining utopia recapitulates both camps' view over transitioning beyond present systems. Open utopia, then, strives to be a corrective conceptual model for bridging Left unity.

As a brief and rough generalisation: strategists view utopia as materially distant, therefore impossible to accomplish in the present either because current modes or means of production have not yet caught up to the prescribed stages of history, or the general circumstances of material conditions are not at a point where strategic manoeuvres can accomplish more than piecemeal victories. Since utopia is disconnected from present possibility, strategists have often turned sour on the usage of utopia in political polemics—explaining in part the common disdain of utopian socialists first instigated by Marx and Engels. This orientation toward utopia encourages views of history as a determined set of 'events' leading to the desired future, and any deviation from the "plan" of history is dismissed as naïve or revisionist. Ideological orthodoxy and demands for discipline seep into this vision. Whilst such analysis is not perceived as utopian, but rather as a necessary development of history by its proponents, the result generates what has often been labelled a "blueprint utopia".

Conversely, proponents of prefiguration have insisted upon utopia as a temporal possibility, one able to be brought forth in the here and now.¹³ Utopia becomes a lifestyle made by changing practices and interpersonal relationships. In order to accomplish these changes, proponents of prefiguration have insisted upon creating institutional models and practices which can mirror a desired utopia. Examples include communes, co-operatives, intentional communities, as well as various democratic practices (such as consensus decision-making) within organisations. Everyday life is implicitly recognised as a site for radical transformation within this framework. Prefigurative perspectives, then, are more invested in the creation of community instead of a party, and typically shy away from formal political power as existing political forms are identified as inherently corruptible and a co-opting force in the status quo. Energies become so invested into creating community and re-socialising practices that prefigurative politics often slides into self-selecting isolated groups where mass exhaustion is typical.¹⁴ The result has been

¹³ For an excellent survey of the relationship between prefiguration and utopianism see *Anarchism and Utopianism*, ed. by Laurence Davis and Ruth Kinna (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). This collection represents a nuanced view of prefigurative relationships to utopia, not necessarily conforming to the categorisation I put forth, but it does help distill the general characteristics of a prefigurative camp.

¹⁴ Adopting a Gramscian analysis of social change, Jonathan Smucker contends that prefigurative groups seek a 'project of *private* liberation'. Jonathan M. Smucker, 'Can Prefigurative Politics Replace Political Strategy',

an inability to translate utopian practices into sustained revolutionary momentum leading to what I call “burnout utopia”, where individuals withdraw entirely from organisations and general prefigurative practices.

Partly, burnout results from the insistence on exclusively localised and autonomous projects, where any demands on the state are construed as reformist politics, and organising becomes a ‘search for pure prefiguration [that becomes] a state of fixed purity instead of an ideal we are always in the process of realizing’.¹⁵ In parallel fashion, blueprint utopias come as consequences of political purity and orthodoxies whose features were described above. Here, proponents experience their own high levels of burnout, albeit centered more on the frustrations inherent in imagining that history accords to one’s own deterministic interpretation or that social change comes once masses of people are disciplined enough to follow the ‘party line.’

A synthesis of strategic focus and prefigurative practice, which I will hereafter refer to as the radical imagination, is necessary to assist in pulling the left out of this exhaustive factionalism. For an effective radical imagination, I submit the necessity of perceiving utopia as an open project—simultaneously to curtail orthodox blueprints while also serving as a preventative from burnout. Writers Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber, while exploring the possibilities of ‘militant investigation’, articulate a methodological position analogous to what I refer to as radical imagination; ‘it is a process of collective wondering and wandering that is not afraid to admit that the question of how to move forward is always uncertain, difficult, and never resolved in easy answers that are eternally correct’.¹⁶ Implications of an open utopia, directed by the use of a radical imagination, point to a clear need of designing an altogether different conception of social action.

