

**Utopian imagination in activism:  
making the case for social dreaming  
in change from the grassroots**  
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**Abstract**

*Social, economic, and environmental inequalities are becoming ever starker. Unrest grips certain areas of the world occasionally, but no structured and promising movement beyond neoliberal capitalism is on the horizon. The status quo is consolidated as the only alternative. Grassroots activists working towards better worlds are often put down for being utopian, thus unrealistic. Therefore, some of today's activism is rooted in a position of resistance and opposition working towards little reforms to prevent the worst.*

*This research aims to uncover whether utopian imagination could be one option leading in a new direction, and subsequently how this imagination could be fostered. The findings of a qualitative survey with mostly young, white, western European, well educated, and radical anarchist activists suggest that while conceptions of a better world motivate and inform their activism, they are often hidden and rarely used in a structured way. These activists see many benefits in utopian imagination. Only a few manageable negative side-effects were discovered and a toolbox for fostering utopian imagination was compiled. However, it became clear that beyond fostering the imagination there is the need for a framework to translate visions into actions and transformation. Prefiguration, story-telling, and popular education are promising concepts and open the space for further research.*

**Keywords:** utopia, activism, radical imagination, grassroots, strategy, transformation, social change

## **Introduction: There is no alternative?**

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)

“There is no alternative”: TINA. Thatcher's narrative, the idea of Fukuyama's “end of history” and their modern actualizations have permeated the fabric of western society throughout, including some members of social movements. This closes down our minds so that we only think in terms of that which is, finding it harder and harder to imagine that which could be. This has also influenced the way some activists do activism, leading to mostly resistance based, reactionary approaches to activism using a fixed set of old tactics. At the same time, neoliberal capitalism has survived its heaviest crisis and emerged even stronger, despite all the efforts activists have put into affecting change. Is neoliberalism just too intelligent and too powerful for any resistance to be successful, or is there a need to revise activist strategies and tactics?

For the purpose of this project I am mainly drawing from activist networks I have been or am part in. While nothing certain can be said about the exact make-up of these networks<sup>1</sup>, let alone the beliefs and identities of their members, some tendencies that I observe need to be mentioned: members are mostly in their 20s and 30s, white, western European, and well educated anarchists who focus on direct action to achieve radical changes. The gender make-up is diverse.

Many of these activists' actions (from here on ‘this activism’) seem motivated by the rejection of how a certain aspect of life is at the moment, or by protecting a current state from a change that might lead to an even worse situation, inspired by the idea that a better world is possible. Therefore they try to exert influence on “policy, institutional and organizational systems, or cultural norms” (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 8), especially for those who do believe that the problems are rooted in the foundation of the system. However, as Reinsborough (2010, 70) says, “people will only go someplace they have already been in their mind”. This shows the importance of a continual collective process of imagining a new narrative, a new vision for a post-capitalist order. In the last forty years, it has become more important for many activists to create the social norms and values they wish for in the here and now, mainly in their internal processes, an aspiration called prefiguration (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 9–11).

Drawing from and combining the ideas of utopianism (Levitas 2010, 2007b; Sargisson 2007; Jacobs 2007) and radical imagination (Haiven and Khasnabish 2010, 2014; Khasnabish and Haiven 2012), this research project uses the concept of utopian imagination:

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<sup>1</sup> See “Prefiguring activist research” below for more information on the networks.

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<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> with constant re-evaluation of values, horizons, and directions.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this project is to explore utopian imagination as one method for making changes more likely, and for providing movement actors with any learning gained. By doing so it will hopefully contribute to movement actors' ability to incorporate utopian imagination into their practices and lead towards a narrative of 'There are many alternatives (TAMA)'<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, this research set out to explore the following questions:

1. To what extent does utopian imagination play a role in this activism?
2. What is the state of utopian imagination in this activism?
3. Is utopian imagination beneficial or detrimental for this activism?
4. How could utopian imagination be fostered?

These questions were explored by conducting a qualitative survey with these activists as well as a literature review. For the purpose of this article, the focus will lie on exploring the benefits and detriments of utopian imagination. The other aspects are only mentioned briefly, and can be found for detailed exploration in the full thesis<sup>6</sup> on which this article is based.

In the following section this research will be placed in context by exploring what it could mean for activist research to be itself a project of prefiguration, creating insurrectionary knowledge in solidarity and with relevance to activists. This is followed by a short description of the methodology of the research. After a brief literature review, the findings of the survey are presented. Subsequently, the findings are analysed and discussed, exploring the implications for the theory and practice of utopian imagination. The paper ends with a conclusion and outlook for further research and action.

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2 Language mistake: fuzzy. Left in the original for authentic reporting.

3 Please note: in the sense of: to try out, to experiment. Not a reference to "Lean in" by Sandberg.

4 This definition was compiled by the author and used as the basis for survey questions.

5 A full list of acronyms used can be found here: <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UI-App-ListOfAcronyms.pdf>

6 <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UtopianImaginationInActivism-web-1.pdf>

## Prefiguring activist research

“Be realistic. Demand the impossible!” (Graffiti, Paris, 1968, cited in Moylan 1986, 15)

As the project of an activist-researcher, this research tries to challenge power and knowledge as it is usually reproduced in academia, producing information that is of value to “struggles for collective liberation” (Luchies 2015, 524). In order to do that, Luchies (2015, 524) proposes ethics of *relevance*, *anti-oppression*, and *prefiguration* which this thesis aspires to follow. This research is relevant to and beneficial for the advance of theory and practice of social movements. Further, results were made accessible to movement actors<sup>7</sup>. As prefigurative research, this paper aims to shift the focus away from understanding movements towards imaginative activism that contributes to radical imagination (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012, 411) and social change.

