



Everyday utopias and social reproduction

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Abstract

This article analyses reproductive labour in everyday utopias. Everyday utopias refer to spaces and practices that experiment with alternative forms of life and create new social imaginaries. Drawing on ethnographic research in three everyday utopias in Finland, the article argues that labour plays a key role in transformative politics by prefiguring socially and ecologically sustainable forms of life not conducive to capitalist logic. The article brings together feminist social reproduction theory and utopian studies to shed light on different forms of reproductive labour in everyday utopias. It identifies four forms of labour: manual, affective, mnemonic and experimental. In particular, experimental labour foregrounds the importance of everyday utopias as sites of political imagination in which novel forms of life are actively developed and tried out. The article concludes by suggesting that everyday utopias subvert conventional understandings and practices of labour and social reproduction.

Keywords

Ethnography, everyday utopias, labour, political imagination, social reproduction

Introduction

I think it's the combination of theory and practice that the Mustarinda community is all about. It strives to encourage and support theoretical understanding, but it's sometimes challenging, because you have to go and clear the snow, or clear the sewage or something like that.

This is how a member of an ecological community, Mustarinda, describes what it means to live in the community and experiment with an ecological way of life. The interview passage highlights the entanglement of manual and intellectual labour in making and

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sustaining the community as an ‘everyday utopia’ (Cooper, 2014). By everyday utopias, we refer to spaces and practices that experiment with alternative ways of life and create new social imaginaries. Rather than focusing on campaigning or advocacy, taking over dominant structures or winning votes, everyday utopias create new ways of experiencing and organising social and political life at the level of everyday life and subjectivity (Cooper, 2014). Everyday utopias are one way of putting into practice, testing and living out utopian visions ‘on the ground’.

We argue that everyday utopias are a particularly timely topic for sociological inquiry. The vexing problems we are facing right now, such as the global climate emergency, war, political disenchantment and seismic social inequalities, underline the need to envisage more socially and ecologically sustainable social formations. Yet, it seems increasingly difficult to articulate political alternatives and organise collective action beyond the prevailing contours of ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher, 2009), resting on naturalised assumptions about the primacy of economic growth, consumer culture and waged work. A number of commentators have suggested that our current conjuncture is best described as post-political and anti-utopian: utopian impulses have dissipated, which has locked us into a narrow repertoire of political choices and impoverished our sense of what is possible (Browne, 2005; Weeks, 2011).

We approach everyday utopias as sites that disrupt such post-political and anti-utopian sentiments by envisaging alternatives to the existing social formation, experimenting with ideals in practice and invigorating collective political imagination. They practice prefigurative politics; that is, they attempt to create on a small scale the change one wishes to encounter in society at large (Breines, 1980) and, as such, can provide us with empirical and conceptual cues for political alternatives. They offer a productive vantage point for what Wright (2010: 37) has called ‘a sociology of the possible’, aiming to develop strategies that ‘enable us to make empirically and theoretically sound arguments about emancipatory possibilities’. The significance of utopian thought lies not only in its capacity to criticise mainstream society and hegemonic ideas but also in its capacity to open up possibilities for experimenting with counter-normative forms of life in the here and now (Cooper, 2014: 32; Eskelinen et al., 2020: 37).

We approach everyday utopias through the analytical lens of reproductive labour and ethnographic methodology. In the course of our ethnography of everyday utopias, we were alerted to narratives of labour that kept recurring in our research materials. Labour was constantly done, talked about, planned, anticipated and wrestled with. It was at the same time a source of pleasure, pride and meaning, and something that threatened to wear one down. Building on these insights, we ask: What forms of reproductive labour do everyday utopias require? How is labour organised and made sense of? What can these forms of labour teach us about the logic of social reproduction and utopian politics? We will outline in this article four forms of reproductive labour, which all have a key role in everyday utopias: *manual labour*, *affective labour*, *mnemonic labour* and *experimental labour*. The distinction between different forms of labour is analytical, as in practice they are complexly entangled.

We theorise labour in everyday utopias through two bodies of work, feminist social reproduction theory (FSRT) and utopian scholarship, and in so doing make two contributions. First, by interrogating diverse forms of reproductive labour, we seek to

advance theoretical and empirical understanding of social reproduction. The insight of FSRT is that human labour is at the heart of reproducing society as a whole: life, workforce, environment, communities, social bonds, cultural memory and ideology (Bakker, 2007; Bhattacharya, 2017). By identifying and analysing differing forms of reproductive labour in everyday utopias, we seek to make visible their key role in prefiguring socially and ecologically sustainable forms of life. FSRT has traditionally focused on the reproduction of labour force and its gendered, classed and racialised dimensions, as well as on the division and hierarchies between reproductive and productive labour. Less attention has been devoted to mapping the diverse forms of reproductive labour and their role in transformative politics. We shed light on these aspects and argue that everyday utopias are sites in which the prevailing, historically sedimented patterns and practices of labour in general and reproductive labour in particular can be critically rethought, subverted and reconfigured. We show how everyday utopias highlight forms of reproductive labour, such as manual labour, often occluded in FSRT, and introduce new forms of reproductive labour, such as experimental labour.