Strengthening the utopic basis of existing radicalisms, where utopia becomes an open project, may just be the conceptual grounding needed to point toward a more coherent and stable strategic mission. After all, if one has no clear and vivid conception of where one is trying to get to, how could a strategy for arriving there be developed? Quite possibly the Marxist movements failed in strategic transitions to socialism because they were devoid (and purposely so) of any utopian image of the future. Certain Marxist groups allowed a rigid theoretical view focused exclusively on economic progression *to be* their utopia, depriving themselves of thinking about what the world they want to live in might look like *after* the revolution.¹⁷ Yet even within these groups of orthodox Marxists, who subscribed to the notion of capitalist growth as a progressive stage necessary for an eventual communist society, an inherent speculative (though

Berkeley Journal of Sociology, 58 (2014). <<http://berkeleyjournal.org/2014/10/can-prefigurative-politics-replace-political-strategy/>>. [Accessed 20 April 20, 2017].

¹⁵ Romina Akemi and Bree Busk, ‘Breaking the Waves: Challenging the Liberal Tendency within Anarchist Feminism’, *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory: Anarcha-Feminisms*, 29 (2016), 104-119, p. 114.

¹⁶ Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber, ‘Introduction’, in *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations Collective Theorization*, ed. by Stephen Shukaitis, David Graeber, and Erika Biddle (Oakland: AK Press, 2007), pp. 11-34, (p. 11).

¹⁷ Specifically, I mean those who relied primarily on the progressive determinism which can be found in some of Marx’s more evolutionarily-based notions of economic stages of production.

unacknowledged) quality is present in their strategy—an idea of a future only imagined as possible. This means, then, that they were also—in their own terms—guilty of employing ‘utopian speculation’ as the basis of their analysis.¹⁸ Who, amongst those who wish to seek an end to present systems, could feasibly orchestrate a strategy without hopeful dreams, or utopian sensibilities, underpinning their activities? Visionary scholar Walidah Imarisha argues that all of us who seek to change the world ‘are engaging in speculative fiction’, i.e. utopian dreaming; indeed, this *should* be the case, as Imarisha explains:

We want organizers and movement builders to be able to claim the vast space of possibility, to be birthing visionary stories. Using their everyday realities and experiences of changing the world, they can form the foundation of the fantastic, and, we hope, build a future where the fantastic liberates the mundane.¹⁹

A potential critique against open utopia is that its aspirational qualities will come at the expense of strategy, which seems a hollow claim. Are we to suppose that those envisioning open utopias live an entirely immaterial existence? Since life is material, in the sense employed by historical materialists, then are speculations of a liberated society not rooted by real material circumstance? ‘The subject of the dream is the dreamer’, writes Toni Morrison, by which she means that any fictive tale, any fantastic future (or present) imagined is reflexive of the life of its inventor.²⁰ Strategic implications of open utopia lay embedded in the dream, awaiting cultivation.

Open utopia is a necessary conceptual intervention for proponents of prefigurative revolution chiefly for its capacity to curb latent elitist tracts amongst practitioners of a prefigurative ethic. The pressures of undertaking revolutionary activity fixed explicitly to a reconfiguration of everyday experience explains not only the burnout endemic to prefigurative practices, but also the impulse toward moral purification. Here is a conception of revolution primarily concerned with de-alienated interpersonal relations, which in practice lays bare all of one’s shortcomings and disfigured humanity so that individual faults become the primary fixation of personal reflection. Strategically undermined by heavy levels of navel-gazing, the prefigurative fails to connect visions beyond fleeting autonomous zones or intentional communities. Adopting a notion of open utopia encourages a prefigurative understanding capable of accepting, but always seeking to push beyond, the inherent messiness of organising practices within capitalist social relations. Such a framework mitigates against tendencies toward activist purity often present within prefigurative social experiments, while also maintaining the importance of intervening at the level of everyday experience capable of unleashing the radical imagination.

¹⁸ See Boggs, p. 361.

¹⁹ Walidah Imarisha, ‘Introduction’, in *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. by Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), pp. 3-6, p. 3.

²⁰ Toni Morrison, ‘Black Matters’, in *Race Critical Theories*, ed. by Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 265-282, p. 272.