Locating this research within a postmodern ontology helps to question power and knowledge, contesting what “truth” and “reality” really are. How people think about things becomes highly relevant when reality is “co-created by mind” and by the environment (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 102; Lincoln and Guba 2005, 195). Imagining what *could* be can play a big part in making these wishes come true.

According to Heron and Reason (1997), there are four aspects of knowledge in a postmodern frame: “experimental, presentational, propositional, and practical” (in Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 103). This research concerns itself with the propositional aspect, aiming to show why it is relevant to concern ourselves as activists with the conscious re-production of society using utopian imagination. This doesn't devalue other approaches to activism or to a conscious re-production of social environments.

The research starts with a literature review focused on defining and learning lessons for utopian imagination as a strategy for social change, including the benefits and potential dangers. As most of the literature is based on and revolving around utopia in fiction and theory, the review was combined with consultation of activists. An online qualitative-survey focused on the research questions was designed using a data and privacy conscious open source provider<sup>8</sup>, while leaving space for any other thoughts people wanted to share. No meta-data such as location was recorded.

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<sup>7</sup> The location of this information was communicated to participants in the invitation to the survey. It can now be found at: <https://ggnetwork.blackblogs.org/fostering-radical-imagination/> & <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UtopianImagination-Resource-vo.o.2.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> The open source platform used was LimeSurvey (available at <http://www.limesurvey.com>) using their hosting platform LimeService (available at <https://www.limeservice.com/en/>).

The survey was sent to two activist friends for testing<sup>9</sup>. The revised form of the questionnaire<sup>10</sup> was sent out in personal emails to 27 activist friends spread over Europe and partly followed up with face-to-face conversations. Additionally, it was sent to the Galway Grassroots<sup>11</sup> email list (about 50 subscribers), to an email list of about 20 anarchists in Ireland, and to the anarchist activist network Rhythms of Resistance<sup>12</sup> centred in Europe with a few situated beyond all over the world (about 400 subscribers, some of which represent groups with an unknown number of members). Additionally, survey respondents were asked to forward the invitation for the survey to email lists and/or activist friends of theirs (a snowballing approach). In the two weeks that the survey was available, 24 people left complete and 5 people incomplete responses.<sup>13</sup> It cannot be said to which extent the actual respondents fall within the general tendency of the networks described above in the introduction.

The survey responses were analysed using a thematic analysis following the approach adopted by Savin-Baden and Major (2013, 439–440). Certain limitations and difficulties emerged from the research design that was chosen for this study. In alignment with the ontology and epistemology, no certain 'truth' could be found, nor was this a desired outcome. Further, the scope of replies could be limited and biased in favour of the utopian imagination. The findings cannot be generalised to a higher level, but do provide insight into what the surveyed activists think. The discovered insights and approaches can be used to investigate other activist networks and their practices, checking for applicability

## Learning from utopian studies

“Things are too urgent now to be giving up on our imagination”. (Morris cited in Giroux 2014, 105)

Activists are often dismissively confronted with word “utopian” when they fight for the betterment of certain aspects. This research aims to reclaim the word utopian,

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9 Some of the responses were used as well and are accordingly labelled.

10 You can view the full invitation and the questions here: <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UI-App-SurveyQsAndInvitation.pdf>

11 About Galway Grassroots Network: <https://ggnetwork.blackblogs.org/about/>

12 See <https://www.rhythms-of-resistance.org/spip.php?rubrique7&lang=en>

13 The answers of respondents are given using the ID the survey software assigned to them. Simple visitors also were assigned an ID, thus the highest ID-number is much higher than the number of participants. No meta-data on the respondents was collected. The full responses can be viewed here: <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UI-Survey-Responses.pdf>

promote a new, positive understanding of it, and use it boldly to promote ideas and emphasise that change is possible. Both critiques and praise of utopianism and the lessons learned are briefly mentioned below.

Authors who have voiced critique about the utopian method such as Popper, Schapiro, Fukuyama, Marx, Arendt, and Dahrendorf serve as a learning ground to draw conclusions informing a utopian activist practice. Among others, these aspects can be found in the literature: Distraction from urgent work (Arendt 1998; Fitting 2007; Sargisson 2007), diversion of transformative energy (Moylan 2007; Sargent 2007), perfectionism (Popper as quoted in Levitas 2007b; Popper 1966), closure (Moylan 2007), ideological fixation (Dahrendorf 1958) as well as authoritarianism (Schapiro 1972).

Working towards an activist utopianism and reclaiming the word utopian in a positive sense can lead to using dreams to energize practices, and support them with hope and direction. Making sure energy is directed accurately and avoiding closure and control keeps any project open to dissent, change, and adaptation.