Second, we engage with and contribute to utopian studies and, more specifically, the body of work on intentional communities investigating the ways in which utopian impulses are lived out and materialised in communal life. Intentional communities as a distinctive form of utopianism (Sargent, 1994) bring together people who live and work for some common purpose, share a dissatisfaction with wider society and seek to create alternatives to it (Sargisson, 2007). While there exists a rich body of scholarship on intentional communities (see, e.g., Firth, 2012; Holden and Schrok, 2007; Sargisson, 2002, 2007), the analysis of concrete processes of labour and social reproduction has been largely obscured (see, however, Cooper, 2014; Sargisson, 2002). We address this gap and argue that attention to labour is highly important for understanding, and appreciating, everyday utopias as *utopian* sites. Counterhegemonic forms of life are prefigured in everyday utopias through reproductive labour, which constitutes a pivotal mode of utopian politics. In this way, everyday utopias imagine and experiment with alternative models for carrying out and organising reproductive labour and highlight its tensions in capitalism.

We will first outline utopian studies and FSRT. We will then describe our research materials and methodological approach before outlining the four forms of reproductive labour that everyday utopias rely on. In the conclusion, we will reflect on what these forms of labour can tell us about the logic of social reproduction and utopian politics.

Utopia, social reproduction and transformative politics

Utopia can be understood as a method of political imagination and a form of social critique that articulates alternatives for what we have now (Eskelinen et al., 2020; Levitas, 2013). It expresses a ‘desire for a better way of being and living’ (Levitas, 2013: 4), offering ‘anticipatory illuminations of other possible worlds’ (Allen, 2015: 525). In lieu of detailed blueprints for ideal societies, contemporary utopian thought emphasises relationality, processuality, open-endedness and provisionality (Sargisson, 1997). Rather than prescribing a destination, utopia provokes and suggests a direction; it is speculative rather than predictive (Bammer, 2015; Weeks, 2011). Utopia is a powerful political force

that can animate political desire, activate political will and inspire collective action (Weeks, 2011).

Everyday utopias are ‘hot spots of innovative practice’ that build counterhegemonic practices and take a critical distance to mainstream society (Cooper, 2014: 2–9). Everyday utopias are caught in the tension between dreams and reality, imagination and actualisation (Cooper, 2014). They are, as Sargisson (2007: 396) notes, ‘places full of dreams, hopes, and disappointments’. While existing in the quotidian (Munoz, 2009), they gesture towards something that does not yet exist. The concept of everyday utopia resonates, to some extent, with the concept of ‘real utopia’ coined by Wright (2010). We prefer, however, the concept of everyday utopia, since real utopia stops short of the utopian dimension with its emphasis on institutionally viable, pragmatic and ‘hard-nosed’ alternatives that accommodate practical realities instead of ‘indulging in utopian dreams’ (Levitas, 2013: 141–143; Wright, 2010: 5–6).

Everyday utopias require labour to materialise their ideas of a better world. One productive way of theorising this labour is offered by FSRT. It highlights social reproduction as the vital yet unacknowledged, undervalued and often unpaid work that sustains life under capitalism. The conception of work in capitalist system privileges market-based, waged activity, while socially necessary reproductive labour is overlooked, although it forms the essential background condition for capitalist economies (Folbre, 2002; Fraser, 2016). In capitalist societies, much of social reproduction takes place outside the market: in homes, neighbourhoods, civil society associations, informal networks and public institutions, although it is also performed as waged work. By insisting that unpaid social reproduction should also be counted as work, FSRT has emphasised the economic and social value of care and other forms of social reproduction (Hoskyns and Rai, 2007).

FSRT has especially highlighted three aspects of reproduction: biological reproduction; the reproduction of labour force; and the reproduction and provision of care needs (Bakker, 2007). It has also expanded this scope by drawing attention to the reproduction of life, social relations, communities, culture, ideology and environment (Di Chiro, 2008; Hoskyns and Rai, 2007). Comprising both material and affective labour, social reproduction forms capitalism’s human subjects, sustains them as social beings and forms their habitus and culture. It builds communities and sustains their shared meanings, affective dispositions and values that underpin social cooperation (Fraser, 2016: 101).

By placing an analytical spotlight on social reproduction, FSRT has also made visible the fundamental contradiction between the global accumulation of capital and the provision of stable conditions of social reproduction. Social reproduction builds upon, reproduces and reshapes global gendered and racialised inequalities that enable the accumulation of surplus value (Bhattacharya, 2017). The reproduction of life depletes human energies, and they need replenishing if the level of human capacities is to be maintained (Rai et al., 2014). A crisis of social reproduction occurs when existing social, political, economic or environmental conditions and relations can no longer be reproduced – something that has become acutely clear right now (Folbre, 2021). Fraser (2016) has claimed that capitalism harbours a deep-seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’: social reproduction is the condition of possibility for capital accumulation, yet capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation destabilises the very processes of social

reproduction on which it relies. Capitalism free rides and depends on social reproduction by according it no monetised value and treating it as if it was free (Fraser, 2016: 101).