Sketching a Radically Imaginative Methodology

'The social world', according to Pierre Bourdieu, 'is accumulated history'.²¹ For Bourdieu, time is a tremendous factor in creating advantages and disadvantages, where power is not simply acquired by an individual in one generation but rather transferred through lineage and legacy from one era to the next. Thus, power 'takes time to accumulate'. Failing to recognise the accumulation of history results in a reductionist understanding of current social reality, where seeking to correct such reductionism Bourdieu reminds us that the accumulation of history is 'what makes the games of society [...] something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle'. To overlook accumulated social history renders the world in a way where people perceive social agents as existing on planes of equal opportunity, 'where every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one' and 'every prize [opportunity] can be attained, instantaneously, by everyone, so that at each moment anyone can become anything'.²²

Yet this assessment can have positive implications for social change, too. Domination is not the only type of power which accumulates; multiform modes of resistance also accumulate. This includes collective efforts seeking change from the prevailing order—what is commonly referred to as a “social movement” which I have interchangeably referred to as “social action”. Since the social world is an accumulation of history, this means, by extension, that social movements entail an accumulation of experience, affect, and knowledge. They also entail accumulated uncertainty and discontinuity, allowing for a ‘social organization of forgetting’ which services systemic oppressions and necessitates a responsive ‘fight against amnesia’ in order to challenge such injustices.²³ In their ethnographic survey over an Argentine shanty-town contaminated by years of oil industry pollution, anthropologists Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun ask why it is that the residents of this area do not collectively organise themselves against the corporate industries poisoning them. Though it appears starkly evident that corporate oil is responsible for this population’s suffering, the authors find instead of ‘cognitive liberation and protest [...] [the] reproduction of ignorance, doubts, disagreements, and fears’ preventing collective action. The authors explain that ‘time is responsible for the veiling’ of domination, where a major component of capital power’s ability to perpetuate its authority is through the privilege of waiting and using time to its advantage, which contributes toward experiences of mystification and bewilderment over the development of history and its extension into the present.²⁴

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by J. Richardson (New York, NY: Greenwood, 1968), pp. 241-258, p. 241.

²² *ibid.*

²³ Chris Dixon, *Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 51-2.

²⁴ Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun, *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 8, 110.

Partly, I find that this confusion stems from a view of the past as only a series of inevitable defeats. Yet these are inevitable only in hindsight and even still hindsight clouds the possibilities that were available in these histories. In fact, what seems to underpin so many questions about collective action—including Auyero and Swistun’s account—is an assumption of destined failure where victory is presumed to always be impossible. With this lens over history, the past is remembered primarily as massacre and destruction, or a glib and vague recollection of nice weather and politeness that no longer abounds; it is almost always, therefore a past conveying a sense of loss. Time, however, is pregnant with possibilities: even if at present time services dominate power, this does not have to be the case, and now I urge the Left to soften its defences and allow for a new opened and fruitful Left correspondence.²⁵ From the position where social history and social action are woven both continuously and discontinuously, I wish to explore where the jagged threads of utopian ideas meet, pulling their yarn as far back as Thomas More’s eponymous text, in order to locate possibilities in the utopian imaginary for a synthesis of Leftist theory.

Reviewing the genealogical trajectory of utopia reveals the presence of open spaces (what noted sociologist John Holloway refers to as “cracks”) within the dominant capitalist system.²⁶ These cracks have accumulated movement, helping usher in dramatic ruptures within social history. Ruptures are here seen as momentous turning points (or even inflections) of social history such as uprisings, material transformations like the ones experienced with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, political breaks from monarchical power, and so forth. Negative developments have led to many ruptures as well, including the European colonisation of the Americas, chattel slavery, and myriad genocidal campaigns against different ethnic populations, among others. Therefore, ruptures, in themselves, do not guarantee positive developments, but can be harnessed or initiated by social action through active use of the radical imagination. They are the events which lead to broad changes in everyday life, where ways of being and knowing dissolve into new realities, and represent the gains achieved primarily through various concerted efforts of social action. Utopia, in this framework, operates as a category of social thought generated by eruptive moments which create the cracks for hopeful imagining. Therefore, it is a utopia produced from the gaps in the social system of capital cohesion. As the Wobblies note in their preamble, we can articulate the cracks by ‘forming the structure of the new society in the shell of

²⁵ Defeat, destruction, and loss have of course been witnessed in history too, and I do not wish to minimise how significant these factors have been. Indeed, without an awareness of the tremendous amount of catastrophe in history, we are severely limited in our ability to orient ourselves toward any sound possibilities for the future. However, my argument here is not that we should omit these realities of history but that we need a more robust and rounded view of history—a sense of deep history—so that we can also understand how much potential and possibility was available in these histories of defeat so that loss is not perceived as destiny and some semblance of hope can permeate collective actions purposed for liberation.

