

## Political Imagination and Social Change

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### Abstract

This Introduction to the special issue ‘Political Imagination and Social Change’ addresses the role of political imagination for transformative politics and social change. It argues that sociology has a critical role to play in analysing, theorising, and facilitating political imagination and contributing to reinvigorating the collective political imagination by offering insights to envisaging alternative social formations and destabilising conventional ways of thinking. The Introduction discusses how political alternatives are imagined, practised, and lived out in different historical, social, and geographical contexts and by different groups of people. It shows how structures of power and domination, such as colonialism, racism, and gender and class systems, shape the practices of political imagination and affect the ways in which people can imagine and act towards social change. It also discusses how political imagination can be methodologically approached, and proposes a tripartite conceptualisation of political imagination centring on the notions of utopia, imaginary, and practice. It concludes that emancipatory and progressive political imagination is sorely needed to counter today’s dystopic and destructive forces and envisage better ways of being.

### Keywords

arts-based methods, imaginary, political imagination, prefiguration, social change, sociology, transformative politics, utopia

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## Introduction

In this special issue, we address the role of political imagination for transformative politics and social change. We examine how political alternatives are imagined, practised, and lived out in different historical, social, and geographical contexts and by different groups of people. We analyse how structures of power and domination, such as colonialism, racism, and gender and class systems, shape the practices of political imagination and affect the ways in which people can imagine and act towards social change. We also explore how political imagination can be methodologically approached and propose a tripartite conceptualisation of political imagination centring on the notions of utopia, imaginary, and practice. The articles in this special issue highlight how political imagination is produced and practised in a range of sites, including art, everyday life, climate activism, and Indigenous and peasant movements.

Political imagination is a transformative and generative force that is inherently intersubjective, affective, material, and social (Malkki, 2015), expanding our horizon of what is possible. The concept of political imagination not only emphasises that imagination is political but also captures new imaginings of the political (Jaffe, 2018). Political imagination helps to envisage social reality in a radically different manner, inspire political action, and articulate political critique. The significance of political imagination thus lies both in criticism of mainstream society and its hegemonic ideas and in its ability to open possibilities for imagining counter-normative forms of life and expand the horizon of the 'not yet' in the here and now (Bloch, 1986; Cooper, 2014; Eskelinen et al., 2020). Conceived of in this way, political imagination is a method for changing the world (Eskelinen et al., 2020: 11). However, political imagination does not have any inherent political allegiance; rather, it can be mobilised for a variety of political projects, whether progressive and emancipatory or violent and exclusionary. The articles in this special issue focus on the forms of political imagination aimed at emancipatory social change.

Our interest in political imagination stems from two observations. On one hand, our current political conjuncture has been characterised as thoroughly anti-utopian and post-political, offering dystopic and disempowering rather than energising and utopian visions for the future (Browne, 2006; Rosa, 2015; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). The political, understood as a space of contestation and conflict, has been reframed as a site of technocratic solutions and the solidification of the neoliberal status quo (Dean, 2014; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014), which depoliticises political grievances, creates a sense of disenfranchisement, and makes it exceedingly difficult to envisage political alternatives and organise resistance to existing power constellations. Moore and Milkoreit (2020) have captured this process with what they call the 'triple failure of imagination'. The sheer scale and magnitude of global challenges make it difficult for people to comprehend and respond to them, which manifests as a failure of sociological imagination (Mills, 2000 [1959]): that is, an inability to understand the interconnections between our life worlds and broader structural and systemic forces. This leads to the third failure, which is the inability to collectively imagine alternative social formations and futures and the pathways towards them.

As a result, while radical political change is needed, we appear to be largely caught within the contours of the existing situation and unable to imagine alternatives (Larner,

2014: 192). This creates a sense of futurelessness. Visions of progress seem to have been replaced by endless cycles of crisis, and the horizon of expectations has narrowed, making the future seem more a threat than a promise (Hartog, 2015; Rosa, 2015; Skotnicki and Nielsen, 2021: 852). In public debate, radical or utopian alternatives are often immediately shot down as unrealistic, which closes off the possibility of another world and proclaims that the prevailing order is the best we can hope for (Skotnicki and Nielsen, 2021: 858). Moreover, utopian visions, rather than pointing to alternative futures, may take the form of ‘retropias’ (Bauman, 2017: 4–9) that practice selective remembering and forgetting and locate utopian visions in a nostalgic ‘lost, stolen and abandoned’ past. Thus, visions for the future seem highly limited and as externally imposed rather than freely imagined and embraced possibilities (Skotnicki and Nielsen, 2021: 838).