The forms and structures of social reproduction can be contested and are always under struggle in society. Everyday utopias are one arena in which this contestation and struggle takes place. In the remainder of the article, we will show that social reproduction is not only vital to reproducing capitalist economies but also to reproducing everyday utopias. Before doing that, we will outline our research methodology.

Research materials and methodology

This article is based on ethnographic research carried out in three everyday utopias in Finland from 2020 to 2022: *Mustarinda*, *Elävän Kulttuurin Koroinen* (EKKy) and *Oranssi Asunnot*.¹ Although they have different historical trajectories, they share many commonalities. They are predominantly run by unpaid volunteer labour. They espouse values of equality, cultural diversity, ecological and social sustainability, and democratic self-governance. Communal life is their cornerstone: members meet, live and work together in houses owned or rented by the communities. Unlike some intentional communities, these are not ‘totalizing lifelong places’ (Cooper, 2014: 8); rather, people ‘flow’ through these communities, some staying longer while others only pass through. Yet, the communities are long-lived: *Mustarinda* has operated for more than 10 years, EKKy for around 20 years and *Oranssi* for over 30 years.

We conducted 24 individual and group interviews, in which 36 members of these communities participated. We also carried out participant observation and investigated materials produced by these communities. In *Mustarinda*, we conducted participant observation for 5 weeks during three visits, while in EKKy, participant observation was conducted periodically (15 visits altogether). We did not conduct participant observation in *Oranssi*, but our research team included a member who had lived in *Oranssi* for a long time and was able to provide us with insights on the everyday life of this community. The interviews focused on mapping the history, goals and activities, everyday life and social relations, conflicts and ways dealing with them, and motivations and meanings derived from living and working in the communities.

Mustarinda is an eco-community whose goal is to promote the ecological rebuilding of society, the diversity of culture and nature, and the connection between art and research. Its key locus of action is the *Mustarinda* house, located in northeastern Finland, far away from urban life. No one lives in the house permanently, but it is used as a residence for artists and scholars and run by volunteer house coordinators. Although *Mustarinda* primarily attracts artists and scholars, it also remains open to others and actively seeks collaboration with the local community. We interviewed founding members of the community, house coordinators and residency guests.

EKKy is a community that works to protect natural and cultural diversity. It is located on an old farm on the outskirts of one of the largest cities in Finland. The land and the buildings are owned by the city, and EKKy rents them. EKKy offers allotment gardens, organises cultural events and courses on sustainability, runs an ecological cafeteria and hosts artistic projects, a bicycle workshop and a free school on its premises. It is also a certified permacultural community. A few of its members live in the old houses, but most

visit the place on a more or less regular basis. We interviewed the founders and core members of the community as well as its current volunteers.

Our final case is Oranssi, a housing cooperative in Helsinki. Founded in 1990, it has roots in the squatting movement. Oranssi offers communal and affordable housing for low-income youth with pressing need for accommodation. Punk, Do it yourself (DIY) and anarchism are its ideological standpoints. In the spirit of housing cooperatives, the members manage the houses according to democratic procedures (Firth, 2012). By offering an alternative to market-based housing and prioritising poor youth, Oranssi caters to people who have few other places to live. We interviewed residents of Oranssi from different decades who have lived or are still living in Oranssi.

Our analysis began with a close reading of the research materials. Through this process, we identified labour – and unpaid reproductive labour in particular – as a key theme that sustains the community and is performed in the flow of everyday life. In the subsequent rounds of reading, we coded all descriptions of labour in the materials, paying special attention to the metaphors and discursive constructions of labour. In the final round of the analysis, we read these descriptions in light of FSRT and identified the four forms of reproductive labour that we will next unpack.

Manual labour

One of the first things that struck us was the amount of manual labour required just to keep things running in everyday utopias. In traditional hierarchies of labour, manual labour has been symbolically coded as ‘low’, similar to feminised reproductive labour. In everyday utopias, this hierarchy is disrupted. Manual labour is accorded a high value because everyday utopias cannot exist without it and because it conveys a DIY ethos integral to the utopian vision of these communities. It also brings people together on a daily basis, constructing a sense of community. We experienced this first hand during our fieldwork period in Mustarinda: one of the authors noticed how taking on the task of washing dishes turned out to be an important way of getting to know the house and the fellow residents and thus becoming part of the community.

Manual labour at our research sites consisted, for example, of renovating houses, gardening, mowing the lawn, snow shovelling, storing firewood, painting, fixing roofs, cleaning common facilities, cooking and baking, doing dishes, minding the compost, warming the house and taking care of the electric car. Part of this work is culturally masculine work, which has been discussed relatively little in the social reproduction literature that has traditionally focused on care and other feminised forms of labour (Folbre, 2002; Fraser, 2016).