Most of those who write and think positively about utopianism go back to the original writings of Bloch (1959) and Polak (1973). Utopianism is seen as necessary for change (Sargent 2007; Strasinger 2010; Geras 2000) and can be used to pull the future into the here-and-now with thoughts and dreams (Bloch cited in Gunn 1987; Gunn 1987; Polak cited in Sargent 1982). It can further function to show alternatives and give direction for achieving change (McManus 2007; Goodwin 1980; Sargent 1982; Geras 2000). Hopes, dreams, and visions are central aspects for motivation and for inspiration (Sargent 1982; Hobbes cited in Gunn 1987; Bloch, n.d.; Albert and Hahnel paraphrased in Moylan 1986; Grossman 2006).

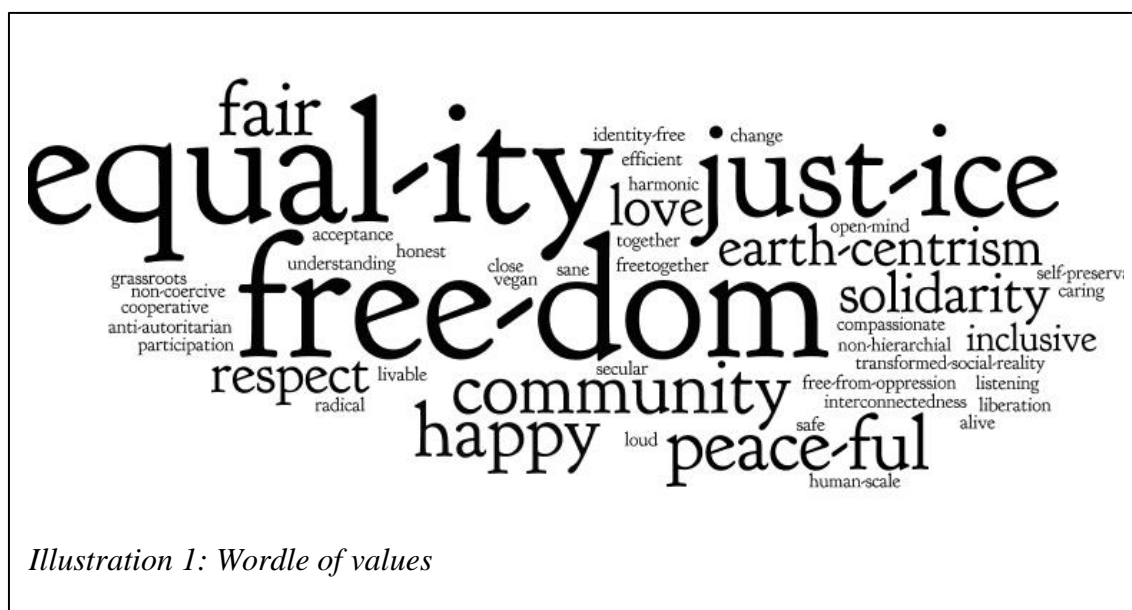
Further, utopianism can serve to raise consciousness and empower people, supporting the necessary step to move from imagination to transformation (Geras 2000; Zikode 2006; Levitas 2010). Utopianism can also be used as a tool to avoid accidentally perpetuating current oppressive structures (Gloria Anzaldua cited in Strasinger 2010; Maria Lugones cited in Strasinger 2010a; Strasinger 2010).

Attention needs to be paid to transforming the utopian thoughts into utopian actions, to alter the social matter in the general direction of utopia. As Sargent (1982) argues, one of the potential downsides of utopianism is exactly the fact that the need for transformation away from the status quo gets forgotten and all “practical difficulties” of the change are ignored (Sargent 1982, 580, 583). That should not mean reducing the utopian strivings to only fit within what is possible or realistic, but concerning oneself with potential pathways. Prefiguration is a useful concept for this purpose. By transforming ideals into means, the achievable can be tested on a small scale and can be continuously adapted.

## What activists say

“We must do and think the impossible.” (Derrida cited in Giroux 2014, 105)

Participants were asked to provide three words to describe the world they are trying to create through their activism. These were processed<sup>14</sup> and a tagcloud was produced using Wordle<sup>15</sup> as an unscientific method that nicely illustrates a snapshot of the most common values expressed by participants<sup>16</sup>.



In the following, the findings of the survey are reported in relation to the questions that were asked, and structured along the themes that emerged from this, as well as those anticipated through the literature review.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Some words have been combined, as they can be seen as holding similar meaning: free-dom, just-ice, equal-ity, peace-ful

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.wordle.net/create>

<sup>16</sup> Two annotations were removed in the processing:  
“free (in all senses of that word...)” (Respondent 1 (tester))

“Freetogether (i.e. free, but not in the individualist, consumerist sense, rather in a more collective together sense of free)” (Respondent 33)

<sup>17</sup> Simple typos and other errors were emended for easier readability.

### **The state of utopian imagination in this activism**

Some respondents put their statements on the state of the utopian imagination in the context of what they think the state of this activism in general is. According to the respondent with the ID 43 (from here on always short 'Respondent ID'), activists "lack hope", "work on auto-pilot" and "can't imagine a different reality". Respondent 23 adds that activists are afraid to mention, let alone act on, their ideals:

"Imagination might seem very far out from what is today, so people don't dare go act out with it a lot" (Respondent 23).

