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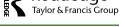
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ABSTRACT

Many individuals become involved in activism due to concerns about contemporary structural conditions and likely (negative) futures arising from them. While negative perceptions are important for driving initial involvement, visions of positive alternative futures to work towards can be crucial for motivating and shaping activist engagement. Positive visions serve as a goal as well as a potential blueprint to inform practices such that the 'means match the ends.' In this paper, we explore Khasnabish and Haiven's concept of the 'radical imagination' as a practice in sustaining and shaping social movement engagement through a shared vision of an alternative future. We emphasise the processes of organising and grounding action in practices of the present, which forms part of a 'praxis of prefiguration' – informing many aspects of community building and activism. While the radical imagination shared by anti-capitalist activists is sometimes depicted as a utopian dream, we suggest that it is, rather, a hopeful imagining in constant conversation with ideological positions and organising practices, situated against and within the margins of capitalist society. These ideological commitments and future imaginings shape the ways that anti-capitalists engage with overlapping environmental and social issues and the wider landscape of political action.

Introduction

It is increasingly apparent that human-centric, industrialised history is catching up with us. This is perhaps best articulated in the notion of the Anthropocene, which articulates the various ways in which humans have made unparalleled and lasting impacts on the planet (for an overview of interdisciplinary engagement with this term, see Lidskog and Waterton 2016). In recent years, the impacts of climate change are being felt in the form of unprecedented fires in Australia and California, flooding in Indonesia, and record-breaking ice melts in the Antarctic. Meanwhile hard-fought for coalitions of governance such as the European Union and the World Health Organisation have been attacked and deconstructed at the same time as we are experiencing a global pandemic. The growth of political polarisation within the last decade has led to increasingly visible activist movements on both the conservative and liberal edges of politics (McCright and Dunlap 2011; Tranter 2013). While the anti-globalisation movement of the early 2000's may have dissipated, concern for the lack of global solidarity, and our ability to manage what appears to be increasingly upon-us crisis, has led to a re-emergence, if splintered, anti-capitalist movement.

As contemporary government policies and rhetoric continue to serve the business interests of fossil fuel and mining companies, as well as capitalising on fear and uncertainty to strengthen political positions, radical political narratives are increasing in visibility. These range from 'alt-right' positions advocating for racial and gender hierarchies around imagined national identities, to radical 'left' positions that call for the dismantling of capitalist and nationalist structures in order to share resources and support equitably amongst all people (Hulme 2008; Obschonka et al. 2018; Van Rythoven 2018). The re-emergence of these radical positions in wider debate, coupled with climate, economic, and political destabilisation around the world, illustrates the need for building our understanding of social change. A large body of literature has investigated the ways that neoliberal capitalism drives inequality and climate change (Klein 2014; Leahy, Bowden, and Threadgold 2010; Norgaard 2018; Foster et al. 2020). Much of this literature calls for substantial structural change in order to slow global warming and increase equality and social inclusion in capitalist countries (Gibson-Graham 2006; Klein 2014). Beyond this literature, anti-capitalist and environmental activists seek to provide a progressive structural critique of government inaction and xenophobic narratives pushed by conservative organisations and politicians, commonly arguing for a range of changes, such as equal redistribution of resources, universal respect for human and non-human life, increased participation in governance, and the protection of the

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environment. These activists are engaged in political campaigning and community organising in order to influence wider social and economic change, often at the same time as attempting to structure their own practices in ways which fit their visions of the future.

This paper explores the interplay between activists' critiques of the contemporary capitalist system and imaginings of potential alternative positive (anti-/post-capitalist) futures in shaping activist practice. The key question investigated in this article is: what role do 'radical' imaginings of alternative futures play in shaping the practices of Australian anti-capitalist environmental activists? We elaborate on Khasnabish and Haiven's (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014; Khasnabish and Haiven 2012, 2015) notion of the 'Radical Imagination' to conceptualise the ways in which activist practices are both enabled and constrained by their ability to imagine alternative ways to structure the world, society, and their own activist organisations. Using in depth interviews and insider-research, we argue that activists engage in 'prefigurative practice' (Chatterton 2010, 2016; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006; Chatterton 2010), making use of their own positive visions and ideological commitments to inform strategic responses to contemporary conditions and expected futures arising from them. We begin by explaining the existing conceptualisation of the 'radical imagination', which, we suggest, highlights the need to understand the conditions in which such imagining is practiced. Our paper aims to contribute to this explanation by outlining the influence of material circumstances on activist's ability to engage the radical imagination, and, we suggest, such practices may be of crucial value in responding to the current multiple crises of capital.

