

Radical Political Imagination and Generational Utopias: Gun Control as a Site of Youth Activism

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For those who still think that utopia is about the impossible, what really is impossible is to carry on as we...¹

RUTH LEVITAS, *Utopia as a Method*



1 Introduction

“We’re your friendly local revolutionaries,” declared Mariann Vizard, the Southern Regional traveler for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), in a speech held in January 1968 at a rally at The University of Texas at Austin in support of resisting the draft.² At the time, criticism against the war in Vietnam had spread across campuses in every corner of the country. Vizard was giving a speech on the importance of not only talking about a revolution but living the revolution every day, a revolution that does not begin by taking to the streets with guns but by living freely, “no matter what that means.”³ Fast-forward to March 2018, when Cameron Kasky, a survivor of the Parkland, Florida high school shooting and an organizer of the March For Our Lives (MFOL) protests, greeted hundreds of thousands of students in Washington, DC: “Welcome to the revolution.”⁴ Students marched in Austin then, too, declaring that “enough is enough” and demanding stricter gun control measures from their

1 Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xii.

2 Mariann Vizard, “Movement Defense,” *The Rag* 2, no. 11 (January 15, 1968): 3.

3 Vizard, “Movement Defense,” 3.

4 Cameron Kasky, “Cameron Kasky Speaks at March For Our Lives - We Are the Change,” filmed March 24, 2018 at March For Our Lives event in Washington, DC, video, 0:19, https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=rgczil-2og8&t=1s&ab_channel=MarchForOurLives, accessed May 3, 2021.

leaders in order to “end gun violence.” Fifty years stand between Kasky and Vizard, and not much has changed in the protesters’ underlying message. As E. J. Montini from the *Arizona Republic* writes: “At its core, the nationwide March for Our Lives campaign is an anti-war movement. It’s trying to put an end to a war we’ve been waging – and continue to wage – against ourselves.”⁵

In this chapter, I explore how radical political imagination has evolved and affected political action in leftist, youth-led gun control movements located in urban Texas.⁶ I consider radical political imagination to be both action-oriented toward fundamental, systemic change and about the smaller, everyday “alternative visions of being, doing, and belonging” constructed in social interactions.⁷ In other words, I analyze radical political imagination as a movement philosophy and as a way of thinking that guides personal activist behavior. In addition, I employ the concept of utopia to describe how the possibilities of radical political imagination are broadened, for example, due to external political opportunities created by mass mobilization. Here, as suggested by Ruth Levitas, I consider utopia as a tool to study radical political imagination rather than as an effort to engage in defining desirable end-goals for societies to strive toward.⁸

I examine radical political imagination as the act of imagining a fundamentally different society than the status quo and utopias as the representations of the broadening of what can be imagined. Both radical political imagination and utopia are culturally embedded notions that reveal just as much about the realities of today as they do about the possibilities of tomorrow. Thus, by probing the understandings the activists have about their own political and cultural context, I examine the type of political action these understandings produce in the present. I particularly focus on radical political imagination that evolves within communities that seem hostile to such efforts but nonetheless are provoked into being through the allowances in other external structures. The political opportunities for leftist youth activists in Texas were and are extremely

5 E. J. Montini, “Montini: March for Our Lives Movement isn’t Anti-gun. It’s Anti-war,” *Arizona Republic*, March 24, 2018, <https://eu.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/ej-montini/2018/03/24/march-our-lives-movement-isnt-anti-gun-its-anti-war/454636002/>, accessed May 3, 2021.

6 Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish use the term radical imagination in *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2015). In order to limit the concept to imagination that deals explicitly with the political, I use the term *radical political imagination*.

7 Alex Khasnabish, “Ecologies of the Radical Imagination,” *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 12 (2020): 1722.

8 Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method*.

narrow, whether it is in the context of the Southern Democrats of the 1960s or the modern Republican Party as the party holding power at the state level. Yet, the anti-war movement in the 1960s as well as the movement against gun violence and mass shootings in places of education both mobilized an unprecedented amount of young people in the United States speaking to the widescale popularity of the issues that translated to local action as well even in the midst of unfavorable political realities.⁹

In this chapter, I argue that the youth-led gun control movements of the twenty-first century are reclaiming the ability to imagine open, even utopian, futures that have been missing from the political Left in the United States. Thus, I begin by considering the time when there was a real belief in social transformation—a revolution—in the U.S. political Left. I define the key concepts of this chapter, radical political imagination, and utopia within the context of “the Long Sixties” and what “radical” meant to the activists themselves.¹⁰ During “the Long Sixties,” the Vietnam War galvanized youth in the United States in a way that facilitated radical political imagination, opening up possibilities to imagine a fundamentally different society. Grounding the conversation in the context of Texas and the New Left, I examine *The Rag*, an underground campus paper published in Austin in 1966–1977, and the types of direct action, activist subjectivities, and articulations of utopian visions for the future that can be produced in an atmosphere characterized by mass radicalization.

In order to demonstrate the significance of broad possibilities for imagination and open futures, it is also important to consider the consequences of limited political imagination and a fixed sense of the future. The politics of gun control throughout the late twentieth century offer a compelling example of how a lack of radical activism and narrowing down of possibilities have stymied the political imagination of the Left in the United States. Focusing on the legislative battles around Concealed Carry and Campus Carry in Texas, I demonstrate how the gun control movement has continuously surrendered ground in the face of relentless efforts by the political Right to pursue their

9 “The Latest: ‘March for Our Lives’ Rallies Draw Huge Crowds,” Associated Press, March 25, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/3ff58ce25dd94736aaod6c2c4f398eec>, accessed May 3, 2021.

10 “The Long Sixties” is used to describe how the spirit of activism characteristic of the 1960s began already in the 1950s with the emergence of the civil rights movement and ended in the disintegration of the New Left in the 1970s. See Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left Since the Second World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, and George Shulman, *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

own utopian project. This ceding has led some scholars to question whether a gun control movement as such has even existed until very recently.¹¹

I argue that the limited political imagination and the appearance of closed opportunities have begun to shift as youth-led gun control movements have emerged as a new iteration of leftist politics. I center on two movements in Texas to demonstrate how the revival of radical political imagination and utopian visions of the future can affect the strategies and goals activists decide to adopt. I begin by examining the campus movement “Cocks Not Glocks” (CNG), which formed at UT Austin after the passage of SB 11 allowing Campus Carry. Drawing on interviews conducted with activists, media appearances by the organizers, and the *Come & Take It* documentary (2018) about the protest, I examine how the CNG protest radically reimagined what political action in gun violence prevention can be by contesting the current state of affairs through humor while also displaying how radicalness can be something embodied.¹² Despite having no real possibilities to affect legislation, the CNG protest was integral to the effort to gain attention to the gun laws in Texas and as such, sparked hope in the campus community with long-lasting effects.