Furthermore, "activism will never solve the problems it claims to attempt to solve, but essentially depends on for fuel" (Respondent 33). Some respondents describe a situation of activism at the moment as being reactive:

I have the impression that many activists are very concentrated on what is wrong about the status quo and what to do against that. (Respondent 15)

In the last years we constantly were forced more to defend than to extend our possibilities. (Respondent 24)

Looking at how much utopian imagination is used in this activism, many respondents did make clear that they can only talk about the utopian imagination in their limited experience of activism. One person reported too much imagination in "the ultra radical left, or anarchism" (Respondent 6) and two people (Respondent 8 and 26) stated that they were quite happy with its extent at the moment and that it exists widely:

Utopian Imagination plays a big role in the activism I have part taken in and experienced so far. (Respondent 26)

Three respondents (15, 23, 25) acknowledge the existence of utopian imagination but state that it is enveloped in silence:

Although I believe that most activists have their idea of how things should be better [...] people's different utopias aren't discussed so much. (Respondent 15)

Eight persons stated that there is little utopian imagination. For example:



Limited! Activism has either been hijacked through the government funding of NGOs or limited in a narrow window of political possibility, even in the left.  
(Respondent 18)

Five people stated that there is little imagination connected with the need for more. For example:

I think it could be used much more. (Respondent 9)

### **Benefits of utopian imagination for this activism**

The respondents reported a wide array of ways in which utopian imagination could benefit this activism. From bringing people into activism through emotional support to giving direction, the findings suggest that people see it as a worthwhile endeavour.

Some influence on potential activists was mentioned: it can serve in “getting people politically active and engaged” (Respondent 8), it can “arouse” (Respondent 18), it can “broaden horizons and highlight how constructed and normalised a lot of the organisation of life on this planet is” (Respondent 22) as well as “enlighten [and] inspire” (Respondent 40).

Some respondents stress that there are certain emotional benefits related to utopian imagination. It can support “psychological satisfaction” (Respondent 5), it can “give social and spiritual strength ... to change world, first in our minds and hearts ... [and] allow us to continue to think that we will make it, it is possible” (Respondent 19). Respondent 24 states that it “trains the brain to imagine a time after revolution :-)”. It can further “create desire” (Respondent 9) and give “energy” (Respondents 17, 23) and “motivation” (Respondent 17).

Four respondents see utopian imagination playing a big role in motivating and driving this activism: it is the “main driving force and main motivator for activism” (Respondent 26), it can “remind ourselves that there's something worth fighting for” (Respondent 43). Respondent 39 shows interest in “how it can play a role in keeping the sparks that originally drove one into activism not just glowing but also bursting into flame.” Two respondents stress the importance of hope and of dreaming: “it can bring hope” (Respondent 43) and that “if we don't dream about it, it won't become reality. it's like Che Guevara's quote ‘Let's be realistic, demand the impossible’. try to get 150% and you will get 100%.” (Respondent 24).

Eight respondents stress the function of utopian imagination to give struggles a goal and direction (Respondents 5, 8, 9, 18, 21, 25, 33, 41). For example:

It can be very powerful when there's a bigger amount of people imagining the same or a similar future [...] because then, there's so much energy created to pursue this aim that it is more likely to become true. (Respondent 9)

Utopian Imagination could help provide the goal or the "for" part as juxtaposed to the "anti" part of activism. [...] While utopian imagination can help focus on DIRECTION, it too doesn't necessarily focus on the "PROCESS". Process is as important as goal in many cases. (Respondent 33)

Three respondents mention that Utopian imagination is not only about a goal, but also about the means: "it helps to try things out, to change them in practice, creating pockets of change within society from time to time" (Respondent 23). Respondent 25 points out that utopian imagination also manifest "in how we do it - in the way we treat each other, we talk to each other, we live together... creating the utopia we envision for the world in our own small contexts". Respondent 22 adds that it could empower people if visions "were enriched by concrete little steps".

### **Detrimental effects of utopian imagination on this activism**

One respondent rejects utopianism, as they understand it, in principle. Speaking about the "ultra radical left, or anarchism", Respondent 6 thinks of utopian imagination as ideologically closed:

Utopian thinking dominates to a point of blindness and inertia. There is a constant reiteration of how we want the world to be [...], whilst ignoring how the world currently is and [...] an avoidance of tactical and strategic thinking, and a "if you don't agree with our style of thinking and philosophy almost instantly, go fuck yourself." [...] It is [...] mostly concerned with its own egotistical survival and [...] it fails to account for real, tangible, material inequalities that people face. [...] The focus should be on short term gains that we can actually achieve rather than blind, repetitive rhetoric that never amounts to anything. [...] the means must be strategically considered in terms of \*how society works now\* rather than how we want it to work in the future [...]. (Respondent 6)

Some respondents offered their opinions on potential dangers or problems with utopian imagination: Respondent 17 sees the risk that "stronger voices can dominate the direction of a vision". Respondent 5 warns that it might be dangerous to "compare it [the image] too rough with what we live in; and expect it to change to radically and on a big scale [...]. Such things lead to burn-out and seeing no meaning in activism."