There is also a certain weariness with the ‘relentless pessimism’ of post-politics (Larner, 2014: 190) and a concern about its performative power, making it potentially difficult to see and appreciate existing struggles for political alternatives. As Jacques Rancière (2016: 154) has critically noted, while we are increasingly told that emancipation is impossible because all desires for protest and rebellion are entirely caught in the machine of oppression, we should not mistakenly assume that the forces of domination are omnipotent, since there are always a multiplicity of forms and scenes of dissensus: ‘Every situation can be cracked open on the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification, altering the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought’ (pp. 155). While discussions of anti-utopianism and post-politics capture important facets of the multiple forms of the injustice, hopelessness, and disenfranchisement characterising our current conjuncture, it is also important to acknowledge, as the articles in this special issue do, that political alternatives are nevertheless constantly imagined, performed, and practised in a host of spaces that people inhabit, not only in the form of established ideologies, visible protests, and organised movements (see in this issue Eskelinen and Lakkala, 2024; Ferreira da Silva et al., 2024; López Flores and Ranta, 2024), but also in the form of artistic imagination and everyday resistance (see in this issue Aula and Masoodian, 2024; Fält, 2025; Gandolfo, 2024; Humphrey et al., 2025; Ourabah, 2025; Perheentupa and Porkola, 2024). People do imagine better futures, question commonsensical schemes of perception and action, prefigure alternative forms of life, and try to make a difference. This special issue charts how and where this happens and the tensions and opportunities it involves.

As the above discussion signals, the topic of this special issue – political imagination and social change – is particularly timely and important for sociology. We believe that sociology has a critical role to play in analysing, theorising, and facilitating political imagination and the struggles it animates and inspires in the current contested and conflict-ridden terrain. Sociological research can contribute to reinvigorating the collective political imagination by offering insights to envisaging alternative social formations and destabilising conventional ways of thinking that tend to lock us to a narrow repertoire of political possibilities (Weeks, 2011). Sociology does not simply describe and explain the social world as it is but also seeks to understand how a different mode of living and being could be possible (Levitas, 2013a; Wright, 2011: 37). In so doing, sociology can contribute to the ‘speculative activation of the political imagination’ and to experimenting with the possibility of inhabiting the present otherwise (Savransky, 2022: 371). Political

imagination is also crucially about hope (Bloch, 1986; Eskelinen et al., 2020: 9) because it may foster a sense of agency and prevent us from getting stuck in the face of heteronomy and oppression.

To sum up, this special issue makes three contributions. First, it seeks to advance the sociological understanding of political imagination and its role for transformative politics and social change. It proposes a tripartite conceptualisation of political imagination that approaches it as a creative force affecting our collective futures and moving from private imaginings towards collective social dreaming. Second, the special issue seeks to increase our knowledge about the manifold ways in which people imagine and pursue social change. Through a careful empirical analysis of a range of geographical, historical, and cultural sites, it highlights how political alternatives are being developed, experimented with, and put into practice. It thus emphasises political imagination as a contextual practice, taking different forms and being deployed for different kinds of political and analytical purposes in different settings. Third, the special issue makes a methodological contribution by showing how political imagination can be reinvigorated and studied by using a range of artistic practices and arts-based methods. In this way, it demonstrates the importance of art for political imagination and sociological knowledge production.

## **Political imagination: utopia, imaginary, and practice**

We propose to conceptualise political imagination as a constellation of utopias, imaginaries, and practices. Utopia is a method of political imagination (Eskelinen et al., 2020) that produces imaginaries of other possible worlds. Utopias and imaginaries are experimented with and lived out through various practices ‘on the ground’. Political imagination is thus a critical and collective praxis drawing together thought and politics, theory, and practice; it is materially rooted and embodied. Emerging out of the existing social conditions, political imagination seeks to radically transgress these conditions by creating experiential disengagement from the status quo and opening possibilities to experience, feel, and know the world differently. Below, we unpack this tripartite conceptualisation of political imagination and discuss it in relation to the articles of this special issue.

*Utopia* performs a critical function by articulating a better way of being and fostering critical reflection on the emancipatory possibilities of the present (Eskelinen et al., 2020; Levitas, 2013a). As Simon Critchley (2012) has put it, ‘to abandon the utopian impulse in thinking and acting is to imprison ourselves within the world as it is and to give up once and for all the prospect that another world is possible’ (p. 152). Utopia criticises the present, explores alternatives, and invites us to imagine ourselves otherwise (Levitas, 2013a: 219). It challenges the common sense, the routine, and the dominant culture (Bauman, 1976: 109) and anticipates something more, something beyond and other than what currently exists (Cooper, 2014: 4). Utopia takes shape and materialises in counter-images and counter-practices that relativise the present and suggest radical alternatives to our current reality (Lakkala, 2020; see in this issue Eskelinen and Lakkala, 2024). In this way, utopia contributes to expanding publicly available and conceivable repertoires of political alternatives and invigorating political imagination.