I continue to examine how this hope was again animated by the MFOL marches that cascaded to Austin too. The mass mobilization of young people and students managed to revive political hope in a manner that brought to mind the spirit of the 1960s to the older activists that had lived through the mobilization against the Vietnam War. By considering a variety of data, ranging from policy letters drafted by MFOL and MFOL Texas, campaign ads and a series of speeches and photographs taken at an MFOL protest march in Austin, Texas in 2018, I show how radical political imagination propelled by mass mobilization can exponentially broaden the futures that movements can perceive. I consider how a collective identity framed around an imagined generation has led to the confluence of different issue-based movements that has facilitated processes of imagining larger, utopian, projects. These projects are constructed in interactions within and across organizations, in coalitions centered on empowering minority voices. I conclude the chapter by exploring the future of youth activism and gun control movements.

11 Kristin Goss, *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

12 The interviews with the activists were conducted as a part of the Academy of Finland-funded Campus Carry research project at the University of Turku.

2 The Revolution is Inevitable: Radical Political Imagination and Utopias during “the Long Sixties”

When students marched in the spring of 2018 for gun control, many were reminded of the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam to Washington, DC in 1969. The sheer amount of young people that had gathered for the MFOL marches were enough for the newspapers to draw comparisons to the Vietnam War era. Much of the reporting took its cues from the Associated Press, which documented the marches throughout the day and compared the numbers between the two events: “A series of protests held across the United States Saturday in support of gun control is shaping up to be one of the biggest youth protests since the era of the Vietnam War.”¹³ The *Washington Post* wrote that the “The memory of the Moratorium — its breadth and its limits — strikingly echoes the strident efforts of high school protesters today.”¹⁴ Some protestors present at the MFOL marches were themselves veterans of the 1960s anti-war movement and saw the mass shootings of today as the modern war: “In Vietnam, we shot at someone else; now we are shooting each other.”¹⁵

To understand what made “the Long Sixties” in particular important in the history of radical political imagination in the U.S. Left, and what exactly the youth of today are drawing from its spirit, it is necessary to first understand what makes political imagination radical in the first place. There are many ways to define radicalness, but at its root it is about comprehending problems in society as connected to a larger system.¹⁶ Therefore, in order for societies to be made better, a transformative change to the status quo is required—whatever “the system” and the “status quo” might mean to different actors. Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps suggest that to be radical is to not accept the status quo and act in ways beyond what is considered “normal” in a society.¹⁷ Furthermore, Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, and George Shulman posit that

13 “The Latest.”

14 Zachary Jonathan Jacobson, “The March for Our Lives Will Last a Few Hours. Its Impact Will Last a Generation,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/03/23/the-march-for-our-lives-will-last-a-few-hours-its-impact-will-last-a-generation/>, accessed May 3, 2021.

15 “March for Our Lives: Rallies around the World Call for Stricter US Gun Control,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 24, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/march-for-our-lives-rallies-around-the-world-call-for-stricter-us-gun-control/a-4318270>, accessed May 3, 2021.

16 The word “radical” itself originates from the Latin word that denotes “root.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/radical>, accessed April 8, 2021.

17 Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 6.

radical is “fundamental and transformative.”¹⁸ Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish define radical as the “understanding that social, political, economic and cultural problems are outcomes of deeply rooted tensions, contradictions, power imbalances, and forms of oppression and exploitation,” and nothing short of transforming the whole system can change these dynamics.¹⁹ However, while the root of radicalness is understood as the desire for fundamental societal change, Khasnabish also argues that radical imagination itself is collective work in the mundane.²⁰ Thus, it is not only found in large-scale action by social movements but in the quotidian, in being and living differently—or, as Mariann Vizard encouraged people in the anti-war rally in Austin in 1968, in living the revolution: “[T]he revolution itself is a very personal, very individual kind of thing. It’s happening to people every day. It happens whenever a person or group of people decide that from now on they are going to consider themselves to be free.”²¹

Indeed, for the New Left youth running *The Rag*, what it meant to be radical stemmed from the very personal realization that they considered themselves to be different from the rest of the society. Seeing themselves as opposite of what was normal and acceptable helped them to recognize how other societal issues were also consequences of that same discordance with the status quo. For example, Scott Pittman reflected on how growing up with the expectations of his conservative family changed the way he saw his own reality:

My humanity is so restricted that any meaningful experience threatens my existence within the system – what if I am unable to relate the color black with inferior? Or if \$20,000 per year plus is not the epitome of my expectations in life? Or if I can’t justify killing by uttering the incantation “commie”, “beatnik”, or “Jew”? These things do not fit into my concepts of reality, and this forces me to live my own reality within an unreal situation. Once I have lost faith in the conditioning of this society I am able to see an incredible range of alternatives for living and experiencing my environment.²²

Thus, it was from this sense of difference that the coalitions of the New Left were formed. Loosely affiliated organizations and individual activists fighting

18 Coles, Reinhardt, and Shulman, *Radical Future Pasts*, 4.

19 Haiven and Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination*, 5.

20 Khasnabish, “Ecologies of the Radical Imagination,” 1720.

21 Vizard, “Movement Defense,” 3.

22 Scott Pittman, “dRAG-net!” *The Rag* 2, no. 10 (January 8, 1968): 12.

for racial equality, women's rights, gay liberation, and an end to the war in Vietnam saw their fight as against the government of the United States, which was perceived as imperialistic and repressive in its pursuit of a conformist, capitalist society. What was new about the New Left was that instead of traditional unions and emphasis on class consciousness, the movement was driven by a belief that a unique coalition of students and racial minorities could bring about radical change.²³ It included organizations such as the black-led Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the white-led Students for Democratic Society (SDS), who were engaging in the communal work of radical political imagination, acting in solidarity and cooperating in educating the public through leafletting, protest marches, picket lines, and other acts of civil disobedience. The most important goal was to raise public awareness, in the belief that if people saw the discordance with the world for what it was and how it should or could be, change would happen. As Vizard underlined for her readers, power was not in physical power but in numbers:

Try to involve people on as many levels as possible in action form rallies on the university campuses to a vigil at the LBJ ranch to sit-ins at that draft board to a march to the State Capitol to possible civil disobedience or at least a good picket line. ... That, I think, is what "resistance" is all about --- not necessarily involving the militant street tactics of Oakland and Whitehall --- we know we're not ready for that... but simply that we don't ask the system anymore. That we understand that it is rotten clear through and that our job is to show that to as many people as possible so that we can clear it away.²⁴

The role that militant, violent action could or should play in radical activism was continuously contested within the movement by the end of the decade.²⁵ In particular, acceptance of violence deepened tensions between the local organizers in the North and South. During SDS's national convention in December 1967, emphasis was placed on the importance of "new militancy," which the representatives from the Southern states could not embrace.²⁶ In response, the Austin delegates, together with other representatives from Southern states,

23 Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 96.