Another detriment that came up was the potential to distract from more important work:

Making the case for utopian thinking is a good thing to do I think, but it should be as grounded in reality as possible and any such efforts should emphasise the greater importance of actual activism work. (Respondent 8)

Other respondents, while being not fully opposed to the idea of utopianism in activism, do see the need to focus on transformation and strategic thinking.

The aim of imagining, for me, should always be to make more clear how I/we might work towards actually achieving our imagined futures. (Respondent 44)

Respondent 9 stresses the importance establishing a “link to connect [...] [thoughts and reality] and to use it to go forward”. Respondent 19 sees the detriment when “utopia becomes something only theoretical”, requiring little steps and the need that “words [...] become facts, even if they seem small” (Respondent 19). Lastly, Respondent 40 warns of the risk of “not be[ing] strategic enough to recognize the forces working against you”.

A few respondents were wondering how to turn utopian imagination into action:

I find the concept quite difficult to engage with. I can see its relevance but I am unclear how it could be “operationalised” systemically in my activism. [...] I wonder what my activism would look like if it was really guided by an approach of utopian imagination. (Respondent 44)

Some of the respondents already ventured some ideas on the question of application, reported in table 1<sup>18</sup>:

**Table 1: Tips for the application of utopian imagination**

<b>Tips for application of utopian imagination</b>	
Application	“One of the sticking points could be the translation of imaginings that emerge into actions that engage, energise and transform.” (Respondent 39)
	“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.” (Respondent 39)
	“I would find it beneficial to have a framework to help me integrate utopian imagination better into my work.” (Respondent 44)

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<sup>18</sup> Some also offered thoughts on general activist strategy. See <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UI-App-GeneralActivistStrategy.pdf>

## Discussion

When you told me about the spark  
I said it was a firefly  
She said it was a rocket,  
gone astray from the fireworks at the funfair  
and someone murmured  
from behind a dark corner  
it was just the glowing eyes of a cosmic leopard,  
staggering across our skies tonight  
and as the blackberries ripened  
at the side of the national road  
and the smell of gasoline filled our nostrils

the answer touched down  
softly on the black asphalt  
neither of us understood  
its language

And left. (Respondent 22)

This research project began with one central concern in mind: how can activism become more successful? Following one possible lead, an investigation into the potential of positive thinking in the form of utopian imagination was conducted. While exploring briefly the state of this activism and utopian imagination, the paper focused on the question of the potential benefits and disadvantages of utopian imagination for this activism, based on utopian studies and as seen in a survey of mostly young, white, western European, and well educated radical anarchist activists. Thoughts on barriers as well as tools to foster utopian imagination are also briefly mentioned.

Levels of engagement with the survey seem to indicate interest and enthusiasm for utopianism in their activism. Most people were not familiar with the term utopian imagination but could relate to the concept with their thoughts and experiences. However, some people had the popular understanding of utopian strongly in their minds, leading to a confusion of terms or a rejection of the definition provided in the survey.

The crisis of activist imagination can be seen as an opportunity. Looking at how the respondents talk about the current state of affairs in their activism leaves us with a bleak picture. They seem to be stuck and losing a defensive battle that leads to inadvertently spending energy for the further consolidation of the the status quo. However, activists think that utopian imagination is important for changing the world. While a fertile ground for utopian imagination exists in these activists' contexts there is the need for more place and time to foster it.

Utopian Imagination is a worthwhile process that can be experienced in spaces of prefiguration and community. There seems to be value in utopian

imagination for leaving behind habitual, purely resistance based activism towards building new strategies of change in activism. The extent to which utopian imagination is practised in activist circles at the moment justifies efforts in introducing and improving the process more widely. Turning resistance into proactivity, prefiguration, emphasis on the sustainability of activism<sup>19</sup>, and a model of dual power<sup>20</sup> could be pointing in a good direction.

### **The many benefits for this activism**

Utopian Imagination offers a big array of benefits for this activism and these activists. It can bring people into activism, support optimism and positive thinking, motivate people to keep going and prevent burn-out. It can further impact the construction of the material world, point activists towards prefigurative politics and give direction through focusing on what one wants.

Utopian Imagination has the power to pull people into this activism. The findings suggest that it can raise consciousness and awareness in a way that is more sustainable than the motivation based on rejection of present ills. This adds the additional potential, but also challenge, of how to engage people who are not yet activists in utopian imagination and expose them to its practice.

Utopian Imagination is beneficial for motivation and hope. The findings reflect the statements of the pro-utopian writers in many ways. It seems to supply motivation and energy that drives these activists as well as create and strengthen desires and the hope that positive change is indeed possible. This can support and be supported by optimism and positive thinking. Emphasis on our thoughts and our (day-) dreams can help to pull the future into being with the power of our imaginations. In “real” dreams at night, our mind is able to construct whole worlds with their own rules, assumptions, and functioning. I suspect that the mind also could have a profound impact on the “material” world that goes beyond what can be observed.

Utopian Imagination can make this activism more sustainable and enduring. Resistance based activism runs the high risk of burn-out and a frequent turnover rate that makes activist circles very volatile, often leading to iteration of processes and to limited knowledge transfers. Some respondents see the role of utopian imagination as lying in keeping people going through a more long term involvement and development. This keeps individuals active over long periods of time and thus allows movements and groups to evolve, learn, and grow over longer time periods. This means putting emphasis on sustainable activism and activist self-care.