Utopias also play a key role in social change. As Levitas (1990: 13) notes, utopias are not only about imagining other alternative worlds but also – and crucially – about bringing them about. The notions of ‘concrete utopias’ (Bloch, 1986), ‘real utopias’ (Wright, 2011), ‘working utopias’ (Crossley, 1999), and ‘everyday utopias’ (Cooper, 2014) capture this world-making function by highlighting the anticipation of utopian impulses and relations in the present and the creation of new ways of experiencing and organising social and political life as a way of practicing transformative politics and pursuing social change. In this special issue, Eskelinen and Lakkala characterise the Utopia Rebellion action of the Finnish branch of Extinction Rebellion as a form of lived utopianism where utopia is created in the here and now. Gandolfo, for her part, approaches Palestinian counter-maps as utopian projects that address the painful experiences of colonialism and envisage a future tangled with nostalgia.

Contemporary utopian theory rejects the idea of utopia as a detailed blueprint of an ideal society and instead emphasises relationality, processuality, open-endedness, and provisionality (Lakkala, 2021; Levitas, 2013a; Sargisson, 1996). For utopia to remain genuinely open and perform an emancipatory function, it must be critical of itself (Masquelier, 2022). Utopias gesture towards a better way of being, but that process is inevitably wrought with difficulties, contradictions, failures, and imperfections (Cooper, 2014). Different groups hold competing and even conflicting concepts of what constitutes a good life and a good society, but these conflicts should not be ironed out or avoided; rather, they are to be explored, debated, and deliberated together. Thus, utopias and political imagination more broadly oscillate between ideal and real, actual and possible, dream and reality, and imagination and actualisation (McBride, 2005: 12).

Utopias need not, however, materialise in order for them to have an impact. Their existence as latent possibilities and active alternatives to the present is in itself important and can facilitate social change (Jacobsen, 2004: 76–78). While utopias seek to envisage alternative futures through critiques of the present, they also draw on the past (Bauman, 1976: 11), to remind us that significant social changes have been possible before and how what was once considered impossible or unthinkable has, with time, become real, such as the welfare state, women’s suffrage, or same-sex marriage. By engaging with the past, utopias can tell different stories about how the world came to be the way it is, remember the power and importance of past struggles, and show the way their spirits live on in the present (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 3). Memories of the past can also provide important imaginative resources for envisaging the not yet and desired social change, as exemplified by the articles by Aula and Masoodian (2024), Fält (2025), Gandolfo (2024), and Perheentupa and Porkola (2024) in this issue. Aula and Masoodian and Fält address memories of older generations as sources of future-oriented social dreaming, while Perheentupa and Porkola discuss how memories can be deployed as resources for concretising the possibility for future change. Gandolfo, for her part, examines the counter-maps produced by the Palestinian artists Mohamed Abusal and Bisan Abu-Eisheh as a form of political imagination, highlighting the role of colonial histories for political imagination and the impact of settler-colonialism on how space is remembered. She argues that these counter-maps are vessels for memory work, recording the history and political violence of the region and experienced by the Palestinian people.

Her article shows how experiences and lessons of past struggles and injustices can both inspire and haunt practices of political imagination in the present.

Political imagination also draws on historically constituted social *imaginaries*. All institutions and social forms can be seen as a temporary solidification of shared imaginaries, or ‘social imaginary significations’ (Castoriadis, 1987). Imaginaries refer to broadly shared collective symbols, representations, and meanings through which people imagine, encounter, and make sense of the social world (Adams et al., 2015; Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; Taylor, 2003). These imaginaries provide answers to fundamental questions such as ‘Who are we as a collective? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking?’ (Castoriadis, 1987: 147). It is by means of and on the basis of imaginaries that individuals are formed as social individuals, capable of participating in social doing and representing (Castoriadis, 1987: 366). Imaginaries are subterranean and unconscious societal streams that are rarely recognised; rather, they are taken as ‘just the way things are’ (Castoriadis, 1987; McAfee, 2017). This explains their powerful role in maintaining and legitimising the existing socio-political order (Schwartz, 2021: 3331).

Castoriadis (1987) suggests that there is a ‘radical imaginary’ that exists at the socio-historical and psychic levels. On the socio-historical level, this imaginary is an open stream of the anonymous collective, while on the psychic level, it is an affective, representative, and intentional flux. Castoriadis (1987) uses ‘radical imagination’ to describe the radical imaginary operating at the level of the psyche. Socialisation informs the manifestations of this ‘first’, or original, imagination but does not determine or destroy it (pp. 369–372). Radical imagination is a ‘tectonic, protean substance out of which all social institutions and identities are made’ and that is constantly in motion under the surface of society, ‘undermining and challenging all that we take to be real, hard, fast and eternal’ (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 6). It can never be fully domesticated or tamed; it stubbornly resists socialisation efforts (Castoriadis, 1997: 55). The concept of radical imagination helps underscore how people are able to change themselves and their societies, to ‘imagine otherwise’ (McAfee, 2017: 962). However powerful dominant social imaginaries may be, they are nevertheless vulnerable to the power of radical imagination (McAfee, 2017).

