

Resource: Fostering the utopian imagination

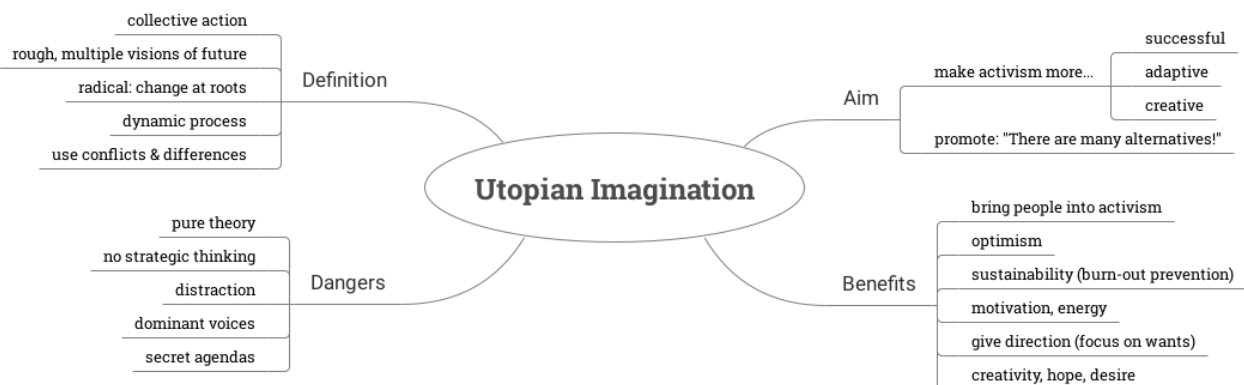
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1 Introduction

“Let's be realistic, demand the impossible.” (Wall-slogan, Paris)

How can activism become more successful, stay creative and adaptive to ever changing environments? Inspired by this question I explored the role of imagination and of positive, utopian thinking for activism in course of my Master's thesis. Based on a online survey with activists, I found that most of those who replied see a lot of potential for more utopian imagination (UI). Many benefits can be derived from utopian imagination, keeping potential dangers in mind. A first collection of methods and tools for fostering the imagination was compiled. This document aims to make the knowledge gathered in the thesis more accessible and share with the participants and any other activists the resources and tools for them to explore and experiment. The next big step after this will be to find ways to connect imagination and action in a strategic framework.



This document and the research on which it is based was composed with a definition of what the utopia imagination 'is', even though that is debatable. This was the information that survey respondents received and responded to:

Utopian Imagination is something we *do* together, envisioning and working towards a better future that is radically, from its roots, different to the present. Utopian Imagination grows by bringing conflicts and differences into the open, leading to multiple, rough, and fussy ideas of how things could be better. It serves to give direction, inspire, and mobilise to action. It can be seen as a dynamic process of small steps, of trying out and leaning into, with constant re-evaluation of values,

horizons and directions.

2 Benefits

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.” (Albert Einstein)

UI offers a big array of benefits for activism and activists. It can bring people into activism, support optimism and positive thinking, motivate people to keep going, preventing burn-out and reducing turn-over rates. It can further help in de-constructing the social order, impact the construction of the material world, and point activists towards prefigurative politics. UI and give direction through focusing on what one wants and therefore help activists to align their actions with their visions and goals. Utopian Imagination can raise consciousness and awareness in a way that is more sustainable than the motivation based on rejection of present ills. This sustainability supports knowledge transfers and allows movements and groups to evolve, learn, and grow. UI can be beneficial for motivation, energy, and hope. It can strengthen desires and the belief that positive change is indeed possible. It can support creativity and thinking outside the box in terms of what is possible but also outside the toolbox of activism. This gives the chance for fighting against the worst present ills while making sure that strategies and tactics have the potential to go beyond resistance and build a future



Illustration 1: In the survey, people were asked to give three words for how they envision their utopian world. Nouns and adjectives were combined, i.e. equal and equality to equal-ity. Size and strength represents frequency of mention.

3 Potential dangers

“Things are too urgent now to be giving up on our imagination”. (Morris)

When embarking on utopian imagination practices, some of the potential dangers need to be kept in mind to be able to avoid them and generate best practices. There is the danger of staying in the place of pure theoretical even if artistic conceptions. There are the risks of dominant voices, unclear communication, secret agendas, and being overly self-critical. Further there is the risk to leave a gap between the present state and the envisioned goal, of not thinking strategically on how to bridge the gap. When things don't exactly or at all change the way imagined, there is the risk to be too hard on oneself and to be disappointed which might lead to loss of energy and despair. Differences in the utopian visions could lead to conflicts and divisions in movements if not embraced as opportunities. Further, there could be the risk of being distracted from more important work.