In the three communities, taking care of the houses constituted a key form of manual labour. This was particularly true for Oranssi. At the heart of Oranssi are old wooden houses that residents have renovated and made habitable by communal labour, a cornerstone of Oranssi identity. The centrality of this labour stems from economic and ideological reasons. Oranssi has scarce monetary resources, so communal labour is often the only resource available for maintaining the community and enabling low-cost housing. Ideologically, it enables the cultivation of anti-capitalist, egalitarian social relations, resisting private property and profit-driven mode of housing and privileging life outside

waged work. By refusing ‘flashy and polished’ housing made with ‘big money’, Oranssi draws a distinction from prevailing middle-class housing norms.

Communal labour was also construed as a counter-practice to capitalist consumer culture. Participation in manual labour means that members of the community are not ‘passive tenants’ merely consuming the houses but ‘active residents’ reproducing the houses. Manual labour was understood as reproducing not only the material surroundings but also Oranssi culture and identity. Living in Oranssi is not just about getting a roof over one’s head but about organising housing and living in a way that is different from mainstream capitalist society. One Oranssi resident summarised this as follows:

There’s a danger that if you don’t do the maintenance work, your relationship towards these houses changes. Then you just consume these houses and their surroundings. I’d like to sustain the participatory communal labour culture, because it ensures that these houses are kept standing.

Manual labour sustains everyday utopias by bringing people together and giving them a shared purpose. The Oranssi residents told us vivid stories about the many renovation projects that had taken place in the community over the decades. These projects had been hampered by lack of tools, technology, money and know-how. In the early years of the community, massive water boilers had been pulled uphill by hand, in ‘ancient Egyptian style’. Although manual labour was often experienced as tiring, the residents narratively transformed these experiences into a collective ‘feat of strength’ that gave a sense of pride and accomplishment and helped to weld the community together. In this way, reproductive labour enabled a caring community based on sharing resources and support (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).

In Mustarinda and EKKy, manual labour included care for the houses and the surroundings but also for the planet (cf. Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Di Chiro, 2008). These communities sought to prefigure an ecologically sustainable form of life by performing manual labour in an ecological manner. In EKKy, it was important that the houses were renovated exclusively with ecological materials and tools, while in Mustarinda, the house was managed by ecological principles aimed at saving energy and material resources. One of the Mustarinda members gave an example of this through a case of making a vegetable plot:

Our goal to practice a post-fossil way of life made us abandon the idea to borrow the neighbour’s tractor. One option was to plough the field with a horse, but we could not find a trained work horse within a reasonable distance. So we ended up going to the field with hoes borrowed from the next-door blacksmith. (Leikas, 2015)

For those at Mustarinda, living an ecological life and running the house in Finnish weather conditions and in a geographically remote place meant that manual labour was at times experienced as highly taxing. In the words of one coordinator: ‘To live there and keep the house warm and the drive clear and the car working and the roof waterproof and the walls somehow together, it’s basically a full-time job’. Everyday matters that could be done relatively easily in an urban environment required meticulous planning and

effort. The shopping trips had to be carefully planned, as they required using a car, which the residents tried to avoid. Long distances and freezing winter conditions made driving the electric car sometimes a nail-biting experience. The remote location caused what the house coordinators called 'hellish organisation sagas':

Every time when something breaks or doesn't work, and we're here in the middle of nowhere, it always requires a hellish organization saga. It can take from one to three weeks for us to catch just the right mechanic who can drive from 250 kilometres away. Who gets stuck on the steep slope with their car and you have to call a neighbour, who comes to pick them up. When we finally get the mechanic here, they realise that they are missing a component, and then all of this starts from the beginning.

Because of the arduous nature of reproductive labour in Mustarinda, it inevitably entailed slowing down the rhythm of life, whether one liked it or not. One could not speed up labour but had to accept the particular bodily, geographical and material constraints that came with living there. This slower rhythm, however, was not experienced as merely frustrating, as in the quote above, but also in many ways as meaningful, as it enabled an alternative mode of being that stood in opposition to the 'normative labour market time', which emphasises efficiency (Cooper, 2014: 135), and to the experience of social acceleration characteristic of late capitalism (Rosa, 2013).

Affective labour

Everyday utopias are driven by simultaneous critique and creation, including self-criticism (Firth, 2012). They are not harmonious spaces of final closure but are inevitably riddled with conflicts and failures that have to be confronted, in one way or another (Cooper, 2014; Sargisson, 2007). This requires constant reproduction of relations of cooperation and sociality (Weeks, 2007). FSRT has called this affective labour. The communities we studied required multiple forms of affective labour: easing tensions, keeping an eye on others' well-being, mediating conflicts, being able to negotiate, socialising new members to the community, settling differences and finding compromises. While affective labour is important for most organisations, it has a heightened importance for everyday utopias, since democratic communal life lies at their very heart. Moreover, these utopias prefigure forms of life that are in many ways radically different from mainstream capitalist society and often do so with insufficient resources, which may cause exhaustion, stress and conflicts. If conflicts are not addressed, the utopias, based on voluntary participation, run the risk of disintegration.