In every society, we can identify dominant social imaginaries that are the taken-for-granted and naturalised schemes of perception that guide social life; the notions of habitus and common sense capture similar dynamics. These dominant imaginaries can be challenged by *counter-imaginaries* that articulate alternative interpretations about the social world. Shifts in imaginaries are an important part of social change, and thus the production of counter-imaginaries is central to expanding political imagination. Several articles in this special issue trace and identify counter-imaginaries to the dominant imaginary resting on the ecologically and socially destructive system of continuous economic growth, overconsumption, colonialist and extractivist structures and the devaluation of social reproduction and non-Western and Indigenous epistemologies. The global ecological crisis that is manifesting itself among other ways in the climate emergency, biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification challenges the dominant imaginary and calls for new political imaginations capable of envisaging futures that are more ecologically, socially, and politically sustainable. Ourabah (2025) asks in her article how to imagine better futures and better ways of being ‘in a dying world’, while Eskelinen and Lakkala

(2024) and Ferreira da Silva et al. (2024) focus on analysing the counter-imaginaries produced by climate movements in Finland and Portugal, and López Flores and Ranta (2024) trace the post-extractivist imaginary that arises from the urgency of the planetary crisis among Indigenous and peasant movements in Bolivia. The counter-imaginaries produced by these movements take issue with growth-oriented neoliberal politics, traditional political institutions, ecological degradation, alienation, colonial legacies, and extractive policies and articulate alternatives that draw on degrowth, an emphasis on care for the people and the environment, the valuation of reproductive over productive labour, an appreciation of the human and more-than-human relationality, anticolonialism, critique of individualism, the creation of new communal ways of living, and an emphasis on the local and marginalised forms of knowledge. Ferreira da Silva et al. (2024) suggest that these political imaginaries have potential to energise and revitalise the democratic debate on climate change. In addition, the Palestinian artists and their counter-maps analysed by Gandolfo (2024) can be approached as the production of counter-imaginaries to established historical and political narratives.

Finally, political imagination can be approached as a *practice* of social change. Political imagination encompasses ideas about how to pursue social change and suggests repertoires of action and paths towards ‘making the world otherwise’ (Levitas, 2013a: xiii). Social movements, intentional communities, and activist groups are important agents for producing and materialising political imagination. They formulate new visions, ideals, and values and suggest which directions to take. Without such visions and paths, struggles stagnate and decline (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). The articles in this special issue illustrate this by demonstrating how social movements produce and practice political imagination by challenging the rhetoric of ‘there is no alternative’ associated with austerity politics (Blyth, 2013) that impoverishes the sense of what is possible and blocks radical social change (see in this issue Eskelinen and Lakkala, 2024; Ferreira da Silva et al., 2024; López Flores and Ranta, 2024).

One central practice of political imagination in social movements, activist groups, and intentional communities is prefiguration, referring to anticipatory attempts to create in the present social relations, spaces, and practices that will hopefully come to characterise society at large in the future (Breines, 1980; Yates, 2015). Prefigurative politics pursues social change by living ‘as if’ the preferred change had already been achieved (Swain, 2019: 48; Cooper, 2020). It calls into question the idea that social change can be realised only through achieving power at the state level or through top-down models of change (Habersang, 2022: 3) and centres instead on processes of change that draw on the sources of power from below to develop feasible alternatives and show that they are possible (Rowbotham et al., 2013: 29; Yates, 2015, 2021). Prefiguration emphasises experimentation in which new political structures are envisaged through bottom-up changes in micro-relations and practices – the ends are not fixed, and the alternative world is never pre-determined (Swain, 2019). Prefigurative politics has historically occupied a central place particularly in feminist and anarchist movements, stemming from the disappointment in the ‘politics of deferment’, which perpetually postpones important questions until ‘after the revolution’ (Firth, 2012; Rowbotham et al., 2013; Yates, 2015, 2021) This has unnecessarily limited repertoires of action and precluded us from seeing the possibilities for change within our reach (Federici, 2019).