All of these dangers can be avoided. Seeing UI and transformation as two ideas that are closely interlinked in a strategic concept can help to see them as real work. The process of imagining needs to be interlinked with transformation, free from oppression, transparent, and sustainable. Prefiguration is one way to show the value of UI as actual work. It helps to approach differences as well as moments of crisis in a new light of opportunities for positive change. Further, activist self-care and sustainable activism are needed. Finding the balance between criticising and gratefulness can be a tricky endeavour but is needed for mental health.

4 Actual tools

“We must do and think the impossible.” (Derrida)

This section cites all the ideas that were given in the survey responses, categorised but otherwise untouched, and footnotes added with more information and links.

Tools to foster UI	
Type	Suggestion
Creative & spiritual	Read science fiction as inspiration
	Use creative, soulful, intuitive methods (e.g. SoulCollage) ¹
	Use ritual-like practices (shamanic or wicca, or...) (i.e. starhawk.org – combines activism and ritual ²)
	Use more utopian art: music, poems, crafts, movie, sketch, show, etc : “We're all big children, and it's widely known, that You learn the fastest when You're having fun at the same time.”
	“The [Galway grassroots] zine ³ provides a space for alternative ideas to be discusses and shared. The physical printing and distribution of the zine in the city is an important 'intervention' in the city space, opening up space for these alternatives through chance

1 “SoulCollage is a process for accessing your intuition and creating an incredible deck of cards with deep personal meaning that will help you with life's questions and transitions.” (<http://www.soulcollage.com/>)

2 Earth Activism: “In this workshop, we’ll use ritual, meditation, guided journeys, dance and song to connect with the deep wellsprings of inspiration that the earth offers us. We’ll explore the internal and social barriers that keep us from stepping into our full power. And we’ll work with tools and insights that can help us become more effective co-creators of the new world we must bring to birth.” <http://starhawk.org/event/earth-activism-weekend-workshop-kressberg-germany/>

3 <https://ggnetwork.blackblogs.org/tag/zine/>

	encounters”
Books & Literature: visions, eutopias, dystopias	Book “bolo'bolo” ⁴
	Venus project ⁵
	“Have a booklist of utopian and dystopian books/films for sharing.ask everyone for suggestions”
	1. Fiction: '1984' (Orwell, 1949), 'Animal Farm' (Orwell, 1945), 'Brave New World' (Huxley, 1932), 'Woman on the Edge of Time' (Piercy, 1976), 'Oryx and Crake Trilogy' (Atwood, 2003, 2009, 2013)
	2. Non-fiction: Starhawk ⁶ , 'The Great Turning' ⁷ (Joanne Macy)
	Look at authors: Eduardo Galeano, Gustavo Esteva: video 'social movement and hope' ⁸
Look at writings from activist perspective of Westoby ⁹ , Mcintosh and Jensen, in Solnit and Griffiths	
Writings not from activist perspective who “mange to be open to possibility and share that through their writings e.g. Macfarlane, Jamie, Maitland writing about landscape, poetry and silence among other things.”	
Look at “fourfold process of transformation” (Matthew Fox ¹⁰) ¹¹	
Intersectionality	“the linking of issues”
	“combining issues to have more people with similar ways of thinking together. like having a camp”
Children ¹²	“Work with children”
	“Addressing young people, especially children who still have the natural ability of thinking radically. Their [UI] [...] can be preserved by working with them, learning from them and with them”
Meetings	“Meetings that are dedicated to just imagine together with others what we want the world to be like, being open to new action ideas”
	“Practicing UI will improve the method”
	“introduce the concept to more people and meet to practise it, brainstorm ideas and actually implement them”
	“It needs an open mind to think of a different world. And such an openness needs places and times for people to creatively think, of what could be different, what they could live like if things would be different.”
	Discussing “ideas of how things could be better [...] might be a helpful start for discussing the strategies to get there.”