24 Mariann Vizard, "It's Time to Organize," *The Rag* 2, no. 12 (January 29, 1968): 13.

25 See, e.g., Holly Scott, *Younger Than That Now: The Politics of Age in the 1960s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 111; Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 157.

26 Dick Reavis, "SDS National Council Says - The South Will Rise," *The Rag* 2, no. 12 (January 29, 1968): 3.

released a resolution that spoke of the resentment Southern organizers felt in what they saw as belittling behavior by the Northern organizers and what it meant to organize in that context:

And we realize that we are the southern organizers, that we have to develop our own strategy and tactics and knowledge of our concrete geopolitical situation, to talk to our own people [sic], and that that is how we [sic] can best strengthen the national organization and the national strategy and analysis.²⁷

Consequently, although tactics did play a key part in the formation of specific movements like the Black Panthers, who in turn were fundamental in provoking in the entire New Left imaginations of radically different kinds of realities, “the Long Sixties” were unique in the history of leftist radicalism due to the possibilities that mass mobilization seemed to offer in terms of imagining a better, even utopian, society.²⁸ Coles, Reinhardt, and Shulman describe the radicals of the 1960s as being “animated by the ‘utopian’ sense that it was possible to reconstitute or refound regime by remaking its central institutions.”²⁹ The time was characterized by epic theories and utopias as something not only worth imagining but possible to achieve.³⁰ As described by one activist in *The Rag*, who was also worried about the state of the movement and the future it promised, the revolution itself was almost a foregone conclusion: “I guess I’ll go on supporting the revolution (since it’s inevitable and I couldn’t possible support the status quo).”³¹

What makes the concept of utopia a relevant analytical tool in explaining the uniqueness of “the Long Sixties” in the history of radical activism of the U.S. Left—and, as I will argue later, in considering the youth movements of today—is its capacity to elucidate the opening of imagined possibilities. In this sense, utopia is not an “end in itself” or a value judgement made on the particular utopian character of a vision for the future but a perspective to help examine phenomena.³² As Levitas posits, employing utopia as an analytical tool is to study the “expression of longing and fulfilment” embedded and

27 Vizard, “It’s Time,” 17.

28 Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 150.

29 Coles, Reinhardt, and Shulman, *Radical Future Pasts*, 7.

30 Coles, Reinhardt, and Shulman, 4.

31 Larry Freudiger, “California Dreamer: Revolution Revisited,” *The Rag*, 1, no. 28 (August, 1967): 10.

32 Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment: A Narrative of the Political Transformation in Eastern Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 5.

repressed in societies rather than understanding utopia as the goal societies could or should strive for.³³ Or, as Charles Taylor explained, no matter how far off utopias might seem, they still deal with what is imagined to be possible “in the bend of human nature.”³⁴ Furthermore, utopias are not wholly diametric to practical thinking either, as “what is pragmatically possible” is defined by the vision we consider to be utopian.³⁵ What is important, then, is to evaluate how open the possibilities for the future are in the first place, rather than how realistic the utopian visions themselves are. Consequently, what made the radicalism of the 1960s unique was the belief in the actual possibility of alternative futures radically different from the present—that “revolution appeared to hover immanently in the atmosphere”—and how that belief animated political action.³⁶

3 “Somewhere in the Middle”: Gun Control and the Lack of Radical Political Imagination

In order to understand how youth-led gun control movements are reclaiming the radical political imagination of the 1960s, it is important to understand the type of activism or issue-advocacy born in environments where a lack of different imaginable futures hinders the success of the movement. I argue that this has been the case with gun control in particular. The time after “the Long Sixties” was characterized by a shift in public consciousness that can be described as counterrevolutionary; with governments responding to the imagined wishes of the “silent majority,” emphasis was placed on identities that morphed into the culture wars still being played out today, resulting in “a staggering closing down of the sense of possibility.”³⁷ Globally, too, the concept of utopia undeniably lost its value.³⁸ As utopias were condemned as exercises in futility in the best case and as dangerous and totalitarian impulses in the worst, the emphasis on realism persisted.³⁹ Fredric Jameson describes how the loss of utopian thought is firmly tied to the fabric of today’s postmodern cities, which are in a permanent crisis mode; thus, if any future is imagined at all, it

33 Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 5.

34 Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 110.

35 Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010), 6.

36 Gary Thiher, “Youth Class!” *The Rag*, 2, no. 27 (June 6, 1968): 4.

37 Coles, Reinhardt, and Shulman, *Radical Future Pasts*, 8.

38 Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment*, 6.

39 See, for example, Karl Popper, Alan Ryan, and E. H. Gombrich, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

takes the form of a dystopia.⁴⁰ Cynical reasoning has led the way to “a weakening of historicity or of the sense of the future; a conviction that fundamental change is no longer possible.”⁴¹ It is not only hard to imagine that change is possible but also to imagine what that change could even be. As Roberto Unger declares, “As we have lost confidence in large projects, whether theory or of politics, we have been taught how to live without them rather than how to recover and remake them in other, more promising forms.”⁴²

This lack of radical political imagination and an ability to imagine alternatives was evident in U.S. leftist politics at the start of the twenty-first century, and in particular it was the underlying condition characterizing the politics of gun control. At first glance, radical political imagination and utopia in the context of gun politics may not seem an obvious pair, especially if utopia is considered to be something unreachable in human societies. However, if we consider radical political imagination to be about understanding issues as systematic and utopia as the opening of possibilities to imagine things that previously were inconceivable, then the concepts are useful in gun politics, too. Furthermore, in many ways the successes of the Right regarding the right to carry guns has enabled the imagining of a type of utopia where every citizen is free to carry guns wherever they wish without any oversight from the government. For example, if the trajectory since post-Civil War Texas had been toward restricting gun carrying rather than making it more accessible, the Concealed Carry bill (SB 60 in 1995), the Campus Carry bill (SB 11 in 2015), the Open Carry bill (HB 195 in 2015), and a law allowing guns in churches (SB 535 in 2019) proved to be watershed moments that would have a profound impact on expanding which and where citizens were allowed to carry.⁴³

On the other side, the politics of gun control have been characterized by the continuous cession of ground and moving of the goal posts of what is considered “normal” in society. In 1968, Sue Jankovsky wrote in *The Rag* about how Senate Bill 162, which among other things armed campus police and led to the threatened safety of the writers of *The Rag* and others identifying with the New Left: “The cops have guns; we’re not living in a safe, academic community, but in a city.”⁴⁴ In 2016, not only was the presence of armed campus security

40 Fredric Jameson, “Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future,” in *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, eds. Michael Gordin, Gyan Prakash, and Helen Tilley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 22.