In this special issue, Humphrey et al. (2025) show a film of an ethnodrama written out of research interviews with 36 trans, intersex, and LGBTI activists. The participants reflect on a fictitious law, the *Acquired Sex and Intersex Status [ASIS] Bill*, which is an amalgamation of several laws in fieldwork locations that explicitly recognise trans or intersex people. The ethnodrama created a prefigurative space of activist imaginaries in which their voices were heard and alternatives could be imagined. In *Extinction Rebellion*, discussed by Eskelinen and Lakkala (2024), prefiguration emerges in the images of the future and in creating a space for enacting the ecological utopia temporarily in the present. Latin American Indigenous and peasant movements analysed by López Flores and Ranta (2024) resist the Bolivian government's extractive projects by focusing on recovering communal practices and attending to human and more-than-human relationality. These activities can be interpreted as a form of prefiguration that seeks to bring about a desired future by living it in the here and now. Similarly, the practices of reproductive labour identified by Ourabah (2025) can be read as prefigurative activities in the anticipation of more ecologically sustainable futures.

In addition to social movements, the articles in this special issue highlight the everyday as a meaningful site of struggle, politics, and social transformation. Ourabah zooms in on the everyday practices and forms of reproductive labour and argues that they can 'alert us to the forms of political imagination flying under the radar of logocentric politics' (Ourabah, 2025: 2). She uses the concept of 'reproductive labour' to theorise the contradictions of reproductive labour in the ecological crisis: reproductive labour not only maintains and reproduces life but also contributes to its damage and destruction. The article also points to the limits of logocentric participation and highlights the important role that materiality and corporeal participation play 'in the times of epistemic uncertainty'. Indeed, at moments of political despair, when political change seems out of reach, such everyday, local, and small-scale practices and social arrangements can be an especially meaningful and feasible way to pursue social change (Cooper, 2020: 908; Salmenniemi and Ylöstalo, 2024). However, while the focus on the small-scale and everyday does not preclude large-scale systemic social change – rather, it highlights the overdetermination of social change by making visible different analytical and practical levels for change that are not mutually exclusive (Salmenniemi et al., 2024) – the question of scaling up and forming larger coalitions and collective subjects is relevant. Eskelinen and Lakkala (2024) ponder this in the context of *Extinction Rebellion*, noting that while the movement expresses critical ideas about the present through utopian images, it is less clear how those images would facilitate change.

The articles in this special issue also show how the intersecting categories of gender, race, class, and age shape and are shaped by the practices of political imagination and transformative politics. López Flores and Ranta (2024) investigate the ways in which political alternatives in Latin America are being sought from Indigenous knowledges and histories emphasising decolonisation, communitarian political ideals, and sustainable coexistence between humans and more-than-humans. They also highlight the important role that women play in the struggles against extractivist policies. Ferreira da Silva et al. (2024) discuss the intersectionality of the climate crisis and how the transformative youth climate movements demand climate justice based on inequalities intensified by it. Ourabah's (2025) article discusses the gendered, classed, and racialised dimensions of

reprod-estr-uctive labour and logocentric political participation, while the articles by Aula and Masoodian (2024), Fält (2025), and Perheentupa and Porkola (2024) focus on the meanings of age and generation and trace political imagination produced by youth and the elderly. Humphrey et al. (2025) discuss trans, intersex, and LGTBI rights, while Eskelinen and Lakkala (2024) conclude their article by stressing that more research is needed to understand how class, gender, ethnicity, and age shape the ways in which utopian alternatives are imagined in climate movements such as Extinction Rebellion.

As the above discussion shows, practices of political imagination are also materially rooted. The articles in this special issue show how more-than-human agents often play a key role in the production of political imagination and ‘political ecologies’ (Bennett, 2010). Human and more-than-human interaction is essential for gesturing towards more ecologically and socially sustainable futures. López Flores and Ranta’s (2024) analysis of Indigenous and peasant movements shows how their struggles are crucially about re-imagining people’s relationships to territories and more-than-humans – land, water, forest, and so on. These struggles are thus not abstract utopian projections but rooted in the material realities of peasant and Indigenous communities and their attempts to ‘heal the human and more-than-human relationality’ and protect themselves from extractive and otherwise ecologically destructive policies. Gandolfo’s (2024) analysis of Palestinian counter-maps highlights how artistic artefacts participate in the production of space and political imagination, while Perheentupa and Porkola (2024), Aula and Masoodian (2024), and Fält (2025) underline the importance of material surroundings and more-than-human agents for the process of imagining alternative futures.