Anti-capitalism and engaging the radical imagination

One of the outcomes of the so-called 'success' of the spread of the capitalist model around the globe has been a lack of ability to envisage alternatives (Fisher 2009). Those who seek to suggest governments intervene in the market to, for instance, prevent environmental damage – despite the fact that it occurs on a regular basis for other reasons – are labelled derogatorily as socialists, 'radical' or, worse 'extremists' or, sometimes more kindly, as utopian, or 'dreamers' (Bowden, 2018). This is often a deliberate strategy encouraged by conservative politicians and the business elite as a means of protecting the existing hegemony. By creating an 'other' in those who would challenge current power relations, an alignment is made between those who would defend capitalist practices and the so-called 'ordinary' citizen. In this way, arguments that the system is undermining itself – such as in the case of climate change (Wright and Nyberg 2015) – are disregarded as dystopian extremism and existing power relations remain unchallenged. Not everyone, however, responds in this way.

For some, negative views of the present, as well as of likely outcomes for the future, serve as powerful emotional and morally informed motivators for engaging in social justice and environmental activism. Likewise, positive visions for the future are also important for maintaining motivation through shared visions of a positive alternative future grounded in experience, and organising practices (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014). Activists are driven to respond to critical understandings of structural conditions and the likely future to which these conditions will lead if the status quo is maintained (Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse 2013). As a result, they become involved in political activity aimed at changing these conditions, and, thus, changing the parameters of the expected future. Positive visions can serve as a goal to work towards as well as a potential blueprint to inform contemporary practices such that the 'means match the ends'.

One way in which activists sustain social movement engagement is through sharing alternative visions of the future, grounded in and built through the practices of the present (Khasnabish and Haiven 2015). This process is conceptualised by Haiven and Khasnabish (2014, 3–4), as engaging the 'radical imagination':

> the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be . . . to build solidarity across boundaries and borders . . . [to] create, with those around us, multiple, overlapping, contradictory and coexistent imaginary landscapes, horizons of common possibility and shared understanding

This speaks to the important role that shared imaginings of alternative futures can play for inspiring and informing the ways that activists respond to social and environmental issues. In a similar way to which the imagination functions to construct social institutions, identities and obligations, it can also disrupt what might have previously seemed to be overwhelmingly powerful foundations of particular social hierarchies (Castoriadis 1987).

In this way, according to Khasnabish and Haiven (2015) the processes of engaging the 'radical imagination' are not simply utopic, rather they are based on critical examination and grounded in material contingent practice. By this definition, then, the radical imagination is both contingent on, and responsive to, the material circumstances which can function to both restrict and facilitate what is considered in the realm of the possible. We suggest that it is only through understanding these processes that the radical can break through the existing webs of structural stagnation that has set us on the current trajectory.

Activism and the praxis of prefiguration

Activists are simultaneously engaged with critiquing the current structure of society and attempting to build their preferred future. This occurs through both protest action, political campaigning, and community organising on the one hand, and through the ways in which they structure their own organisations and lifestyles in the here and now (Khasnabish and Haiven 2015). Organising and grounding action in this way forms part of a 'praxis of prefiguration' – political action aimed at building alternatives in niches of possibility within the overarching structure the wider activist movement is fighting to change (Thompsett 2016; Khasnabish and Haiven 2012).

Activism incorporates a wide variety of activities such as protests, rallies, petitioning, film screening, and fund-raising aimed at influencing social and political change. Bramble and Minns (2005) outline that anti-capitalist activists commonly have substantial experience with a wide variety of protest campaigns focusing on environmental, indigenous rights, and social justice issues. This overlapping experience illustrates how interlinked these issues are both in practice as well as in the analysis of activists themselves (Bramble and Minns 2005). For a great many anti-capitalist activists, the participants in this project included, the intersections of all these issues under capitalism are important rather than mobilising around only a single issue at a time. Decision-making processes are an important dimension of activist practice, with there being some debate over majority-vote or consensus approaches to democracy in activist groups (Chatterton 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). Along with involvement in a variety of campaigns, activists also employ a diversity of tactics, such as creative symbolic actions as well as directly oppositional blockades (Bramble and Minns 2005).