²⁶ See John Holloway, *In, Against, and Beyond Capitalism: The San Francisco Lectures* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

the old', and bring about an intentional rupture.²⁷ We can thus strategically prefigure our futures in the here and now by articulating the cracks in the social imaginary of open utopia.

Early utopian writing can be understood as an embryonic social dream. Social dreams enable us to break from the practical politics of the here and now to broaden the scope of sociopolitical possibility. Tom Moylan provides the inspiration for my thinking on open utopia when he refers to utopia as a methodology poised against a perpetual 'utopian problematic' which 'must always enable further openings [...] so that its mobilization of desires and needs for a better world will always exceed any utopian visions that arise from that very process [...] and always seek for more'.²⁸ Open utopia is in flux, responsive to the ruptures and extending the cracks which connect, or accumulate, until future rupture. It is then we discover that movement, such as the strategic connecting of cracks and articulating action of prefiguration, which forms (and can be formed by) the radical imagination.

Fighting social amnesia requires an explication of the world where history is not a reducible series of disconnected accidents or happenstance; were it to be otherwise, it would render natural the status quo. We might usefully imagine history not as a straight arrow across space, but a spherical web rotating on its axis like a globe in orbit. Thus, social action can operate within a framework of meaning, intention, and open utopian possibility—or, to put this in Holloway's terms, the social accumulation of the cracks can guide open utopian futures. By discovering where the threads of utopian social history weave together and where the spaces between these threads reside, I believe we will locate valuable insights for cultivation by today's social movement agents seeking change from current capitalist domination; we might possibly discover ways in which we can strengthen solidarities amongst the Left by ameliorating fissures between strategic and prefigurative revolutionaries. Though our history may be cast in orbit, gliding into a future unknown, a strategic prefiguration is capable of pointing the direction of our travel towards a hopeful horizon; an open utopia. We can win.

The Social Project of Open Utopia

We can pose the point of contact between Europe and what would come to be called the Americas as a grand phenomenological and eruptive moment which blasted open the European radical imagination, shattering rigid convictions in what was known and could be known.²⁹ Grounding our concept of open utopia in such a way helps clarify some of the impetus behind Thomas More's master work, where the world from a European perspective suddenly

²⁷ 'Preamble to the IWW Constitution', *Industrial Workers of the World*.

<<http://www.iww.org/culture/official/preamble.shtml>>. [Accessed 20 April 2017].

²⁸ Tom Moylan, 'Realizing Better Futures, Strong Thought for Hard Times', in *Utopian Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*, ed. by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2011), pp. 191-222, p. 221.

²⁹ This does not mean that European elites were *humbled* by their discovery of how little they knew about the world, but rather opened at least in a relative sense to wider imaginative possibilities.

expanded beyond what was ever believed to exist and what was ever conceived as possible, and thus it was both a material and intellectual transformation.

Quite possibly early utopian writers saw an opening within the rupture provided by contact with the Americas, sensing possibility and wishing to mobilise the desires of their contemporaries in order to ‘seek for more;’ to sustain rupture as long as possible. Early utopian works represent the beginning of a nascent social imaginary which would eventually grow grander and more creative as time would enable. They are permeated by a sense of hope and possibility. This sense was so strong at the time that attempts were made by early European colonisers to bring utopia to earth—an unfortunately ill-use of the radical imagination. These colonisers took for granted the capability to blueprint society and attempted to impose their societal schemas upon indigenous Americans, expecting their experiments to work without a hitch; of course, their euro- and ethnocentric assumptions blinded them to many problematics inherent in their endeavours.