When we asked what caused conflicts in the communities, one of our interviewees sardonically replied: 'Would it be a shorter list if we thought what doesn't cause conflicts? You can pick up a fight about anything, literally anything'. Conflicts in the communities often concerned noise, division of labour, using and maintaining common facilities, clashes between different personalities, disagreement over self-governance mechanisms, mental health problems and sometimes substance abuse or violence.

Often the same things that brought people together also caused the most disagreement. Communal labour was an emblematic example: it was essential to the

communities' survival but also a source of constant dispute. Some residents were seen as avoiding their responsibilities, while others carried more responsibility than could be reasonably expected. Living in many respects in radically different conditions than those of mainstream society, which is the essence of everyday utopias, meant that there were no ready-made models for communal labour, that they had to be created along the way and constantly negotiated; this was part of their 'labour of imagination' (Newman, 2019: 29–30). Furthermore, utopian communities that, by definition, do not take norms, limits or goals as given (Firth, 2012: 161) need to constantly renegotiate their own practices. Some of the members had grown tired of this. One resident described Oranssi as a 'poorly functioning Soviet Union', referring to its dysfunctional organisation. Some EKKy members were deeply frustrated with 'marathon meetings', which could last for several days with only few decisions made in the end, even though they appreciated that this was often inevitable in democratic, self-governing communities.

While conflicts were experienced as exhausting at times, they were also seen as opportunities for learning. Affective labour is necessary for reproducing spaces 'in which critical, transgressive and experimental forms of belonging, participation and ethics can occur' (Firth, 2012: 154). The residents appreciated that they were pushed to 'live together with other people and sometimes clash with them, having to negotiate', as one Mustarinda house coordinator put it. Affective labour, involving the necessity of confronting differences and learning to negotiate conflicts, was seen as a necessary skill in pluralistic and democratic societies. One EKKy member reflected on this as follows:

Conflicts are a kind of test. If you pass, it means you've found a functional way of working and a way of preventing this conflict from happening in the future. Conflict means honesty and trust. You are ready to confront the fact that others may disagree with you. If there are no conflicts, it means that they have been skilfully avoided, and that's disturbing.

In contrast to families, for example, utopian communities can diminish the potential amount of affective labour by choosing members who could be a good fit for them. In Oranssi, the members chose residents through a consensual decision-making process. While they wanted to keep the community open to people who did not necessarily have anywhere else to go, they also acknowledged that the community could not be 'a rescue team' or 'a mental hospital'. Likewise, in Mustarinda, the selection committee for residency guests strove to choose residents who had experience of or interest in communal life, 'because otherwise the everyday life in the house would be too demanding for everyone'. EKKy kept its activities open but also saw it as important that participants were able and willing to work together with others.

In line with FSRT, the communities recognised and embraced interdependency (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). They were sites where care was provided and received. One needed to 'be awake about other people's business' and to 'look after one another, if someone is going through a rough patch', as one Oranssi resident remarked. Affective labour created and sustained bonds between the community members, who were often referred to as 'friends', 'family', or 'my flock'. Oranssi was portrayed as a 'haven' and 'a place for healing' for those who felt themselves marginalised in society or who sought to live on the margins of society: gender and sexual minorities, poor working-class youth, punks and anarchists.

Similar to manual labour, affective labour could also wear one down and drain the reproductive reserve of the community (Rai et al., 2014). Here the collective responsibility for affective labour helped. One Mustarinda house coordinator remarked:

Here people have to interact with each other, and sometimes it just doesn't work. It can drain you. But it's also a strength. If I was here alone, I'd probably dig a hole in the backyard and go lie down there, but when you can share this with people who have the same experience, it's a completely different matter.

Affective labour in Mustarinda also consisted of engaging residency guests in sharing the bulk of reproductive labour. While the house coordinators assumed the primary responsibility, it was seen as important to make residency guests carry responsibility for maintaining a common life. In this way, the community espoused anti-capitalist social relations, as house coordinators were not perceived as servants to paying customers but as facilitators encouraging the guests to immerse themselves in the post-fossil form of life.

FSRT has stressed that even when unpaid, social reproduction is not free or an unlimited resource but consumes the caregiver's energy, time and other resources, and can also potentially run dry (Folbre, 2021; Rai et al., 2014). Several community members shared with us experiences of exhaustion. It was a particularly acute issue in Mustarinda and EKKy due to their economically precarious conditions. The communities would have liked to compensate for the reproductive labour being carried out, but it was not possible, and sometimes not even desirable, to turn it into a form of waged work. For that reason, many community members had a waged job elsewhere. The communities were acutely aware of the risk of exploitation, because in the absence of material resources, everything had to be 'lived off the backs of the members', as one Mustarinda member remarked. The members had to perform affective labour to mitigate this risk and prevent the resources for reproductive labour from becoming depleted in volunteer-based communities.