Common to anti-capitalist activist practice is a focus on action that seeks to force specific structural change rather than seeking to simply influence authorities in the hope of limited reforms. This focus on directly making change is linked to a strong critique of capitalist society as a whole, as well as a concern with amplifying the voices of those marginalised or silenced by the dominant discourses of neoliberal capitalism, such as women, refugees, and Indigenous people (Bramble and Minns 2005; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). Perhaps because of this, protest activities and friendship circles are commonly closely intertwined for anti-capitalist activists (Bramble and Minns 2005).

Many anti-capitalist groups explicitly reject formal political and leadership structures, seeking to prioritise autonomous consensus decision making and non-hierarchical grassroots structures (Chatterton 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). Prioritising grassroots structures poses challenges for decision-making and networking of groups in order to drive and maintain fast-paced political and social change (Chatterton 2010; Wolfson 2013). Nevertheless, this is commonly seen by these activists as the best way to build and sustain the alternatives being advocated (Chatterton 2010). A key facet of this is that anti-capitalist activism for these groups is not simply focused on advocating for an imagined future utopia, but, conversely, seeks to build a preferred alternative reality in the here-and-now through non-hierarchical grassroots organising practices (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). To that end, these activists are engaged simultaneously in critiquing current social structures while working towards building their preferred alternative (Chatterton 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010).

Within anti-capitalist movements there are ongoing discussions about the utility of prefigurative practice (Raekstad 2018). Anarchist groups commonly centre prefigurative politics as a fundamental aspect of anti-hierarchy and social inclusion. In contrast, many socialist groups express some scepticism about focusing too much on prefigurative politics to the detriment of timely and effective campaign organising. Both anarchists and socialists share an anti-capitalist position that sees the overthrow of capitalism as a necessary precondition for social justice and environmental sustainability. Additionally, some anarchist groups also incorporate elements of what Chatterton (2016) describes as 'post-capitalism', which aims to simultaneously fight back against capitalism while attempting to also prototype alternative ways of organising and relating to each other within the niches opened up in the overarching capitalist system. This helps support their involvement in the radial subcultural field of activism that is oriented in opposition to the wider social system, while also illustrating on a small scale the viability of their proposed alternatives to the current capitalist system (Chatterton 2016; Khasnabish and Haiven 2015). These visions are in conversation with ideological positions, organisational practices, community norms, strategies for avoiding burnout, and specific critiques of social, environmental, and economic injustices. In this paper, we suggest that the radical imagination allows activists to not only involve themselves campaigns 'against' capitalist projects, but also work towards alternatives in ways that align their practices with future goals.

Methodology

This article draws upon research from the first author's honours thesis within the field of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Newcastle, Australia (HREC approval no. H-2018-0209). This research engaged a small number of individuals to explore their lived experiences and understandings of grassroots anti-capitalist activism and community

building. A qualitative approach grounded in phenomenology provided the most appropriate methodology for investigating this topic prioritising in-depth, rich explanations of respondents' lived experiences from the respondent's perspective and in their own words (Geertz 1973; Williams 2006: 212–214; Schnegg 2014, 15–16).

Primary data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 12 activists from a number of different localities around Australia who were engaged with activism and community building. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, seeking to understand participants' stories of involvement with activism, with questions ranging from childhood and youth experiences, motivations for their involvement in activism, the differing analyses and priorities participants brought to their participation in activism, and the material conditions in which they practiced their involvement. In this way, the interviews are not intended to be 'representative' of the demographics of activists, but rather, gain an in depth understanding of the ways in which participants perceive their activism as enabled or constrained in negotiating their values and hopes within a capitalist world.

Strategic recruitment of interviewees sought participants from the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN), a large network formed in 1997 which functions as both an educational and organising space for university campus environment groups and radical activists across Australia. Although the network is officially student-based, it explicitly argues that everyone is 'a student of life' and involves individuals and representatives from multiple grassroots and non-government organisations (ASEN n.d.). ASEN was chosen as it is a national network of activist groups from around the country that engage across overlapping environmental and social justice campaigns, it runs a yearly training conference that members of these groups attend to skill- and knowledge- share, and because the lead researcher had existing relationships with key members in the national network as a result of extended involvement.

Potential respondents were sought and recruited through purposive sampling informed by the first author's experiences with the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN) and recommendations of key members of different groups within ASEN. Information regarding the research project was circulated through ASEN's communication channels. Members of the different activist groups within ASEN, with which the first author already had established relationships, were also contacted directly and asked to pass on information about the research project to interested parties. Recruitment took place at the Students of Sustainability (SoS) conference in Melbourne, which ran from the 6th – 12 July 2018. The majority of the interviews (n = 7) were conducted face-to-face during the time of the conference or in the immediate two weeks subsequently, with five interviews conducted via videoconferencing.