Blueprint utopian thought, as briefly detailed above, has attracted the criticism of many, including the twentieth century philosopher Karl Popper. Popper argued that utopias fostered an irrational belief in prescribing scientific social ends (or lulling people into a dogmatic faith in historical processes which would result in the desired utopian society). Such scientific determinism, for Popper, inevitably led to violence, therefore he appealed for the death of utopian thinking in preference for immediate strategies of eliminating oppression in the present rather than basing strategies on abstract ideal futures.³⁰ Popper’s warning should be heeded, but we must recognise that his conception of utopia was of a prescriptive tendency within the social imaginary, again a ‘blueprint utopia’, and his call to eliminate concrete oppressions shares similarities with the methodology proposed here in that the radical imagination confronts the present while cultivating a temporal conception of open utopia. When reading More’s *Utopia*, I suggest rejecting prescriptive interpretations of his fictional society (as well as all blueprint utopian orthodoxies) in order to maintain open utopian movement. In this vein, More’s text reflects the author’s own hopeful desire for how another world could actually look, rather than inducing the sterile ideologies which Popper feared.

The evidence to suggest More wrote from a position of hope is, obviously, dependent upon an interpretive choice over known intentions; yet my source of inference lies in the similarities of More’s *Utopia* with known cultures of certain indigenous American groups during his era.³¹ No private property, communal lifestyles, subsistence-based, and goods stored in “warehouses” (read: longhouses) to be doled out according to need; these are features of More’s *Utopia* which were commonplace amongst various indigenous communities including the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois).

In a small way, this diminishes More’s imaginative undertaking, where the idea of a society without need for lawyers (just to reference one aspect of More’s utopian community) does not

³⁰ See Karl Popper, ‘Utopia and Violence’, *World Affairs*, 149(1) (1986), 3-9.

³¹ For an excellent history on indigenous societies in North America, see Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014).

seem as far-fetched as it might have sounded to More's contemporaries, since plenty of societies without lawyers existed at the time—and still today, as well. We might also very well conclude that More's ideas in total were not entirely unique because he painted a society which could have been mostly real in his time.³² But I think this errs on missing the bigger point; it does not matter much whether More conjured up a spectacular idea which rocked the foundations of social imaginaries or if he produced a minimally interesting yet blasé text similar to already existing conceptions of society. Instead, what matters here is that the social world experienced an epochal turning point, what I mean by rupture, and generated the openings (the cracks) which would nurture the social imagination. In other words, this point in history enabled dreams and hopes to grow bigger.

If we flash forward in time we discover certain moments of rupture occurring again and again with similar social responses from utopian thinkers and movers. Consider Marx and Engels' famous opening of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'a spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism'. The two penned the words just prior to massive uprisings in Europe, referred to sometimes as the 'Springtime of the People' or 'People's Spring'. Not only was the spectre haunting Europe, but, according to Marx and Engels, 'all the Powers of Old Europe' were seeking to 'exorcise' the spectre in order to retain their ability to dominate.³³ Marx and Engels recognised the cracks in capitalist hegemony, and committed to writing the manifesto in the hopes of initiating a rupture—or better yet, a total revolution. Their aspirations were almost realised in the rupture of the People's Spring.

Underpinning their motivation for writing the manifesto was a solid conviction that utopia (i.e. eu-topia, in the sense of a "good place") was imminent, and its form would be communism. I would argue this reflects a sense of speculative hope, but I think this aspect is sometimes forgotten by readers of the *Manifesto* because of the criticisms lobbied by Marx and Engels against certain trends in the utopianism of their time. Their criticism of 'utopian socialists' such as Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier was not as much a derisive attack on utopia per se, but more an appeal for social agents to take history into account and attach utopian ideals to a specific set of strategies rooted in the present material society. Marx and Engels mapped out an analysis of how and why utopia would be actualised—the formation of an early strategic camp. The *Manifesto*, then, attempts to nudge people, specifically the proletariat, in the right direction. No more is this better reflected than by their concluding lines in the *Communist Manifesto*: 'the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!'.³⁴ A straightforward call to action, and

³² On the point of More's society without lawyers, see Dunbar-Ortiz documents on the Haudenosaunee's confederated system of diplomacy, which operated on the basis of good-faith and trust as opposed to legality. Dunbar-Ortiz, pp. 24-25.