41 Fredric Jameson, “Utopia as Method,” 24.

42 Roberto Unger, *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

43 On post-Civil War gun legislation in Texas, see Hernández-Ehrisman in this volume.

44 Sue Jankovsky, “Campus Cops: Licensed to Quell,” *The Rag* 2, no. 13 (February 5, 1968): 3.

an uncontested fact, but students and faculty were allowed to carry firearms on the premises of public universities in Texas as well. If in 1995 public buildings could still get away with banning guns on their premises, regardless of the new legislation, no such affordances were given to public universities in 2015, despite their protests.⁴⁵ Likewise, if the discussion after the UT Tower shooting in 1966 revolved around whether handguns should be banned or not, in the twenty-first century handguns have become a normalized, uncontested part of life while so-called assault weapons have become the subject of intense debate.⁴⁶ And if in 1995 constitutional carry or permitless carry was seen as a fringe idea supported only by the most fervent gun rights advocates, it did become reality in Texas in 2021.⁴⁷

Undoubtedly, this development can be attributed to the relentless efforts and extraordinary scale of organizations such as the National Rifle Association. Yet, in part, it is also due to the inability of gun control advocates to animate wide-scale grassroots action that could be called a social movement.⁴⁸ For most of the twentieth century, gun control activism, both nationally and locally, was led by lawmakers and groups of policy experts for whom moderation was the key.⁴⁹ In 1995, the challengers to the Concealed Carry bill consisted of the national gun control organization Handgun Control Inc. (HCI), later known as the Brady Campaign, and a coalition of local leaders, such as law enforcement officials, teachers, mothers, religious leaders, and some business owners.⁵⁰ In 2015, when the Texas legislature passed SB 11, opposition to the bill looked very much like it had twenty years before, with campus personnel, law enforcement, and organizations such as Moms Demand Action speaking out against it.⁵¹ The end results of both of these legislative fights were the same—the bills were passed with very few concessions. In 1994, the *Austin American-Statesman*

45 Stuart Eskenazi, "DPS Restricts Handguns on its Property," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 30, 1995, B5; Asher Price, "UT Campus Carry Panel: No Gun-Free Classrooms," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 11, 2015, A1.

46 See Kolehmainen in this volume.

47 Sami Sparber, "Texans Can Carry Handguns without a License or Training Starting Sept. 1, after Gov. Greg Abbott Signs Permitless Carry Bill into Law," *The Texas Tribune*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/16/texas-constitutional-carry-greg-abbott/>, accessed May 29, 2022.

48 Goss, *Disarmed*.

49 Goss, 9.

50 Eunice Moscoso, "Activists, Victims Work behind the Scenes for Gun Control," *Austin American-Statesman*, October 22, 1995, B7.

51 Ralph K.M. Haurwitz, "On Eve of Sandy Hook, Rally Calls for Gun Limits Citing Sandy Hook, Rally at Capitol Says Curb Guns, Marchers Call for Gun Limits," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 14, 2015, B1.

reported a speech given by Sarah Brady at UT Austin that summarized the position of all major gun control advocates of the country: “We are not for disarming people,” Brady told the audience, “When you have an epidemic it’s a public health issue, a safety issue. ... Somewhere in the middle are most of us.”⁵² Yet, while gun rights advocates had been very vocal about the need to protect their constitutional rights, there were no legitimate “extremist” groups demanding disarmament on the opposing side. The National Coalition to Ban Handguns (NCBH), from which HCI had separated at its formation, had held tougher positions on gun control, including banning handguns.⁵³ But once it became clear how unpopular this really was, the NCBH changed its position and name to the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, an organization that still exists today.⁵⁴

Nor did gun control arouse any significant grassroots activism in those considered part of the “extremist” groups on the Left during “the Long Sixties.” On the contrary, when militancy grew among certain sections of the New Left during the latter part of that decade, the Gun Control Act of 1968 was passed in part to keep firearms from being available to groups like the Black Panthers.⁵⁵ While not all members of the movement were convinced that the revolution required taking up arms—most organizers in the South believed that violence was “impossible and inadvisable” as an organizational tactic in their community—limiting gun carrying by private citizens was certainly not on the agenda of the New Left, which saw the U.S. government as enemy number one.⁵⁶ Yet, even though the gun debate during the 1960s was not the partisan issue that it is today, Scott Melzer argues that the formation of the gun rights movement and transformation of the National Rifle Association into the ardent defender of the Second Amendment and the “cultural warrior of the Right” happened in part as a direct response to the threat the movements of “the Long Sixties” posed for traditional “American” values and frontier masculinity.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Robert Spitzer notes that gun control as a social

52 Mike Burgess, “Sarah Brady Takes Gun-Control Opponents in Stride,” *Austin American-Statesman*, October 14, 1994, B7.

53 Robert Spitzer, *The Politics of Gun Control*, 2nd ed. (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1995), 89.

54 Walter Carrol, “Organizations Advocating Gun Control,” in *Guns and Contemporary Society: The Past, Present, and Future of Firearms and Firearm Policy*, ed. Glenn Utter (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 177.

55 For the arguments used by advocates of the bill, see, e.g., William Vizzard, *Shots in the Dark: the Policy, Politics, and Symbolism of Gun Control* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 3.

56 Students for a Democratic Society, National Convention, “The Resolution,” *The Rag* 2, no. 12 (January 29, 1968): 13.

57 Scott Melzer, *Gun Crusaders: The NRA’s Culture War* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 9, 47.

regulatory policy is bound to incite a high amount of controversy, comparable to issues like civil rights or abortion rights, as it is not only a question of regulating individual behavior but trying to affect community values.⁵⁸

Consequently, throughout the century, as the influence of the NRA grew while at the same time the very public assassinations of political leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy sparked the first stirrings of gun control advocacy, gun rights became the issue of the Right and gun control the issue of the Left.⁵⁹ Arguably due to the strength of the gun rights movement, gun politics have been mostly debated on the terms of the Right. On the other hand, the gun control movement has largely been on the defensive, focusing on moderate legislation on the local level with largely symbolic consequences.⁶⁰ This has strangled radical political imagination in the gun control movement and narrowed the opportunities to imagine not only a different type of future, but actions and goals worth pursuing. However, I argue that this has begun to shift, as the youth of today are reclaiming the spirit of political hope that characterized the mobilization of “the Long Sixties.”

4 “We Don’t Want To Live With It”: Humor and Generational Utopias as Expressions of Radical Political Imagination

As I contend that the youth-led gun control movements of the twenty-first century are fundamentally altering the dynamics of gun politics, I focus on two ways radical political imagination has manifested in recent gun control movements in Austin formed in relation to two very different political realities: the “Cocks Not Clocks” (CNG) protest showed how, even with limited options, radical political imagination could be expressed through humor, while the March For Our Lives (MFOL) movement, buoyed by the power of mass mobilization, exploded the opportunities for imagining different type of futures. Using humor as an expression of radical political imagination, CNG was able to reimagine action in gun control activism; alternatively, the generational utopias imagined by MFOL redefined the goals of gun control activism. Thus, both CNG and MFOL were key moments in the generational shift in gun control activism.