Political imagination is also a critical question from the perspective of democracy. Teppo Eskelinen (2017, 2020) has argued that the dissipation of utopian energies poses a threat to democracy because as a utopian project, democracy requires us to envisage alternatives to our prevailing social reality. We are, after all, constrained not only in what it is possible for us to imagine but also in what it is possible for us to imagine as possible (Levitas, 2013b: 46). The democratic form of life requires the capacity to collectively practice political imagination. Several commentators have raised concerns about the withering of such capacities. Jameson (2009: 434), for example, has called for ‘a revival of long-dormant parts of the mind, organs of political and historical and social imagination which have virtually atrophied from lack of use, muscles of praxis we have long since ceased exercising, revolutionary gestures we’ve lost the habit of performing’ (cited in Moylan, 2021: 184). Kathi Weeks (2015: 744) has similarly noted that our capacity to think forward into the future and our abilities to imagine beyond ourselves as subjects of a radically different future have withered from lack of exercise. The articles in this special issue also point to the centrality of political imagination for democratic participation and governance. They address the political imagination of marginalised and oppressed groups, such as Indigenous peoples, Palestinians, LGTBIQ+ communities and women (Gandolfo, 2024; Humphrey et al., 2025; López Flores and Ranta, 2024; Ourabah, 2025), as well as groups who are easily ignored or excluded from political decision-making systems such as young people or the elderly (Aula and Masoodian, 2024; Fält, 2025; Ferreira da Silva et al., 2024; Perheentupa and Porkola, 2024).

As this makes clear, political imagination, while neither easy nor given, is undeniably necessary for democratic participation. It is not an individual disposition or a thing that

individuals possess to greater or lesser degrees; rather, it is produced and accomplished together (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 4, 62; Salmenniemi et al., 2024). When political imagination is understood as a skill, it is important to develop methods for training and cultivating it. These methods can be employed to ‘educate desire’, to paraphrase Miguel Abensour (cited in Levitas, 2013a: 4), and to facilitate disengagement from the contours of the existing configuration of social relations and the experiences and meanings to which we have become habituated (Weeks, 2011: 205). This can help us to think and desire what was previously unthinkable (Sargisson, 1996: 59).

The articles in this special issue showcase artistic practices and arts-based methods for cultivating and studying political imagination. Building on the idea of utopia as a method of political imagination (Eskelinen et al., 2020; Levitas, 2013a), the articles highlight the central role of artistic practice and arts-based methods in invigorating political imagination and enabling experiencing, feeling, and knowing the world differently. Aula and Masoodian (2024) introduce an interdisciplinary workshop method drawing on sensorial ethnography and visual narratives for studying transgenerational and creative co-imagination. Perheentupa and Porkola (2024) focus on the art concept of ‘utopia consultation’ and discuss how it can be used as a method for reinvigorating young people’s political imagination and for collecting research material on utopian thinking, while Gandolfo (2024) highlights the central role of artists in the production of subversive political imagination. By analysing a longitudinal community and participatory artistic collaboration, Fält (2025) introduces arts-based spatial, material, and sensual exercises deployed to inspire the elderly to dream of different futures and future bodies. Humphrey et al. (2025) use ethnodrama to offer an imagined space for trans, intersex, and LGTBI activists to discuss social change.

## **Outline of the special issue**

This special issue consists of seven research articles, two *Beyond the Text* publications and five book reviews. It begins with Luisa Gandolfo’s article examining political imagination in utopian cartography in Palestine-Israel. Instead of neutral representations of the land, cartography and maps can be understood as political narratives that tell how the land is perceived. They are intrinsic to colonisation, dispossession, and erasure. By analysing counter-maps produced by Palestinian artists, Gandolfo demonstrates how the land can become envisaged differently. Over time, Palestinian counter-maps have become enmeshed with utopian visions, ways to envision alternative futures in a shrinking political space. At the same time, they are also a vessel for memory work, a record of place names that lend insights into the locality and history, as well as a reminder of the political violence that resulted in the inhabitants’ exile. In her analysis, Gandolfo provides a multidirectional conceptualisation of utopia. Although utopia implies a forward-looking hopefulness, Palestinian counter-maps offer a utopian vision that looks in two directions: to a past remembered and to what might be. The dystopian exists alongside the utopian, as the vision of a utopian society grows from a nostalgia tempered by loss and longing as much as hope and expectation.

In their article, Pabel Camilo López Flores and Eija Ranta investigate how Indigenous and peasant movements resist extractive political projects and organise collective life in

alternative ways in Latin America. Since the 1990s, neoliberal policy agendas and growth-oriented, extractivist models have gained momentum in many ostensibly progressive Latin American countries. However, in places where Indigenous and peasant movements have been particularly strong, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, they have been able to reject extractive projects and construct alternatives to neoliberalism, drawing on Indigenous people's ideas of the good life. These ideas, conceptualised as *vivir bien/buen vivir* (living well), emphasise decolonisation, communitarian political ideas, Indigenous self-determination, and a sustainable coexistence between humans and more-than-humans. López Flores and Ranta present an empirical analysis of a contemporary conflict in Bolivia, where state-led extractivist practices clash with communitarian and post-extractivist grassroots movement strategies. Focusing on the perceptions and experiences of activists, especially women, López Flores and Ranta present post-extractivist politics as a utopian vision that responds to the urgency of the planetary crisis at the local level. Moreover, they conceptualise post-extractivism in Latin America as not only a future-oriented utopian vision but also an unfolding process that is based on concrete socio-territorial struggles for re-existence, generating alternatives to extractive politics.