The interviews followed a topic guide comprising a number of one-on-one open-ended questions and discussion prompts aiming at facilitating discussion with the respondents about their experiences and understandings. The interviews took between 45 and 120 minutes, with the average length being approximately 90 minutes. The interviews, which were recorded, were transcribed for the purpose of analysis. Interview transcripts were hand coded for emergent themes, utilising standard qualitative thematic analysis. Pseudonyms have been used for all named individuals and all identifying information have been omitted.

The youngest participant was 18 years old and the eldest 53, with the vast majority (n = 9) between the ages of 21 to 27. There were a range of gender identifications within the group; six of the activists used she/her pronouns (traditionally feminine), three used he/him (traditionally masculine), and three used they/them (gender neutral or non-binary). While eight of the activists explained that they had grown up with a middle-class family, the rest stated that they came from either working class background or had experienced a mix of the two. The participants expressed that they had been very politically engaged with increasingly 'radical' anti-capitalist activism for an extended period of time. Participants had various levels of involvement with activism over time, with two participants who had been involved for approximately one year, and while the majority of had been involved for two to five years, the oldest participant had been involved in environmental and peace activism for 29 years.

Insider research

The design and focus of this research project were influenced by the first author's experience with the field of activism. The first author has been involved for some time as an insider within local Newcastle grassroots activist collectives and the wider national environmental and social justice movement, including the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN). The first author's participation with these groups has involved helping plan and take part in a number of protest actions and community events, as well as helping to run two recent Students of Sustainability (SoS) conferences. As a result of this the first author simultaneously inhabited positions as insider-participant and outsider-researcher with regards to the field of study.

'Intimate insider' research (where friendships exist prior to commencing research) offers many advantages but also reshapes the researchers' role in, and experience of, the social/cultural field and their relationships (Taylor 2011; Greene 2014). Insider research

leverages the researcher's background and subcultural capital and can allow deeper levels of understanding. It may also provide access to respondents and events/spaces otherwise unavailable (Hodkinson 2005; Taylor 2011; Greene 2014). Insider status can improve the quality and plausibility of explanations and facilitate the flow of interviews. It is, however, important to balance insider position and empathy with a more distanced, critical perspective.

The roles of subcultural insider and researcher operate alongside and support one-another, with insider status influencing participation and access through shared experiences and trust (Hodkinson 2005). Insider research, even more so than research from an outsider perspective, requires reflexively examining the researchers own experiences and understandings as an insider in the field being researched and the ways that this grounds and influences their interactions with research participants as well as the analysis of data (Hodkinson 2005; Taylor 2011; Greene 2014).

As an insider researcher, the first author was able to leverage her background and subcultural capital to gain access to respondents and events/spaces otherwise unavailable. The first author's position as an insider researcher also helped to build a rapport through shared language and experiences, which helped participants to feel comfortable and speak frankly. It also helped with initial analysis as her familiarity with activist language allowed easier interpretation of jargon and acronyms. However, this insider positionality added further challenges to reflexivity, requiring ongoing conscious work to recognise the researcher's biases in order to balance empathy and community accountability with academic rigour. This required care, intuition, and checking with informants to determine what ended up being 'off the record'.

A brief history of the Australian student environment network

Initially a portfolio within the National Union of Students' (NUS) environment portfolio, ASEN has long had a more radical standpoint than the rest of the union. In addition to its focus on environmental mobilising, ASEN also engages with Indigenous rights activism (through involvement with the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, supporting Invasion Day rallies, and working with Indigenous elders and activists to help educate its majority settler and migrant membership about Indigenous issues and colonialism in Australia), and with a wide variety of other campaigns that might not at first glance seem directly linked to environmentalism. This illustrates an attempt at a more intersectional approach to environmental issues by ASEN compared to many larger mainstream environmental activist networks such whose environmental action is often missing engagement with diverse perspectives on class, race, and gender. Partly for this reason, as well as questions about whether 'the environment' was a relevant concern for a student union, the NUS had been rife with debates about whether the organisation should sit within it, and eventually ASEN left the union to become a separate organisation in the mid 2000's. It now functions as an independent network, which is open to participation from non-students, representatives of non-government organisation, and community-based activist groups.