Humor became the core of the CNG protest when Jessica Jin, a UT Austin alumna, found the idea of accepting gun violence as a de facto part of

⁵⁸ Spitzer, *The Politics*, 5.

⁵⁹ Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 65.

⁶⁰ Vizzard, *Shots in the Dark*, 155.

“American” culture not only inherently wrong but completely absurd.⁶¹ Enraged over analysis that pundits on a Texas radio station offered on the permanent and inevitable nature of gun violence after the Umpqua Community College shooting in October 1, 2015, Jin encouraged her peers to start bringing dildos to the university. This was an explicit effort to protest the new Campus Carry legislation, which allowed the carrying of firearms on public universities, and to make visible the absurdities of gun culture, as public displays of sex toys were considered a misdemeanor under Texas state law. The “absurdist direct action organization” would eventually grow into a series of protests involving thousands of participants and sex toys, gaining the attention of local, national, and international media, and eventually even leading to an invitation to the White House for the group’s leaders.⁶²

Together with a group of young women at UT Austin, Jin organized a protest to fight “absurdity with absurdity.”⁶³ Employing sex toys as a visual representation of this, the CNG protest approached the Campus Carry legislation from a cultural perspective. What the Campus Carry law represented to the CNG protestors was an unacceptable status quo. Jin explained this in the documentary *Come & Take It*: “So they say as long as you have a gun you can live with it. Well, we don’t want to live with it, we think that’s a horrible solution.”⁶⁴ Though the CNG protesters did not necessarily contest the constitutional right of citizens to carry firearms, they did contest the normalization of gun culture itself. That is, while they did not question the legality of the bill, they did make efforts to denormalize the concept of private gun ownership for the purpose of self-defense. It is this questioning of the root of the issue, rather than only the specific policy, that made CNG an exercise in constructing collective radical political imagination, while humor became the means to which express it.

According to incongruity theory, “humor is based on the perception or recognition of incongruity” or, as Jarno Hietalahti posits, in the “paradoxes that need to be solved.”⁶⁵ Connecting this idea to the concept of utopia, as utopias

61 Jessica Jin, “Episode 39 – Jessica Jin (CNG),” interview by Ari Andersen, *Millennials Don’t Suck*, January 30, 2018, audio, 7:33.

62 Jin, “Episode 39,” 6:35.

63 Mark Wilson, “Sex Toys Used to Protest Gun Law,” *Austin American Statesman*, August 25, 2016, B1.

64 Jin, *Come & Take It*, dir. Ellen Spiro and P. J. Raval (March 2018), video, 13:13.

65 Giseline Kuipers, “The Sociology of Humor,” in *The Primer of Humor Research, Vol. 8*, ed. Victor Raskin, (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 363; Jarno Hietalahti, “The Significance of Humor and Laughter for Utopian Thought,” in *The Revival of Political Imagination: Utopias as Methodology*, ed. Teppo Eskelinen (London: Zed Books, 2020), 117.

are also contradictions of the present, Hietalahti shows how humor and laughter can become instrumental in enhancing the possibilities for change presented in utopian constructions.⁶⁶ The CNG protest did not articulate any utopian visions for the future; indeed, future visions were not instrumental to the protest. However, if humor and laughter have the power to make visible the absurdity of the present, of the status quo, the more then “there is room and possibilities for utopia.”⁶⁷ Thus, while not presenting alternatives, by laughing at the normalized status of gun culture the CNG protest opened up possibilities for imagining alternatives. As John Holloway describes the modern state of the world, it is as if societies are trapped in a room with no doors and no windows while the walls are caving in—most people are debating how to arrange the furniture in the room but some are, through radical political imagination, creating cracks in those walls.⁶⁸

Absurdity as the expression of radical political imagination can prove to be a particularly powerful tool for activists working to create opportunities in an environment where none seem to exist. For the CNG protestors, whose options for otherwise affecting policy were nonexistent, humor and dildos as a sign of resistance emerged as a way to politicize daily life. The Campus Carry law had already been passed when the CNG protest was organized, and with a Republican majority in the Texas legislature, the chances of successfully lobbying to reverse the policy were not even entertained by the activists. Instead, as described by one of the organizers of the protest, they focused on spreading information and influencing the opinions of their peers:

Our intention was never to change legislation. It was mostly just to get a reaction out of students, because students were not involved in the decision-making process. Students were not invited to be a part of the task force. They were not invited to testify for the working group. We just wanted to get students involved. This Campus Carry bill is now a reality.⁶⁹

Furthermore, the protest used humor to contest notions of sexuality and gender, not only in the context of gun culture but vis-à-vis the broader culture the protestors occupied: “The dildos proved a point—one to make a joke of masculinity and gun culture, but also to highlight the fact that Texas obscenity

66 Hietalahti, “The Significance,” 122.

67 Hietalahti, 123.

68 John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto, 2010), 8.

69 Interview with research team, University of Texas at Austin, March 27, 2018, notes in possession of author.

laws take precedence over gun control.”⁷⁰ Beyond gun culture itself—which was not part of the upbringing of the activists—was the fact that gun culture as a representation of “toxic” masculinity appeared to be more acceptable than sexuality.

Using humor to disrupt the normalized imaginations of what gun culture can appear to be, the CNG protest radically reimagined what advocating for gun control looks like. As noted by Jin, most of the gun violence prevention activists were gun violence survivors themselves, working from a place of trauma:

[U]sually gun violence prevention is really reactionary right? There’s a shooting and everyone’s like here’s what we can change and this is all really sad and terrible and it gets people down after a while, like it’s very exhausting to be a gun violence prevention activist because you’re dealing with heartbreaking tragedy everyday.⁷¹

The CNG protest was also rooted in a strong sense of insecurity and the precarious life of the participants, particularly due to women who had been or were afraid of becoming victims of sexual assault, a prevailing concern in campus communities. This sense of insecurity was compounded by the fact that the young women organizers became targets of vicious online hate immediately after the protest.⁷² Yet, the ability to have fun within a context that is often characterized by seriousness, tragedy, and an overwhelming sense of fear was in itself radically different from the way gun control activism has traditionally been organized. There is empowerment in finding the fun in survival.⁷³ The jovial nature of the protests even opened up a physical sense of possibilities intrinsically tied to campus space:

It was the first day of class when I did that, and so their first experience at UT was me screaming with a dildo. It apparently shaped a bunch, like, “For me, it’s my day at UT, my first day in college, and this girl is holding

70 Interview with research team, University of Texas at Austin, March 27, 2018, notes in possession of author.

71 Jin, “Episode 39,” 27:40.

72 Hannah Smothers, “How a Group of College Girls in Texas Became a National Harassment Target For Guns-Rights Activists,” *Cosmopolitan*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a3273931/cockes-not-glocks-protest-texas-harassment/>, accessed May 3, 2021.