4 http://sfbay-anarchists.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/bb_3.pdf

5 “The Venus Project proposes an alternative vision of what the future can be if we apply what we already know in order to achieve a sustainable new world civilization. It calls for a straightforward redesign of our culture in which the age-old inadequacies of war, poverty, hunger, debt and unnecessary human suffering are viewed not only as avoidable, but as totally unacceptable.” - <https://www.thevenusproject.com/>

6 Starhawk: see writings on the website, i.e. 'The City of Refuge' (<http://starhawk.org/writing/books/city-of-refuge>)

7 “The Great Turning is a name for the essential adventure of our time: the shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization.” (<http://www.joannamacy.net/thegreatturning.html>)

8 Can't find the video.... other one: Esteva, Video: 2006 Oaxaca Police killings, democracy now: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMMo23neIOo>

9 <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=2PXSnhSAAAAJ&hl=en>

10 Matthew Fox is a “Dominican priest” (see also for details and critique) (<http://www.dialogueireland.org/dicontent/resources/dciarchive/zheresyhope.html>)

11 “Matthew Fox speaks about of the Via Positiva needing the Via Negatiain order to access the Via Creativa which leads to the Via Transformativa and back into the cycle once more.” (Respondent 39)

12 Some ideas could potentially be found in Ginwright (2008).

	<p>“I think the most important is that people come together and have time to imagine and brainstorm things. You will never get as much ideas and dreams in an online platform or chat or whatever, as with some people sitting together on a bonfire or spending a weekend together.”</p> <p>“important too to have fun, get together, build community, potluck shared dinners, musicmaking etc”</p> <p>“Working in dialogue, to question, explore and create meaning together. This could be as informal as having chats over tea or a formal organised workshop</p> <p>“I link the idea of utopian imagination to Paulo Freire's idea of conscientisation¹³: supporting individuals and groups to develop an analysis that challenges the hegemonic 'common sense' of elites. In this sense, popular education approaches and methods could be seen as fostering a utopian imagination.”</p>
Retreats	<p>“Taking long breaks from capitalist society, being given an opportunity to be, think, reflect”</p> <p>“So places where people get together and do something in a different way can create such an atmosphere, even if it is only temporarily. Places where people try to live different ways over a longer period (like communes, ...) also can help to foster imagination”</p>
Inspiration	<p>“Being open to new action ideas, inform yourself about struggles and methods of other activists”</p> <p>“Taking the time to share utopian ideas, thereby inspire each other, thereby become more inspiring for others. This leads to positive feedback by seeing people become more open to ones ideas...”</p> <p>“Learning more about what happened in Spain in the thirties¹⁴, and what is happening in Kobane and other parts in Kurdistan/Syria¹⁵ at present in the midst of all the violence..to spread that info and be inspired.”</p> <p>“Home weeks¹⁶ of CDRA (Community Development Resource Association)¹⁷ in Cape Town”</p> <p>“First nations communities in Canada that through a process of utopian imagination that emerged from the grassroots the model of service delivery was abandoned and a new model is being experimented with that builds on traditional ways of doing things that work through the idea of interconnectedness¹⁸.”</p> <p>“Spreading the ideas, solutions, initiatives, ways of struggling with different issues.”</p> <p>“And isn't maybe art another indicator for the presence of UI (for example utopian architects after French Revolution¹⁹, ideal workers city²⁰ etc.)?”</p>

13 See also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TioH-t9FWMU> and

<http://www.freire.org/component/easytagcloud/118-module/conscientization/>

14 Spain in the 30s: The Respondent most likely refers to Spain's Revolutionary Anarchist Movement. See <http://flag.blackened.net/liberty/spain-rev.html>, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-porter-spain-model-for-anarchist-organizing> and <https://libcom.org/history/1868-1936-anarchism-in-spain>

15 See for example <http://anarchism.pageabode.com/andrewnflood/resources-rojava-revolution-kurdistan-syria>, <http://anarchistnews.org/tags/kobane> and <http://www.submedia.tv/stimulator/2015/02/21/anarchy-rojava-libertarian-revolution-middle-east/>

16 “During home weeks the focus of the organisation is on itself and what is happening within it. Everyone is involved in this process no matter what their job description is. In this way they engage with not only what is emergent but also with what is being hidden the shadow side of things.” (Respondent 39)

17 <http://www.cdra.org.za/>

18 Some information on interconnectedness: <http://firstnationspedagogy.ca/interconnect.html> and https://secure.cihi.ca/free_products/mentally_healthy_communities_aboriginal_perspectives_e.pdf

19 Unclear what exactly is meant. Possibly see <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2013/09/08/architecture-in-revolutionary-times/> and Vidler (1991).