Mnemonic labour

Reproductive labour also concerns the reproduction of collective memory and the cultural symbols that give meaning to life and nourish political struggles (Federici, 2019: 5). Collective memory as a representation of the past shared by members of a group (Wertsch, 2008) plays a pivotal role in collective struggles. It strengthens commitments and creates horizons for the future (Bammer, 2015: xxii) by bringing the past to bear on the present and the future (Munoz, 2009).

Collective memory does not, however, emerge automatically, nor is its creation a passive process (cf. Lorde, 2018: 39); rather, it requires what we call mnemonic labour. This labour takes different modes in the communities we studied. One is the narrative construction and transmission of collective memory of the community. Members told stories about the history of the community and sought to pass this knowledge on. Through narrating and sharing the past, new members were invited to align themselves with the community. Members emphasised the importance of introducing the historically accumulated ethos and praxis to newcomers as a way of reproducing

the community over time. A long-term member of Oranssi explained: ‘You carry with yourself knowledge accumulated over a long period of time and pass it along. We carry this place for future youth, for the next generation, not for ourselves’.

Long-term activists who had been involved in the community for several years, sometimes even decades, embodied collective memory and had a key role in preserving it. For example, Jenny had been taking care of a wide variety of tasks in EKKy for several years and commanded a huge stock of tacit knowledge. At the time of the interview, she was integrating new members and observed: ‘We have to take good care of all the knowledge that has accumulated over the years. If someone cannot finish the project and has to leave it, we need to make sure that others can find the knowledge and continue the project’.

The reproduction of the community over time required preserving and reproducing the collective memory and stock of praxis, and the willingness to reinterpret them in new circumstances. It was believed that the communities should evolve in time as new members came in and brought new skills, needs and questions. In Oranssi, the residents wanted to sustain the practice of communal labour as a key anchor of Oranssi’s identity but acknowledged that it was also important to allow the members to reinterpret this practice:

I appreciate the openness and adaptability of this place. The same round of tasks circulates year in year out, but we modify it. We always re-organise and search for new solutions. The community doesn’t tear new suggestions to shreds, saying ‘we’ve always done it this way’, but we change it and try new ways. Nothing is final.

Another mode of mnemonic labour was the reproduction of the collective activist memory. Several members had long-term involvement in and ties with the counter-cultural and subcultural milieu, such as squatting, punk, anarchism, environmental movements and the peace movement. They wished to make use of and pass on the historically accumulated activist know-how to new members, reproducing new generations of activists. Everyday utopias were conceived of as nodes in the longer counter-cultural activist assemblages. Long-standing members of EKKy and Oranssi contemplated this as follows:

I see this place [EKKy] as a continuation of what my generation called alternative movements. We began protesting against nuclear power, lived in communes and ate vegetarian food. We lived on the margins and were a counterweight to the mainstream culture. People need to go and continue protesting. We need to educate a new generation for this practice, once we grow old and get tired.

A lot of our generation was squatting in Helsinki in 2007–2008. There’s that connection, that knowledge of what it means to be a squatter. But I feel there’s been only little squatting lately here. I’m afraid that if squatting goes away, then so does this knowledge and culture and a way of being. Then the whole culture of Oranssi could be easily lost.

The importance of mnemonic labour in everyday utopias comes into sharp relief when it fails. We witnessed this in one Oranssi house into which many of the residents had moved during or just before the COVID-19 pandemic and had no previous experience of

Oranssi. For them, the collective memory of Oranssi had remained vague, and they had difficulties in identifying themselves with the community, not knowing really what it stood for. They voiced a wish to know 'why we live here and what we work for'. One of them elaborated: 'We've had to figure a lot of things out on our own. If we had a little bit of [knowledge] how things can be done [in Oranssi], it might ease the work of organizing ourselves.'

While these members felt that a lack of models had given them a certain leeway to identify their own ways of doing things, they longed to learn from the history of Oranssi: about resident selection, job allocation and how to deal with accessibility and ability issues. They wanted to learn from others' experiences as a way of connecting themselves to the community. This desire elucidates how mnemonic labour is important for creating a sense of belonging and identity, and for maintaining solidarity among members, essential for sustaining the communities over time. It also highlights that culture and ideology do not survive on their own but require reproductive labour (Bakker, 2007).

The final mode of mnemonic labour is the renovation of old houses in which the communities lived and worked. Through renovation, members learnt and revived old skills and practices. They renovated houses by respecting the history of the buildings, using traditional methods and materials. As one EKKy member explained, 'we teach new generations skills that previous generations used to know. I see it as societally highly important that those old skills do not disappear'. Mnemonic labour also helped to strengthen temporal commitment to the community: by renovating the houses the members tied themselves into the history and the future of the community. One Oranssi resident remarked: 'If I renovate this well, it means it will also be nice for someone who comes here later'.