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19 See this zine on sustainable activism: <http://cre-act.net/sustainable-activism/sustainable-activism/> or this web-resource: <http://knowyourix.org/dealing-with/dealing-with-activist-burn-out-and-self-care/>

20 See also <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/scott-crow-anarchy-and-the-common-ground-collective> and <http://www.fifthestate.org/archive/390-fall-2013/mutual-aid-times-crisis-ecological-economic-political/>

Utopian Imagination can give this activism direction. As many of these activists seem to be stuck in resistance and opposition, the utopian imagination can help create a positive pole as a balance. When fighting against one issue after another, the direction can get lost. Utopian imagination can serve as a tool to help activists align their actions with their visions and goals. This opens the chance for fighting against the worst present ills while making sure that strategies and tactics have the potential to go beyond resistance. For many respondents, the function of utopian imagination as giving direction to their activism seems to be a very important one.

The idea of prefiguration is the probably most concrete way forward for an activist practice of utopian imagination. What aspects of our utopian image 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. The findings suggest that there is value in creating free spaces like camps or zine projects, as they provide opportunities for experimentation and learning as well as bases for spreading new ideas and concepts. The ideas of free spaces and prefiguration are closely interlinked. The hope is that they will become more permanent and grow in diversity, size, and number. However, a future practice of utopian imagination needs to go far beyond today's understanding of prefiguration.

The idea of agency wasn't mentioned in the responses. This non-appearance suggests that activists already see themselves as agents of change. However, it could also mean that it is difficult to admit that one is being active while not believing in their own power. Is much of this activism actually limited by a disbelief in the existence or strength of one's own agency, leading to the stuck state of this activism as some respondents have described? I do think that utopian imagination has the power to help people realise that they have the ultimate agency to change and not technology, the economy, or the elites.

### **Limited detrimental effects**

The potential downsides of utopian imagination can either be used as a valuable opportunity for learning and creating best practice utopian imagination or be discarded. 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 utopian imagination as actual work.

The anti-utopian opinion of Respondent 6, quoted above, gives a good insight into the currently dominant understanding of utopian as well as in the recurring reform vs. revolution debate. While I would agree that there are certain covert restrictions on thoughts and actions in anarchist circles, this might be largely due to a lack of imagination and to predominately resistance based tactics. At the same time the efforts that many anarchists put into projects of prefiguration do show that there are many forms of anarchism and that the experience of those circles can vary widely. I would also agree that many of the strategies and

tactics should be informed by the present state of things. But that doesn't mean failing to think about where one wants to go in the long run or only selecting those tactics that are offered by the system. This leads towards a revolution through the everyday act, be it by prefiguration or in challenging and subverting existing tactics.<sup>21</sup>

The risks of dominant voices, communication, secret agendas, and being overly self-critical also need to be considered. Attention needs to be paid to who is contributing how much to the visions that a group is creating for themselves to avoid reproducing patterns of dominance within activist groups. There is the need for transparency and openness to avoid secret agendas. Lastly, it seems to be important to go easy on oneself. There is the risk of constant disappointment that might lead to despair and burn-out. All the energy created through utopian imagination in the first place could be lost if there is limited acceptance of seeming failure as part of success. This calls for sustainability within utopian imagination and activism to keep the energy going.<sup>22</sup>

Utopian Imagination is valuable and actual work. There was little evidence for the idea that this activism would be distracted from its real purpose if at all or too involved with utopian imagination. However, is “real” activist work more important than utopian imagination? Utopian imagination in the form of prefiguration plays a major part in the work of anarchist activists at the moment and also spreads increasingly into other organisations and networks who would be hesitant to call themselves anarchist. Thinking of utopian imagination as actual work might help to legitimise the time and space that is devoted to it.

Utopian Imagination and transformation need to be linked. The argument for focusing on transformation as part of utopian practice was made by a few respondents. The danger of staying in a space of purely theoretical, even if artistic, conceptions of utopia relates to the criticism of utopianism as mentioned in the literature review. This means nothing more than acknowledging the realities of the present moment, as they are necessarily the point of departure for any transformation. Seeing utopian imagination and transformation as two ideas that are closely interlinked in a strategic concept helps to use the power that is ascribed to utopian imagination in those processes of transformation and might make them more successful.

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21 Such as holding a protest march, but not announcing, or even asking for permission, where the law might require this.

22 See this zine on sustainable activism: <http://cre-act.net/sustainable-activism/sustainable-activism/> or this web-resource: <http://knowyourix.org/dealing-with/dealing-with-activist-burn-out-and-self-care/>

## Learning from the barriers

Looking at the barriers<sup>23</sup> to utopian imagination is helpful as it provides information on how to create and sustain practices of it.

Utopian imagination could play a role in approaching differences in activists' motivations, opinions, and practices in a new light and see them as something positive and something that improves activism. This is partly the case within the Global Justice Movement (GJM) where it is understood “as a resource and a value at the same time” (Teske and Tetreault as cited in Strasinger 2010, 88).