³³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert Tucker (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), pp. 469-500, p. 473.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 500.

similarly to early utopian literature, this call is filled with speculative hope and social dreaming. All of this to point out that utopia has been present within the strategic camp since its origin.

Manifestoes are not explicit or overt aspects of all utopian literature. Furthermore, it appears erroneous to suggest that More thought of his work as a call to action, but recalling that the utopian project is a historical one we discover the genealogy of utopian manifestoes embedded within the onset of More's work, developing into an arc toward political action throughout the centuries before Marx and Engels. Indeed, More's work, as well as many others which came before it and which we might classify as utopian, advocates a clear picture of what Marx would call 'primary communism'. But as Ursula Le Guin says of More's work, 'his Good Place was explicitly No Place. Only in the Head. A blueprint without a building site'.³⁵ Quite reasonable, then, that subsequent thinkers would turn to questions on how to make this No Place a location somewhere and somehow.

We must be careful, though, not to fall into the trap of thinking the trajectory of utopia is historically determined, or operates upon some grand human law which governs social movement. Instead, we should recognise that the cracks in capitalism—the social movement of the cracks—keep utopia open, not closed. In other words, we are not destined to fail in the fight against capitalism. Along utopia's trajectory toward manifesto are numerous ruptures guided by the movement of cracks. These ruptures have been both political and social; specific for European utopianism, they have been responsive to momentous events such as the Protestant Reformation, European Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, U.S. and French revolutionary wars, and creation of globalised capitalism witnessed through the massive Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and colonisation of the Americas. Clearly not all ruptures represent positive developments, yet with each rupture a newly opened space, a new crack, is created, and by tracing backward our accumulated social history we witness the embryonic dream of utopia taking clearer shape. One further finds the ripe possibilities for utilising the radical imagination, as cracks can be connected by sound strategy and prefigurative use.

Socialist contributions toward utopia pointed the dream toward practice—making the dream a reality—which Ernst Bloch labeled "concrete utopias". Bloch's introduction of concrete utopia into the utopian lexicon was intended to provide a sense of utopia as capable of pragmatic actions, where he encouraged us 'to hope materialistically' and link our utopian vision with real-world social developments; much in the same spirit intended by Marx and Engels.³⁶ Jumping forward multiple generations which witnessed failures of Soviet-style communism, rise in U.S. superpower, the dawn of neoliberal globalisation, and an entrenchment in the Thatcher belief that 'There is No Alternative' (TINA), utopia seemed a long dead and ossified relic of past social dreaming. Partially to blame, in my view, is the tendency that the utopian content of these social histories was almost entirely void of prefigurative practices as the cold, impersonalised version

³⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Utopiyan, Utopiyang', in *Utopia* by Thomas More (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 195-198, (p. 195).

³⁶ See David McNally, 'Utopia', in *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, ed. by Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, and AK Thompson (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016), pp. 431-437, p. 437.

of strategic revolution firmly took hold of these socialist experiments. Yet the fall of the Soviet Union, and with it the centrally planned notion of communism, provided a new rupture in the social imaginary—one which proclaimed loudly in contradiction to TINA that 'Another World is Possible'.

Open Utopia: A New Chapter

Living utopias since the 1990s have been primarily undertaken by social movements more prefigurative in substance. The fall of the Soviet Union was seen as a victory for proponents of capitalism, with Francis Fukuyama famously proclaiming the fall as the signifier of the 'end of history', meaning that capitalism won and all ideologies which conform to capitalism and a hollowed-out republican-based democracy were the only viable ones.³⁷ For some on the international Left the fall was devastating, but for others it was perceived as a tremendous relief. Finally, the real work of imagining alternatives to capitalism was freed from the shadow of Stalinist-style communism. And with this grew a sense of excitement: what was next for anti-capitalism, who would show us the way?