73 Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), 70.

up a dildo for a gun violence protest.” The idea that people will say you can do anything in college and you can really, like... That was a physical feeling for that.⁷⁴

On the other hand, humor can also be mistaken for frivolousness. The organizers of the protest grappled with maintaining the seriousness of the message while understanding that their cohort was persuaded by activism that was fun: “There was an issue with that, just kind of cognitive dissonance, because policy is the most important, but in order to get the attention of college students you have to be more... You have to be a little bit wackier.”⁷⁵

The humor and absurdity of the protest caused a multiplicity of complex emotions in the participants and the audience, from an enormous sense of possibility to unbridled hate. Yet, existing in a reality that feels absurd is also deeply *uncomfortable*. The main purpose of the protest was to embody what it felt like, particularly as a woman, to coexist in the same space as firearms. In the performance of the uncomfortable, no borders between the protestors and audiences were demarcated—discomfort was embodied by the ones holding the dildo and induced in the audiences witnessing that act. This approach was made explicit to participants, as demonstrated by the speech Jin gave when handing out the dildos to protesters: “Strap it on, deal with the discomfort, deal with the weird looks because that’s the way people should be treating gun culture in America.”⁷⁶ The uncomfortableness represented the same misfit aspect the radicals of “the Long Sixties” felt upon realizing they did not belong within the status quo.

There was also a clear incongruity between what kind of activists the CNG organizers imagined themselves to be and what the norms and expectations were in the gun violence prevention community, which led to disillusionment that stymied the growth of the movement. Furthermore, this disillusionment was very clearly tied to their identities as young women, many of color, as if their very existence in that space was too radical. Jin described this revelation after being invited to Washington, DC to a gun control policy meeting after the success of the CNG protest to share her perspective with other members of prominent gun violence prevention organizations across the country:

74 Interview with research team, University of Texas at Austin, April 4, 2018, notes in possession of author.

75 Interview with research team, University of Texas at Austin, March 27, 2018, notes in possession of author.

76 Jin, *Come & Take It*, 12:05.

I don't need to tie what I'm working on culturally into this very dry policy space. My work is probably more cultural and it's more about changing perspectives than changing laws. ... My mistake was thinking that I needed the folks in DC to take me seriously. ... They put me in a panel in that event called "what's new in gun violence prevention." ... [W]hat was new in gun violence prevention was the young person, the black girl and the gays. ... That shouldn't be a new thing.⁷⁷

Jin's experience shows how coalitions of students, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people, formed already in "the Long Sixties," sometimes are a product of being grouped together as the same *other* by those in the majority.

Despite the disillusionment, however, the protest managed to create a sense of hope and excitement, both in the organizers themselves and within the community. The official Facebook channel of CNG is an example of the long-lasting resonance of the movement. The page has remained active throughout the years, supporting "get out the vote" efforts and offering political commentary on various issues, often by posting memes with dildos Photoshopped into the hands of Donald and Ivanka Trump, members of the neo-fascist Proud Boys group, and armed men protesting COVID-19 restrictions.⁷⁸ Replacing guns with dildos in these memes worked to produce the same effect as the protest itself, using humor to contest the normalization of images of firearms and making visible the absurdity of some of the debates dominating the political conversations of the day. Studies have shown the prevalence of young people engaging with and producing political memes to build community, to cope in the world, and to persuade and influence their peers.⁷⁹ The dildos used by CNG proved to be a simple and effective (viral) way to engage with politics online.

77 Jin, "Episode 39," 50:05.

78 Cocks Not Glocks, "Trump promotes 'GIANT, BEAUTIFUL, MASSIVE' dildo," Facebook, September 30, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/cocksnoglocks/photos/a.1700740450203280/1978033829140606/>; Cocks Not Glocks, "#Goyaway, Goya," Facebook, July 16, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/cocksnoglocks/photos/a.1779365942340730/2757464954530819/>; Cocks Not Glocks, "Boys will be boys, but they still play with toys," Facebook, August 15, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/cocksnoglocks/photos/a.1700740450203280/1957489484528374/>; Cocks Not Glocks, "Michigan protestors valiantly fighting for our right to go back to work to sacrifice our lungs to the holy shrine of capitalism. God bless America!" Facebook, May 2, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/cocksnoglocks/photos/a.1700740450203280/2691633614447287/>, all accessed May 3, 2021.

79 On political memes and their usage and purpose, see, e.g., Benita Heiskanen, "Meme-ing Electoral Participation," *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017); Joel Penney, "'It's So Hard Not to Be Funny in This Situation': Memes and Humor in U.S. Youth Online Political Expression," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 8 (2020): 791–806; Ryan Milner,

The myriad of different opportunities that the organizers of CNG themselves created in the political structure by reproducing alternative ways of doing things made such collective actions vital. The provocative way in which the protest approached gun control activism managed to catch the attention of the media in a way that at that point far surpassed any other effort to contest gun laws in Texas. This also created a sense of hope in the UT Austin faculty. A UT graduate student described how the protest created a sense of solidarity in the community:

I think it obviously served to highlight the absurdity of the law and also to create a space where the UT community feels united on this issue, as opposed to the legislature. So, I think that creating that space was very successful in letting students know that they are not alone in the opposition of this law. I think that probably the main success is in the long term of showing to the city and the state and the country that we are not this mute, compliant group of people who are willing to just sort of take this lying down.⁸⁰

In the campus community of Austin, the CNG protest, together with the faculty-led Gun-Free UT movement, constructed new networks for gun violence prevention ready to be mobilized, networks that were considered vital when the MFOL protest swept across the country two years later.⁸¹ As a UT Austin professor explained:

People like to say that nothing happened after Sandy Hook, and if nothing would happen after, you know, twenty six-year-olds are shot, nothing is ever going to happen. But it was never true that nothing happened. ... I think what we saw in Parkland this year is a result of that slow, somewhat underground, somewhat understated but long-term continuation of a protest movement.⁸²

Radical political imagination and lived forms of utopia are about opening the possibilities for a different future by working “against the present in the present itself.”⁸³ By employing the disruptive power humor can have, CNG created

“Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2357–90.

80 Interview with research team, University of Texas at Austin, April 25, 2018, notes in possession of author.

81 For a discussion about Gun-Free UT, see Heiskanen in this volume.

82 Interview with research team, University of Texas at Austin, March 28, 2018, notes in possession of author.

83 Keijo Lakkala, “Disruptive Utopianism: Opening the Present,” in *The Revival of Political Imagination: Utopias as Methodology*, ed. Teppo Eskelinen (London: Zed Books, 2020), 31.

new ways to advocate for and think about gun control. Through CNG, already the emphasis was placed on the potential of young people to reimagine gun control.