Teppo Eskelinen and Keijo Lakkala's article explores the utopian visions of the Finnish branch of Extinction Rebellion (*Elokapina*), focusing on Utopia Rebellion, its protest week. They argue that to understand utopian visions, we need to analyse how they conceptualise society as it exists and its most pressing problems, thus focusing on the critical function of utopia. The authors approach utopias as counter-images that criticise the present by envisioning ideal alternative societies. Conceptualised this way, utopias can be viewed as a call to practice political imagination. The article shows how Extinction Rebellion construes its utopian counter-images and how its utopian visions encompass social critique of the current 'destructive utopia' of economic growth. The movement's utopian ideas are rich with elements that today's society lacks, such as a redefinition of work, more focus and time for care, meaningful collective activities, and human connections with nature, which run counter to the alienating texture of current societies. The authors suggest that degrowth serves as an organising idea for Extinction Rebellion's utopian visions.

Daniela Ferreira da Silva, Anabela Carvalho, and Maria Fernandes-Jesus' article continues the discussion of climate activism. Zooming in on youth climate activists' political imaginaries in Portugal, the article shows the plurality of political imaginaries articulated by the Portuguese climate movement and differences in how climate activists assess the current social and political landscape and construct visions of political futures. Some movements, such as School Strike for Climate and Climáximo, radically challenge the existing system by illustrating structural causes of climate change and envisioning alternative and more just socioenvironmental futures. They express a desire for radical democracy that would represent the 'people' and those most impacted by climate change. These groups also work with visions such as ecosocialism and degrowth and thus energise the democratic debate about climate change. Other, more moderate movements, such as LIDERA and Ambiental-Ist, do not question the dominant imaginaries of neoliberal democracy and market-driven politics but rather affirm the status quo. They tend to reproduce a technical-centred discourse that evades the discussion about social inequalities. They also present the problems related to climate change as generalised and global,

which runs the risk of simplifying and depoliticising them. The article thus illustrates the important implications of imaginaries for social change.

Massilia Ourabah's article focuses on politics in the everyday and the production of political imagination through what she calls reprod-estr-uctive labour, which highlights the contradictory nature of reproductive labour in a dying world. By analysing reproductive labour through ethnographic fieldwork in French households, Ourabah suggests attentiveness to non-discursive, material forms of societal and political participation in a predominantly logocentric and speech-centred political regime. More specifically, she investigates the ecological practices adopted by her research participants, such as cooking zero-waste dinners, cleaning toilets with vinegar, and saving water at bath time. By analysing these activities, Ourabah makes visible the contribution made by those people who are either unable or unwilling to participate in public political discussion on the ecological crisis. The quiet environmentalism that takes place in reproductive labour is predominantly carried out by racialised, working-class women who tend to be excluded from elitist and expert-based political discourses. By reminding us that those who do not express audible concern about the ecological crisis can still care, Ourabah calls for expanding political imagination from the public and discursive forms of participation to the material, unspoken everyday practices of maintaining life.

The next two articles focus on the role of art and arts-based methods for cultivating and studying political imagination. Inna Perheentupa and Pilvi Porkola investigate the art concept of 'utopia consultation' and experiment with it as a research method for studying political imagination. Utopia consultation is a one-on-one performance concept that invites the participant to discover their utopian visions in dialogue with the artist consultant. The research highlights the role of equal dialogue in stimulating political imagination and shows how dialogue takes place not only between people but also – and importantly – with the material surroundings. While play is often overlooked in sociology, the article suggests that it is important for the queering of normative everyday ways of observation and the production of new insights. The authors also identify arts-based tools to cultivate a hopeful orientation to the not yet, thus leaving behind overt realism, which tends to limit imagination. Finally, the article emphasises the need to practice political imagination collectively and respectfully across differences.

Inkeri Aula and Masood Masoodian focus on the possibilities of art for political imagination. They argue that social change requires creative co-imagination and develop interdisciplinary workshop methods to achieve that goal. Co-imagination is defined as the process of purposefully imagining something together. The experimental workshops described in the article were targeted at both youth and the elderly in Finland and Estonia. Older generations, the authors point out, carry valuable knowledge regarding social change and its possibility due to their life experience. The practical workshop method introduced in the article combines two types of elements: sensory activity and grassroots comics visual narration. The authors propose that transgenerational co-imagination is fostered by discovering the material environment together and by social sharing of the multisensorial experiences gained during sensory activity. The article thus illustrates how imagination takes place in multiple human and more-than-human relations.