Activist self-care and sustainable activism are needed. How could utopian imagination play a role in providing the space for these very personal and subjective but also highly political processes of mental health in a collective manner? Could activists see crisis as an opportunity for change, as its original Greek meaning suggests?<sup>24</sup>

## A first collection of tools

A full collection of all the tools people have suggested in the survey can be found in the online appendix<sup>25</sup>. For example, people suggested looking at utopian (science) fiction writing, immersing oneself in any form of utopian cultural production, making use of rituals, and making use of reflective spaces of self-publishing, such as zines. The importance of intersectionality was also mentioned. Additionally, a lot can be learned from people and movements who are already making steps towards concrete utopias. Meetings and workshops were a further tool that was suggested. This emphasises that utopian imagination needs to be a collective process and not something people do at home on their own. That supports the learning and the spontaneous ideas that can only emerge when creative minds share common space.

## Finally, some answers

1. *To what extent does utopian imagination play a role in this activism?*

Utopian imagination plays a limited role in this activism at the moment. Where it exists, it is hidden as a basic understanding that is not openly, let alone methodologically addressed. Activists see the importance of visioning processes.

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<sup>23</sup> See in the online appendix: <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UI-App-Barriers.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> “Latinized form of Greek krisis 'turning point in a disease' (used as such by Hippocrates and Galen)” ([http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=crisis](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=crisis))

<sup>25</sup> Full appendix here: <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UI-All-Appendixes.pdf> and only the toolbox here: <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UI-App-Toolbox.pdf>



The wish for things to change positively forms the basis for many activists' motivation but rarely informs strategies and tactics.

2. *What is the state of utopian imagination in this activism?*

Utopian imagination is in crisis, with sparks of hope. Creativity and imagination is limited in the context of strong hegemonic conditioning through the status quo and habitual, mainly resistance based activism. Activists identified the lack of space and time as major barriers. However, prefiguration is increasingly practised and shows a path out of the crisis.

3. *Is utopian imagination beneficial or detrimental for this activism?*

Utopian imagination can have many benefits for activism and achieving positive change. After thorough consideration of the few draw-backs, valuable learning can complement its many benefits such as bringing people into activism, keeping people going, and giving direction. Utopian Imagination can lead to more sustainable activism, support new and creative strategies and tactics, and help to re-construct the world in thoughts and action.

4. *How could utopian imagination be fostered?*

Utopian imagination can be fostered with a wide array of tools and methods ranging from exposure to utopian literature through intersectionality and working with children to formal and informal meetings and workshops. Retreats from the status quo, systems thinking, and popular education can help break the conditioning. Getting inspired by other movements opens thought horizons. It is necessary to promote the usefulness of utopian imagination as an important and collective endeavour to facilitate the introduction of those tools.

### **Implications for the literature**

The understanding of utopia as a process was found as expected. Looking at the results more broadly in light of the theory discussed in the literature review, it becomes clear that academic definitions and thoughts about what utopianism is are very much in line with what these activists think about it. This might, however, be influenced by the definition given in the survey. Further research into the understanding of what utopian imagination means to activists would need to be formulated more openly. The replies from some of the respondents confirm that prefigurative politics is a concept that is used and practised without necessarily referring to the term itself. The responding activists confirmed the idea that this activism is rooted in resistance and opposition and emphasised the need to go beyond it.

Only one of the respondents saw any real danger in practising utopian imagination, casting doubt on the warnings even of some advocates of

utopianism. In terms of its potential shortcomings, the idea that utopian imagination is a distraction from real activist work did come up, confirming the theory. It is further interesting that none of the respondents spoke about the possibility of their utopia being someone else's dystopia. This could mean that the surveyed activists assume that there are fundamental values that are widely shared, or that the sample was not diverse enough. The idea that utopia requires, or leads to, perfection didn't come up, showing that this is an outdated conception of utopianism.

### **Implications for the streets**

These findings show that there is the need to practice utopian imagination in activist contexts. The expected benefits make it worthwhile. The toolbox collected through this research project can be a good starting point for activist self-research, workshops<sup>26</sup>, and further development of the concept as well as the practice. However, it became clear that fostering utopian imagination alone is not enough. Some respondents were rightly wondering how to systematically turn utopian imagination into a practical approach for action.

How can the missing link between imagination and transformation be built? How can utopian imagination be practised by activists? First leads point in the direction of prefiguration<sup>27,28</sup>, dual power<sup>29</sup>, intersectionality, popular education, and narrative story-telling<sup>30</sup>. Some of the respondents already ventured some ideas on the question of application as reported in table 1 above.

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26 During the process of writing this thesis, I hosted two workshops on radical imagination. The outlines of those workshops can serve as a further resource and can be found here: <https://utopianactivism.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/667/2018/08/UI-App-RadicalImaginationWorkshops.pdf>

27 According to Antliff (2010), one precondition for utopian and radical imagination is an anarchist version of prefigurative democracy and "political federation" (Antliff 2010, 61), as methods of self-governance.

28 A lot was written about prefiguration in wake of the alter-globalisation movement (Maeckelbergh 2011), such as prefiguration and emotion (Brown and Pickerill 2009), prefigurative politics in Tahrir Square (Sande 2013), prefiguration in interpretation collectives (Baker 2013), prefiguration and actualization (Murray 2014), in relation to state engagement (Petray 2012), and rethinking prefiguration (Yates 2015), to name a few. See Boggs (n.d.) for a the concept of prefigurative communism.