Mustarinda and EKKy also searched for historical models for an ecologically sustainable form of life. These models can be interpreted as counter-practices to the mainstream throwaway consumer society and as ways of prefiguring ecologically sustainable futures. EKKy had hunted down an old and endangered cereal variety and tried to preserve it by growing it in its allotments. Mustarinda members studied how agriculture had been historically practised in the area as a way of learning from the past, gaining new insights into present practices of food production. Although it was important to learn from the past, the members emphasised that one should not get stuck in the past. 'It's important to understand how things were done before, but our goal is not to be prisoners of the past', concluded one Mustarinda member. EKKy members echoed this by saying that 'we revive old skills and methods but do something new with them'. The communities thus oriented themselves to the future with mnemonic labour, rediscovering the past and making use of the lessons inherited from it.

Experimental labour

Experimenting with new ways of living and doing lies at the heart of utopian practice (Cooper, 2014). We suggest that experimentation constitutes a form of reproductive labour distinctive to everyday utopias. Experimental labour is reproductive labour in two senses. First, it seeks to produce and reproduce communities as *utopian* sites, as sites of transformative politics, gesturing towards something that does not yet exist. Second, it is

labour oriented towards developing an ecologically and socially sustainable form of life and preserving the planet for future generations (cf. Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Di Chiro, 2008). Experimentation as a utopian practice was understood as an open-ended journey whose destination cannot and should not be known beforehand. A member of EKKy summarised this idea:

In this place, you can try out whatever you like. And always when we do something, it leads to something else. I like this sense of being on a journey, I like processes and how unpredictable they can be. . . . You can analyse, plan and develop things to some extent, but you need to leave enough space for the doing itself. I think the process dies if everything is controlled till the end.

The significance of experimental labour in everyday utopias is related to a lack of economic resources, which pushes the communities to invent ways of working that do not depend on monetary forms of economy, such as buying services or goods. It is also related to the efforts of these communities to disengage from the existing fossil-fuelled capitalist structures and imagine and put into practice ecologically more sustainable structures (see Järvensivu, 2017). There are no ready-made models for an ecological form of life, which makes experimental labour indispensable for the communities. Especially in EKKy and Mustarinda, experimental labour was aimed at envisaging long-term models for an ecological life that others could adopt and develop further. They wanted to ‘live in the post-fossil future’ in the here and now, as one Mustarinda member formulated it.

Crucial to experimental labour was a constant dialogue between theory and practice. Theoretical conceptions were put into practice in various experiments, and theory was, in turn, lived through in the everyday experiments that generated new theoretical insights. One Mustarinda member illustrated this with the metaphor of soup: one needed to literally cook soup in order to keep the people in the community alive, but at the same time, one also had to ‘cook intellectual soup’ and think how to combine theory and practice in daily life. This dialogue between theory and practice underlines the importance accorded to experience-based knowledge in making utopia (cf. Kaartinen et al., 2023). ‘I don’t believe it’s possible to achieve a notable change without the personal experimental channel’, concluded one Mustarinda member. Experimental labour was conceived of as a fundamentally collective process:

The best part of Mustarinda is that we can experiment together with things that you couldn’t or wouldn’t dare to try out alone. Many of us couldn’t experiment with energy solutions in our rented flats in Helsinki. And it’s nicer to screw up together than alone.

Experimental labour also occupied a pivotal position in the everyday life of EKKy and its attempts to prefigure an ecological form of life. The members of EKKy described the community as a place for ‘propeller-head thinking’. One could experiment freely as long as these experiments were in alignment with principles of sustainable development. Experimental labour was seen as an effective form of transformative politics (cf. Newman, 2019), as it generated examples about how to live in a more sustainable manner. Based on their experiments, EKKy members wished to provide people with information about ‘what works and what doesn’t in diverse life circumstances’.

Experimental labour was also an epistemic practice with which members sought to learn, for example, ‘where electricity and heat comes from, where we use them and how much, what kinds of solutions we can make and how they affect us as individuals and in our common life’. Experimental labour seemed never-ending: one had to constantly rethink everyday practices and how they could be performed in a more ecological manner. A good example comes from soup bowls. One Mustarinda member told us how she had been thinking of getting rid of all bowls, because they took so much space in the dishwasher, leading to the dishwasher being used more than would otherwise be necessary. By using smaller dishes, one could save energy and water. Experimenting with sustainability was thus part and parcel of everyday life.

Another important area of experimentation had to do with energy systems. Mustarinda had experimented with a host of energy solutions over the years (Järvensivu, 2017). It had tested a wind power plant and modified its car to operate with biogas. Since market-based solutions with ecological options were often limited, the community had to invent creative solutions itself through trial and error. The metaphor of ‘floundering’ that emerged in the interviews captured the sometimes chaotic processes of experimentation and improvisation. One of the long-term members of Mustarinda pondered how this posed a challenge to striking a balance between ecological and social sustainability:

We’ve chosen the path of doing things in a different and more ecological way so that there would be a horizon to the future. When you diminish material and energy consumption, it means that the amount of work increases. We use a lot of time thinking how to create ways of working and travelling that would be easy, possible and sustainable, and also pedagogical. When you don’t just buy things that would make things easier quickly, it becomes a bit more difficult. There’s a contradiction quite often that something that is ecological can be mentally draining and challenging for the community.