An answer came back almost as soon as Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history was upon us, and the answer has perhaps been articulated best by Grace Lee Boggs: 'we are the leaders we've been looking for'.³⁸ We are the agents of a new society, and we are the change in capitalism. Recognise that capitalism is a social power, and like all social powers it can be undone through human capacities. Holloway tells us that 'we are the crisis of capital, and we are proud of it', by which he wishes us to understand that humans are endowed with real power and capitalism is a system which reacts to this human power.³⁹ Capitalism is actually playing a deceptively aggressive *defence*, while we are on offence. Therefore, we can break capitalism's social cohesion by understanding that capitalism operates in reaction to the inherent dynamism of human-beings.⁴⁰ Utopia returns and revolution is viable.

I believe many social movements after the fall of the Soviet Union operated within this understanding of social power and reembraced utopian dreaming. David McNally endorses this view, noting that 'international left-wing movements of the 1990s and early 2000s renewed activists' investment in the concept of "utopia"'.⁴¹ He cites the rise of Zapatismo with its call for an 'international of hope' and the creation of the World Social Forum as key moments which led to the reemergence of utopia within the social imaginary of movements. However, the movements McNally points to heavily rely upon a prefigurative framework often at the expense

³⁷ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1992).

³⁸ Bill Moyers, 'Bill Moyers talks with Grace Lee Boggs', *Bill Moyers Journal*, (June 2007), <<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/06152007/watch3.html>>. [Accessed 20 April 2017].

³⁹ Holloway, p. 30.

⁴⁰ This does not imply that each group or individual is in a similar position of social power, as capitalism operates through uneven development (i.e. destruction). Resistance, and the offense we take, will look differently depending on the angles it arrives from.

⁴¹ McNally, p. 431.

of political strategy. Recalling Thomas Nail's differentiation between R/revolution, the international movements which McNally argues have ignited social movements' interest in utopia on the whole fit the mould of lowercase revolution.

These movements, such as Occupy Wall Street (OWS), did not go far enough in cultivating the radical imagination, and we must be soberly aware of the need to make our prefigurative forces 'move to the pulse of the concrete' lest they slide into the self-marginalisation of isolated sub-cultures.⁴² Holloway urges us to 'keep building the cracks [in capitalism] and [find] ways of keeping them, strengthening them, expanding them, connecting them; seeking the confluence or, preferably, the commoning of the cracks'.⁴³ The radical imagination, committed to prefigurative strategy, offers an 'impure way forward' by articulating the cracks and pushing for sustained ruptures.⁴⁴ It aligns with an open utopia, one which posits utopia as a temporal category of ideas not meant to prescribe our reality, but to help guide us toward an uncertain, yet partially tangible, future. In short: prefiguration rehearses a world beyond capitalism while strategy moves us along the pathway toward liberation, making the radical imagination an embodied spirit of open utopia.

The radical imagination as methodology is about unlocking creativity, and the moments we do this come as a result of fun and inspiring activities as well as during the practical organising of work necessary for sound strategy. One powerful way capitalism maintains hegemony is by rendering labour invisible and generating fetishisms. Such fetishistic thinking also infiltrates movement-organising, because so often the hours of work and social labour that go into organising an event (like a lecture, march, or direct action) are taken for granted by spectators and obscure the hard work involved. Thus, people are pressed and unimaginative when asked how we can change the world. In stressing the need to be strategic, advocates of this view seem to me to be actually trying to penetrate the wall built by fetishistic thinking, where people are unaware of how much labour is needed to arrive at the society they want. Linking the strategic emphasis on material analysis with prefigurative idealisms of alternative social relations offers a promising conceptual model for revolution. Change happens at root on an everyday basis, and in our everyday lives we need fun to keep us energised and hopeful. For many, the daily suffering experienced under capitalism, and the fight against it, are only bearable by envisioning, and working toward, a humane society. Coming together in order to imagine a better world taps into our deep desire for excitement, thrills, and inspiration while also exposing how the ways capitalism claims to fulfill these desires are a false promise. Such envisioning happens best, in my view, during strategic use of the everyday.

This is an altered extract from a prize-winning essay for the Next System's Project "What's Your Alternative?" essay competition. Visit the Next System's Project at thenextsystem.org

⁴² McNally, p. 437.

⁴³ Holloway, p. xv.

⁴⁴ Deborah Gould, 'Politics', in *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, pp. 303-309, p. 309.

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