29 Dual Power: "resisting while building counter institutions" (<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/scott-crow-anarchy-and-the-common-ground-collective.pdf>) See also a short video interview: <http://www.submedia.tv/stimulator/2016/02/17/dual-power/> & <http://www.scottcrow.org/#/interview-video-on-dual-power-transitions/>

30 Selbin (2009) writes about the role of story in achieving change. As stories can be used to tell tales from the future, they can give direction, warn, motivate and make things seem possible, affecting the ideological as well as material world. Stories can empower and connect people to work towards change together (Selbin 2009, 3, 16, 189).

What could such a framework look like? What does this mean for overall activist strategy? How can small steps of activist work be kept in orientation towards long term goals? And how could those actions be designed in a way that they support sustainability in activism?

Initial research brought up three books that could be used as points of departure for researching this important aspect of practising utopian imagination:

- *From Anticipation to Action* (Michel Godet 1994)<sup>31</sup>
- *Creating Futures* (Michel Godet 2006)<sup>32</sup>
- *Sociology of the Future* (Bell and Wau 1971)

### **Directions for further research**

This research provides important and valuable first insights into the power of utopian imagination for activism. What next? Many questions that need to be addressed come to mind:

How can imagination be translated into transformation? What conditions would enable activists to engage in processes of utopian imagination? Are there any concrete and successful movements, campaigns, or projects based on utopian imagination? What can be learned from intentional communities and autonomous zones around the world? How can a balance be achieved between building autonomous zones while at the same time having a wider influence beyond? Will practising utopian imagination actually make activism more successful?

Most pressingly, further research into the issue of finding concrete ways of how people can transform the power and benefits of utopian imagination into real change are needed and offer exciting possibilities. For example, a group, campaign, or movement<sup>33</sup> with a positive vision that is interested in experimenting with the tools and concepts could be the basis for a long-term intensive case study aiding activist self-research. This would offer the opportunity to see how thoughts are translated into action and what impact this has on the group of activists, their well-being, the sustainability of the cause, as well as any concrete successes in relation to the vision.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://en.lapropective.fr/dyn/anglais/ouvrages/from-anticipation.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <http://en.lapropective.fr/dyn/anglais/ouvrages/creatingfutures2006.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> One interesting project is “Equilibrismus e.V.” which tries to consult with small island states to establish their ideas. They aim at “a complete change of paradigm in regard to ecological and social issues”, presenting “new concepts instead of reforms” (Equilibrismus e.V., n.d.). See their website for further information: <https://www.equilibrismus.org/en/>.

## **Conclusion: There are many alternatives!**

I am hopeful for the state of utopian imagination, even on this island!  
(Respondent 44)

This research set out to find a way to make activism more successful. After describing the situation that some activists find themselves in and stating the research questions that serve as pointers towards finding a possible solution, the research project was placed in the context of anti-oppression, prefiguration, and movement relevance. The following literature review offered crucial insights into the state of knowledge in utopian studies at the moment and provided useful lessons for utopian imagination as an activist practice. The findings from a qualitative survey conducted with over 24 mostly young, white, western European, and well educated radical anarchist activists were presented and subsequently analysed.

The research showed that the state of utopian imagination in their activism is mostly bleak. But there are also aspects of it hidden in these activists' lives and organising. Many of them see valuable uses in utopian imagination for their activism and for achieving change, and the detriments are light if practices are designed carefully with the risks in mind. The research provided a big collection of ideas on how imagination can be fostered in activist circles to reap the benefits of utopian imagination as an approach in this activism. However, fostering the radical and utopian imagination alone can only be the first step in an activist strategy based on utopianism: there is a need to link the imagination with action and transformation.

The findings of this project legitimize the use of time for utopian imagination as part of activist practice as well as giving an array of ideas to start from. They form an important step in translating the idea of utopia from literature and other art-forms into a strategy of achieving fundamental change that can be applied by activists on the ground. Such an activist strategy based on utopian imagination could start with prefigurative internal processes of horizontality, inclusion, and empowerment. Messages and communication could focus on positive framing and alternative institutions could be created. Further, emotional spaces could be mutually supportive and power and resources redistributed. These are first starting points for groups and movements to experiment with and develop further.

The crisis of neoliberalism offers an opportunity for activists to create, live, and spread their alternative visions of the world. Projects such as the Self-Administration of North and East Syria (SANES), the unemployed workers movement in Argentina, as well as the autonomous zone of the Zapatistas in Chiapas all show that cracks in the system can be occupied with alternatives. The impact of austerity measures in Greece made way for the raise of solidarity economics. The Mondragon collective based in the Basque area shows that different forms of production and reproduction are possible. The situation looks

bleak but offers so many chances and opportunities that need to be imagined and created.

There is no alternative to exploring the many alternatives. It is high time for activists to leave pure resistance once and for all behind. Enough fighting for small little reforms that strengthen the system! Let's start to build in the cracks that the status quo leaves behind. Let's get active and start creating, first in our minds and dreams – and then in the “real” world. There are many alternatives!

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