This generational shift, however, would only truly become a driving force in the MFOL protests, where radical political imagination became the vehicle through which to reimagine the goals of gun control and even utopian futures. The first of these protests was organized by students on March 24, 2018, after the Valentine's Day shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The event echoed the size and spirit of the 1960s anti-war protests. As the Parkland youth called on their peers to come together to ensure no more would fall victim to a mass shooting, hundreds of thousands of students responded in solidarity across the globe, in cities and in small towns, from Washington, DC to Hong Kong.⁸⁴

This massive set of gatherings on the streets around the world created, for a moment, the sense that anything could be achieved. To those fighting for gun control, the crack in the wall of the status quo had never before appeared so large. Thus, if the students involved in CNG, limited by how closed the opportunities for change appeared to be, had focused on making visible what was wrong in the present, the MFOL youth were much more future-oriented. The idea that even one more shooting would be too much was popularized in the Parkland youth's first viral tweet #NeverAgain, which galvanized a generation of young people to take ownership of their potential power to change their own realities. For the tens of thousands that walked in Austin, Texas on March 24, 2018, the drawing of borders between now and the past was just as clear. The present had become unacceptable, an unlivable dystopia and existential threat that could no longer be ignored. This would be the point of no return. The newly drawn border was verbalized in signs carrying the popular rallying call of the march, that even one more school shooting would be too much.

The focus in the MFOL marches was not on what was possible but what was impossible to live with. When around 40,000 people die by gun violence per year and political pundits lament this as an inevitable and entrenched part of "American" culture, the goal of "not one more" is utopian even in a very traditional understanding of the word, pregnant with negative and naïve connotations.⁸⁵ However, the power in such statements does not reside in the fixedness of the goal or how realizable they appear to be, but in the opening of possibilities created by the imagination that such a goal is actually possible—namely, the idea that the current state of affairs is *not* inevitable.

84 "The Latest."

85 Gun Violence Archive, accessed January 24, 2021, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/past-tolls>, accessed May 3, 2021.



FIGURE 6.1 March For Our Lives. Austin, TX

There is no doubt that such phrases are taken as serious promises by the youth, declaring that they are going to force the change they wish to see in the world. The feeling of empowerment is clear in signs such as “We are the SPARK that will light the FIRE that will BURN the NRA down.” One of the organizers of CNG gave an impassioned speech at the Austin march, imploring her generation to come forward and stop “playing nice with the right,” as “change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time, we are the ones that we’ve been waiting for; we are the change that we see.”⁸⁶ If two years prior things had seemed hopeless for the students fighting the arrival of firearms in classrooms, here the tide of change, like in the 1960s, felt unstoppable.

The power of mass mobilization can be particularly potent when it evokes a sense of unified community among activists, such as the imagined generational cohort referred to by those in the marches. Nor is it only that those identifying with the cohort may believe in its power; for instance, adults who participated felt the same hope. State Senator Kirk Watson (D-District 14), also a former mayor of Austin, affirmed this in his speech at the march: “I believe we are seeing a true turning point. I think we are seeing a moment where the past of history shifts. We’re seeing how a new generation speaks openly and enthusiastically and with a unified voice that it not only seeks change in order to secure its future, it demands it.”⁸⁷ Two years later, the

86 CNG organizer, “March For Our Lives – speech,” March 24, 2018, video, 13:40. Videos of the MFOl march on March 24, 2018 at Austin, TX were recorded by the Campus Carry research team.

87 Kirk Watson, “March For Our Lives – speech,” March 24, 2018, video, 2:28.

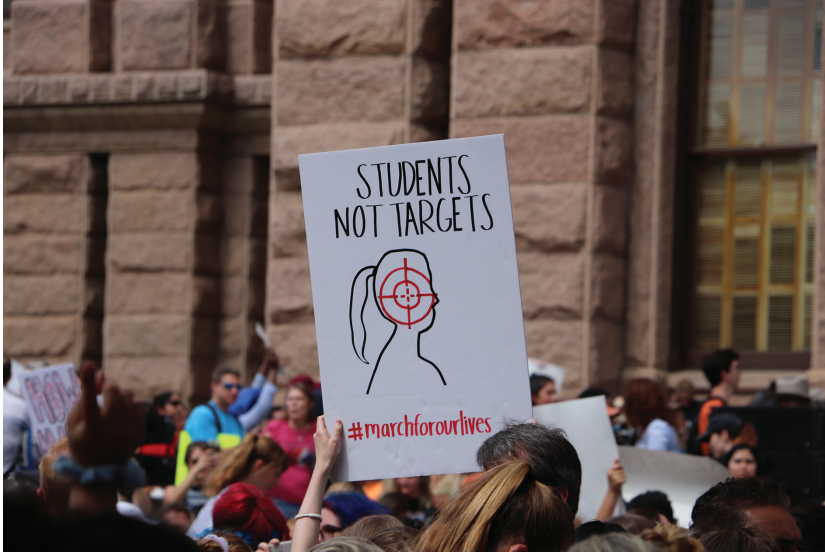


FIGURE 6.2 March For Our Lives. Austin, TX

organizers of MFOL still had that hope in their own power, as evidenced by a TV ad campaign they launched in the fall of 2020, ahead of the presidential elections:

Our power means we demand all gun sales will be licensed. Our power means we demand weapons of war will be banned for good. Our power means lawmakers must listen. Our power means we refuse black people to be murdered on the streets. We refuse to fear for our lives. We refuse to live without justice. It's our power and we will use it.⁸⁸

Consequently, in many ways the power of a particular generation was drawn from its imaginary of being a cohesive unit. However, it is noteworthy to consider that a sense of belonging to a generation is always relative. Karl Mannheim thus defines generation as a locality that only offers a possibility “which may materialize”; to become a member of a generation in actuality requires participation in a common destiny.⁸⁹ Moreover, a desire to participate in

88 March For Our Lives, “Our Power: Next Time,” YouTube video, 1:43, August 6, 2020, 1:11, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eH6F_w6tWs4&t, accessed May 3, 2021.

89 Karl Mannheim, “Problem of Generations,” in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Pál Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 303.

that common destiny, such as taking part in political processes through such actions as voting or being part of a social movement, often requires a shift from negative self-identification with the generation to a positive one.⁹⁰ For example, while a recognition of being part of the mass shooting generation does not necessarily translate into a desire to take part in collective action to try and change that sense of reality, a belief that a generation has the power to change things just might. At the same time, members who identify themselves as part of a generation may respond to issues in completely contradictory ways, forming generational units *within* a generation.⁹¹ Indeed, a significant segment of the youngest generation believes that carrying guns is the best way to guarantee their safety.⁹²

What made generational community important here is that by adopting such a frame, the organizers of the MFOL movement were able to create an imaginary of a collective that is large enough to support radical political imagination, not only in identifying current problems but establishing an orientation toward the future that can be seen as utopian in nature. Building on creative means of seeking gun control and efforts to contest the normalization of gun culture, such as those constructed by groups such as CNG, MFOL began to see an open future beyond the impenetrable wall of gun legislation that, at least to their generation, had previously appeared closed and fixed. In this way, goals came to be considered not in terms of what is feasible but what is desirable. Moving from individual experiences of insecurity to collectively constructed generational utopian visions for the future, the MFOL youth went from imagining something that feels possible in the present to striving toward something larger and a different way of thinking about public safety altogether.