20 Could refer to <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/13/story-cities-21-adriano-olivetti-ivrea-italy-typewriter-factory-human-city> or to Menier Chocolate in Noisiel, France (established in 1825): <https://wiley-vch.e-bookshelf.de/products/reading-epub/product-id/577084/title/Redeveloping%2BIndustrial%2BSites.html>

Individual	“Apply this imagination [...] also just for your own life, starting with small goals that are easier to achieve and that make you trust in that way of trying to change the world, focus on one goal at a time to not overload yourself”.
	“I think a few lead questions would help, also maybe just little inspirations how to creatively escape the pre-fabricated cage of a mind within which I think, could help. Like, day-dreaming while you ride your bike downhill to imagine how you really want things to be. No compromise.”

Tips for practice of UI	
Tips for practice	“Making the case for its usefulness”
	“Developing the habit of not confusing radical imagination with unrealistic expectations and welcome it as something positive among activist”.
	“Anything that promotes positive (but realistic) thinking.”
	“A new frame of reference within which to operate, based in values ²¹ which have a universal meaning, as opposed to tied to ideology”.
	“Some questions that guide me to think about some of the ideas given in the definition of utopian imagination would be useful at a personal level, while a similar process could be made into a workshop for groups who want to envision the future they are working towards. I would find an intersectional approach that explores how we challenge and transform class, 'race' and gender issues in the way we work crucial to any discussion of utopian imagination.”
	“Opposing the ideas and policies of Thatcher and of Reagan/Nixon and their modern day equivalents: May and Trump, by every possible means.”
	“Learn systems thinking”
	“Reinforcing feedback loops”
	“More networking with others who think the same in order to find the right way”.
	“I like the idea of "head/heart/hand" which I use to make sure I'm mixing up methods in the workshop between intellectual work, emotional work and physical moving about/creating work. I also find that paired discussions and small group work can be really important in supporting those who are less confident to speak in plenary groups to be able to contribute.”
“Important to root utopian imagination in popular education (Freire, Augusto Boal's Games for Actors and Non-Actors ²²) and in narrative storytelling approaches (Centre for Story Based Strategy ²³).”	

Table 1: Tips for practice of UI

5 Translation into practice

“I am hopeful for the state of utopian imagination, even on this island!” (Survey respondent)

This resource offers a first step in introducing and promoting utopian imagination in an activist context. Feel free to play around with the tools, improve, learn, and share. Once we have

21 An interesting organisation in this context is Common Cause Foundation: <http://valuesandframes.org/>

22 “Games for Actors and Non-Actors is the classic and best-selling book by the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal. It sets out the principles and practice of Boal’s revolutionary method, showing how theatre can be used to transform and liberate everyone – actors and non-actors alike!” Download the book here: https://geraldkeaney.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/augusto_boal_games_for_actors_and_non-actorsbookfi-org.pdf

23 <http://www.storybasedstrategy.org/>

established utopian practices, how can they be translated into practice? Utopian images do need to be translated into strategies and tactics for transformation. This is the next big step we can undertake together.

The idea of prefiguration is the probably most concrete way forward for an activist practice of UI. What aspects of our utopian visions can we actually start with in the here and now? Not only do these efforts at realising utopia provide vital lessons for learning but they also offer small steps people can do. This builds on the idea that after all society is the sum of all our small, individual, and collective actions.

But there is the need for more, creative, and novel strategies and frameworks!

Tips for application of UI	
Application	“One of the sticking points could be the translation of imaginings that emerge into actions that engage, energise and transform.”
	“Keeping a kind of two-focused approach can help with this the big picture is held while at the same time the small steps and gains along the way are worked with and where possible celebrated.”
	“I would find it beneficial to have a framework to help me integrate utopian imagination better into my work.”

6 Thanks

I believe that emphasis on our thoughts and our (day-) dreams can help to pull the future into being with the power of our imaginations. The idea is that the mind has a profound impact on the 'material' world that goes beyond what can be observed as evidence.

I would like to thank everyone who participated and helped make the research project possible and contributed with their ideas and thoughts.

If you would like to take a deeper look at the research, you can download the thesis as a *.pdf here: <https://ggnetwork.blackblogs.org/fostering-radical-imagination/>

Please drop any comments, feedback, further ideas, visions, by mail to ggn-utopia@riseup.net

September 30th, 2016

7 References

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