The special issue also features two Beyond the Text submissions. Harvey Humphrey, Slater Cain, Gina Gwenffrewi, Leni Daly, Odhran Thomson, and Mathew Wilkie offer a film of an ethnodrama. It is a written script that consists of significant dramatised selections of narrative constructed from research interviews with 36 trans, intersex, and LGBTI activists across Malta, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The characters in the play respond to a fictitious law, the *Acquired Sex and Intersex Status [ASIS] Bill*, to explore the tensions the original research participants experienced in relation to language, identities, recognition, and representation. Although the bill is fictitious, it brings together several laws in the fieldwork locations that explicitly recognise trans or intersex people. The characters' frustrations are the real frustrations of the research participants regarding these existing and proposed laws. The ethnodrama creates a space for activist imaginaries to have their voices heard and in which alternatives can be imagined. The film is combined with a text that explains its history and discusses sociological thinking on authenticity from the perspective of trans and intersex studies.

In the second Beyond the Text item, artist Emma Fält reflects on their long-term artistic collaboration with Roberto Fusco and Anna-Maria Väisänen in the Shared Futures project. The submission creates connections between community and participatory arts and sociology. The multiform project brought together elderly people in Northern Savonia in Finland to imagine the future a hundred years from today. The exercises used in the project were often conducted non-verbally and focused on embodied knowledge. The participants were given a set of concrete questions and tasks that directed their attention to spatiality (both present and future), materiality, sensuality, listening, and audioscapes, remembering and sharing their ideas with other participants. The participants were asked to report their findings in textual form and by drawing. The project's outcomes emphasise sharing, deep and radical listening and multi-sensoriality in overcoming restrictions on dreaming something that does not yet exist. The project also experimented with artificial intelligence, an effort that produced 'wildly imaginative results' of its own.

Finally, the special issue also contains reviews of recent scholarly books on political imagination and social change. Matti Eskelinen reviews Rhiannon Firth's *Disaster Anarchy: Mutual Aid and Radical Action* (2022), and Donatella Gasparro reviews *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism* (2022) by Matthias Schmelzer, Aaron Vansintjan, and Andrea Vetter. Meredith Degyansky writes about Tony Fry and Madina Tlostanova's *A New Political Imagination: Making the Case* (2021), Emil Øversveen about Andreas Reckwitz's *The End of Illusions: Politics, Economy and Culture in Late Modernity* (2021) and Henna-Elise Ventovirta about the volume *Arts-Based Methods for Decolonising Participatory Research* (2021), edited by Tiina Seppälä, Melanie Sarantou, and Satu Miettinen.

## Conclusion

This special issue seeks to increase our understanding of political imagination as a key driver of social change and to highlight how political imagination is produced

and practised in a variety of contexts in the Global North and South. It introduces a novel conceptualisation of political imagination resting on the notions of utopia, imaginary, and practice and underlines the need to preserve the radical and critical function of political imagination in the face of the market-driven, profit-focused valorisation of ‘imagination’ that readily seeks to domesticate and recuperate it (Malkki, 2015: 14; Moylan, 2021: 2–3). Emancipatory and progressive political imagination is sorely needed to counter today’s dystopic and destructive forces of racial capitalism, colonialism, ecological degradation, and anti-democratic movements. The articles in this special issue offer insights into the struggles against these forces and highlight the alternative social formations being envisaged and experimented with in different parts of the world.

By analysing how political imagination is practised in different social and geographic locations, this special issue also shows that our collective futures (or even our pasts) are not set in stone but are open for change. In doing so, it broadens our understandings of the political, including political agency. By directing attention to the margins of conventional and institutionalised political spaces and forms of participation – such as everyday life, grassroots movements and arts-based exercises – the articles shed light on their transformative potential for collective social dreaming. The articles highlight how small-scale practices and prefigurative politics can play an important role in pursuing social change. They also elucidate how the animation of political imagination is itself a step towards acknowledging that the future is radically open, thus paving way for emancipatory change. Moreover, they remind us that the structures of domination may not only block subaltern groups’ efforts towards social change but also help make glaringly visible the very need for that change.

Finally, the contributions highlight the role of sociologists as active producers of political imagination. Many authors in this special issue situate themselves as agents of social change and carry out their research in dialogue with the material, corporeal, and affective practices by which people imagine social change and alternative futures. Sociology plays a key role in expanding our sense of what is possible, energising social dreaming and ultimately working towards emancipatory social change. We hope this special issue will inspire further theoretical, methodological, and empirical work on political imagination and spark transformative political action seeking better ways of being.

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