The youth activists in the MFOL movement did not stretch the limits of their imagination in a vacuum. Importantly, constructing goals that can be considered as generational utopias happened through processes of collective radical political imagination, not only within the movement but especially in interactions with activists working on other issues. For the youth movements of today, radical political imagination is intersectional. The youth organizers of MFOL, the climate justice movement under Sunrise, the immigrant rights

90 Donatella Della Porta, "Deconstructing Generations: Concluding Remarks," *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 11 (October 2019): 1591.

91 Mannheim, "Problem of Generations," 304.

92 For example, 24% of the 1,204 undergraduates surveyed at UT Austin as part of the Campus Carry research project were in favor of the Campus Carry legislation. See results in Sampo Ruoppila and Albion M. Butters, "Not a 'Nonissue': Perceptions and Realities of Campus Carry at The University of Texas at Austin," *Journal of American Studies* 55, no. 2 (2021): 299–311.

movement in United We Dream, and Black Lives Matter seeking racial justice are quite explicitly working toward the same goal of transforming institutions in society into something that represents a fundamentally different vision of the United States. A UT Austin professor shared what made them hopeful about the MFOL marches: “[T]hey get intersectionality. It’s not just a word as it kind of still is around campus, it’s like this cool theory but here’s these kids living it and practicing it.”⁹³ While reviving the coalitions of “the Long Sixties,” it is not only the recognition of a shared otherness that is driving students, those of color, and LGBTQ+ people together this time, but a fundamental understanding that there is no longer any one issue to advocate for—since all the issues are at their core the same.

The focus of MFOL shifted away from reconciliatory policy propositions. The staples of what can be considered as “commonsense gun laws”—such as a ban on assault weapons, implementing universal background checks, and defining more rigorous standards on who gets to carry—were seen as perhaps beneficial but alone wholly insufficient. Rather, to answer the public health crisis of gun violence, the need for systemic change on all levels of society was seen as imperative. In a policy outline called the Peace Plan for a Safer America, MFOL recognized that gun violence is also about police violence, the rights of immigrants, the rights of LGBTQ+ people, and economic and environmental justice.⁹⁴ These issues were all tied together, as evidenced by a letter that MFOL wrote with seven other youth organizations to then-Presidential candidate Joe Biden:

[W]e grew up with endless war, skyrocketing inequality, crushing student loan debt, mass deportations, police murders of black Americans and mass incarceration, schools which have become killing fields, and knowing that the political leaders of today are choking the planet we will live on long after they are gone. ... Why would we want a return to normalcy? We need a vision for the future, not a return to the past.⁹⁵

The key to the alternative vision for the future promoted by MFOL is comprised of community-based programs that tackle the root causes of crime and prioritize restorative justice over criminalization and punitive justice. It is the idea

93 Interview with research team, University of Texas at Austin, April 17, 2018, notes in possession of author.

94 March For Our Lives, “Peace Plan for Safer America,” August 2019, <https://marchforourlives.com/peace-plan/>, accessed May 3, 2021.

95 March For Our Lives, “Our Letter to Vice President Joe Biden,” May 2020, <https://marchforourlives.com/earn-our-vote/>, accessed May 3, 2021.

behind such radical political imaginations as defunding the police, decarceration, and eliminating force in policing that became central to the goals of particular different MFOL Texas chapters after the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.⁹⁶ Behind the campaign of MFOL Texas “Invest in Communities, Divest from Police” are calls for the reallocation of funding from law enforcement to community programs that focus, for example, on mental health, education, housing, and healthcare.⁹⁷ Such calls for abolishing racist institutions and dedicating funding to communities of color have been around as long as there have been black organizers in the U.S. working toward racial equity, but what is unique in the current wave of protest led by youth activists, which MFOL is an integral part of, is how these ideas have propagated across movements and become characteristic of a generational vision for a better future.

5 Conclusion

On October 1, 2020, Jin hosted a panel on activism ahead of the 2020 Presidential Election.⁹⁸ The panelists included activists from 18 Million Rising, a national organization creating a leftist Asian American community online, and MOVE Texas, which focuses on youth outreach in Texas. The panel offered a multifaceted crosscut of how radical political imagination and a common project are being constructed in intergroup activist spaces. Jin spoke about the lessons she had learned about organizing for gun control:

I found the most authentic way to organize for gun control at least is to talk to most impacted communities. ... when we pass a bunch of laws to make stuff illegal like who does that impact? Like who gets locked up, whose families get impacted, who's actually getting shot the most all the time and like who are the people in the policy leading rooms and why don't they look like the people most impacted. ... I am actually talking

96 March For Our Lives Texas, “A Statement Including a List of Demands from March For Our Lives Texas for City Councils of Austin, El Paso, San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas in Solidarity with Demands of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” June 10, 2020, <https://www.mfoltexas.org/ordinance.html>, accessed May 3, 2021.

97 March For Our Lives Texas, “Texas Banner Drop,” August 4, 2020, <https://www.mfoltexas.org/past-events.html>, accessed May 3, 2021.

98 Come & Take It, “Days of Action Part I - Making the “Hard Ask”: How to Turn Out the Vote,” Facebook, October 1, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ComeandTakeItDoc/videos/370520037480882/>, accessed May 3, 2021.

to impacted people or I'm just kind of running along with a bit of more neoliberal, well-funded, messaging that wins but throws a lot of people under the bus.⁹⁹

The evolution Jin experienced in terms of organizing for gun control demonstrates how radical political imagination is being cultivated in activist spaces and how it produces fundamentally different kinds of action. It also substantiates Khasnabish's claim that it is important for researchers to not only consider the "successful" and "grand" movements that animate mass mobilization and policy change but examine how radical political imagination can and is produced in the quotidian activism of community organizers.¹⁰⁰ As the radicals of the 1960s encouraged their peers to both take part in collective action and live the revolution every day, so do the current movements produce alternative ways of being for the individual and for the collective.

The politics of gun control in the United States have for the most part appeared to be closed and with limited options for the future. Within this reality, CNG contested their present by making visible the absurdities they perceived in what had become normal. Through radical political imagination, CNG was also able to reimagine the ways of thinking about and engaging in gun control advocacy. Mass mobilization can also provide increased opportunities to imagine what was previously unimaginable. MFOL was able to harness that power and thereby construct utopias for an imagined generational community. Yet, movements on the ground before mass mobilization are what support the relationships and networks to be tapped into, like awakening a slumbering giant, until an opening in the political structure appears. As movements and organizations such as Cocks Not Glocks and March For Our Lives are banging on the impenetrable wall of the status quo, the future thus appeared, even if only for a moment, to be open instead of closed.

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99 Jin, "Days of Action Part I", 29:49.

100 Khasnabish, "Ecologies," 1723.

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