While experimentation as a form of reproductive labour was highly valued in everyday utopias, the members felt it was not acknowledged in mainstream society, mirroring the devaluation of reproductive labour in society more generally. They were frustrated that policymakers did not understand how much work pursuing an ecological form of life required, leaving communities to tackle ecological problems with resources that were in no way sufficient for the task.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed reproductive labour in three everyday utopias in Finland. We have contributed to FSRT by analysing reproductive labour in these utopias and by developing a categorisation of different forms of reproductive labour that may also prove helpful in other contexts. We have identified four forms of labour – manual, affective, mnemonic and experimental – and analysed how they are performed and articulated in everyday utopias. Experimental labour, in particular, is distinctive to everyday utopias and something that has been largely omitted in extant literature on social reproduction. Experimental labour foregrounds the importance of everyday utopias as sites of political imagination, in which novel, ecologically and socially sustainable forms of life are

actively developed and tried out, with varying degrees of success. Reproductive labour in everyday utopias is not geared towards reproducing labour force for capitalist economies but towards reproducing political subjects and the planet for future generations.

We have also contributed to the literature on intentional communities and everyday utopias by underlining the significance of reproductive labour for making alternative worlds happen. While some other utopian projects have sought ‘the end of work’ (Granter, 2009), in the everyday utopias studied here, labour is an intrinsic part of creating radically different forms of life. Utopias are thus not merely theoretical conceptions of better worlds but also material processes embodying and realising other ways of being through hands, land and houses. Reproductive labour is a key utopian practice that holds important transformative and transgressive potential. Everyday utopias destabilise the conventional understanding of labour and social reproduction, and their valuation and modes of organisation in society. This involves tensions, as everyday utopias often have to rely on capitalist economies and waged work, despite being critical of them. However, by embracing social reproduction and by destabilising the conventional production/reproduction hierarchy, everyday utopias prefigure social formations that acknowledge and value social reproduction as a prerequisite for a sustainable form of life and are willing to address the inevitable tensions and conflicts it entails.

Unlike in mainstream capitalist settings, reproductive labour in everyday utopias is visible, which is an important aspect of modelling and inspiring change (Cooper, 2014: 31). Reproductive labour is a necessity since the communities have scarce economic resources. It is also a virtue since the communities, while unavoidably entangled with it, wish to disengage from the capitalist organisation of labour, time and care. Our findings point out, however, that everyday utopias also struggle with replenishing reproductive resources since reproductive labour can be both physically and psychologically exhausting and prone to depletion. A precondition for everyday utopias is that carers are also cared for.

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Résumé

Cet article analyse le travail reproductif dans les utopies quotidiennes. Les utopies quotidiennes font référence à des espaces et des pratiques qui expérimentent des formes de vie alternatives et créent de nouveaux imaginaires sociaux. À partir de recherches ethnographiques menées sur trois utopies quotidiennes en Finlande, nous soutenons dans cet article que le travail, en préfigurant des formes de vie socialement et écologiquement durables qui ne contribuent pas à la logique capitaliste, joue un rôle clé dans les politiques de transformation. L'article associe la théorie féministe de la reproduction sociale et les études utopiques pour mettre en lumière les différentes formes de travail reproductif dans les utopies quotidiennes. Quatre formes de travail sont identifiées : manuel, affectif, mnémorique et expérimental. En particulier, le travail expérimental met en avant l'importance des utopies quotidiennes en tant que sites d'imagination politique au sein desquels de nouvelles formes de vie sont activement développées et testées. En conclusion, nous suggérons que les utopies quotidiennes ébranlent les conceptions et pratiques habituelles du travail et de la reproduction sociale.

Mots-clés

ethnographie, imagination politique, reproduction sociale, travail, utopies quotidiennes

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el trabajo reproductivo en las utopías cotidianas. Las utopías cotidianas se refieren a espacios y prácticas que experimentan con formas alternativas de vida y crean nuevos imaginarios sociales. A partir de la investigación etnográfica

sobre tres utopías cotidianas en Finlandia, el artículo argumenta que el trabajo juega un papel clave en la política transformadora al prefigurar formas de vida social y ecológicamente sostenibles que no sean propicias a la lógica capitalista. El artículo conecta la teoría feminista de la reproducción social y los estudios utópicos para arrojar luz sobre las diferentes formas de trabajo reproductivo en las utopías cotidianas. Se identifican cuatro formas de trabajo: manual, afectivo, mnemotécnico y experimental. En particular, el trabajo experimental destaca la importancia de las utopías cotidianas como sitios de imaginación política en los que se desarrollan y prueban activamente nuevas formas de vida. El artículo concluye sugiriendo que las utopías cotidianas subvierten el entendimiento y la práctica convencionales del trabajo y la reproducción social.

Palabras clave

etnografía, imaginación política, reproducción social, trabajo, utopías cotidianas