Radical imaginings and (partial) ongoing revolution in the margins

Our interviews suggest that activists come together for a range of different motivators. While some might be expected to have a natural affinity for some issues (for instance, in the case of political causes which might personally affect them), others may find emotion connections to particular causes. For all of the people involved in our research, however, these initial motivators were developed and furthered in the practice of their involvement with activism. Participants described the trajectory of their own analysis of injustice as being part of the process of being involved in new spaces and communities. To this extent, while some of the initial motivators for participants might be seen to have an emphasis on dystopian futures, these narratives were often challenged through their involvement with activism. To this end, we found three key themes that were conducive to the development of the 'radical imagination'. We argue that the radical imagination is not a fixed ideological perspective, but involves the ongoing negotiation of ideological critique and justice, hope and utopia, which necessarily occurs through practice and conversation.

'The system is the problem': ideological critiques and commitment to climate justice

Participants argued that they aim to achieve structural change on a number of intersecting issues, rather than proposing reform around specific isolated campaigns. Participants described combining socialist and anarchist ideological critiques of capitalism with intersectional politics to make links between the issues of economic injustice, colonialism, sexism, racism, and environmental degradation. For instance, environmental and social justice issues are understood to be bound up with the logics of capitalism:

> We're not gonna have an environmentally sustainable society under capitalism . . . the number one necessity is the overthrow of capitalism before we can get any closer to justice. (Rachel, 27, she/her)

> . . . anarchists or, more broadly just anti-capitalists, [argue that] the [capitalist] system exacerbates every

other '-ism' that there is. . . . So like when we talk about climate justice . . . it means recognising the intersection of all of those issues. And that the same system is producing all of those negative outcomes. So, like surely it's the system that's the problem. They're not disconnected things. (Kelly, 24, she/her)

Rachel and Kelly argue that the inherent mandating of hierarchy and inequality within capitalism means that it cannot co-exist with gender equality. For this reason, they argue that in order to overthrow patriarchal systems of oppression, capitalism must also be replaced. This critique leads them to argue that shifting to an anarcho-communist society is a necessary foundation for achieving equality and freedom from oppression.

While participants recognise the need to function within capitalism until it is replaced, they emphasise their agency in being able to build spaces that attempt to exist outside of or in opposition to the rules of capitalism, and, at times, break the law. Through their involvement with activism, participants aim to resist inequitable social, political, and economic structures as well as work towards building and encouraging a sustainable, equitable, and just alternative future. Although their success in achieving this in their own lives and activist groups is always only partial. For these participants, activism requires direct and sustained involvement supporting communities, ongoing campaigns, and direct actions geared toward measurable change. Activism is understood as involving the development of a political consciousness and then collectively taking political action to change structural conditions. Thus, the focus is on actively working to change the way things are. As Rachel states:

I guess in its essence activism for me is about resisting and actively trying to challenge and change the status quo . . . And then actively trying to change the power hierarchies, the resource and money hierarchies that lead to the unjust status quo. And to create something better. (Rachel, 27, she/her)

These examples illustrate the ways that multiple threads of injustice and sustainability are woven together into a holistic structural critique of capitalist society. At its core, the activism of the participants draws upon a specifically anti-capitalist perspective that advocates for the complete re-working or replacement of the current socioeconomic system in order to achieve real and lasting sustainability and social justice. This perspective means that anti-capitalism is not just 'fighting back' against things, but also fighting towards something, thus the necessity of imagining potential alternatives and methods for making them reality.

Pro-topia: finding hope

Engaging with visions of the future was seen by participants as important for maintaining motivation as well as making sure the campaign objectives are actually moving the movement closer to its overall goals for societal change. This illustrates Khasnabish and Haiven (2015) concept of a 'radical imagination' sustaining activist engagement through a shared vision of a positive alternative future grounded in organising practices. Participants noted that within their activist groups they are engaged in ongoing conversations around what a more equal and sustainable society might look like, grounded in their shared ideological positions and critiques of contemporary systems of inequality and oppression.

The best example I've seen of my idea of utopia is a book called 'woman on the edge of time'. I think it was written in the seventies or eighties by just an awesome woman. It obviously still has issues, but it's this kind of amazing world where no-one really lives in cities anymore . . . people live in decentralised communities that are pretty much self-sustaining, apart from some things that are traded. And each community is independent and makes its own decisions. And people are free to move wherever they want. People are much more emotionally intelligent, and kids [have a lot more freedom] but there are lots of people to help them become critical loving humans. Yeah, so that kind of world. It's like a mutual aid society. (Shannon, 25, they/them)

Shannon's vision of the future illustrates how fictional stories can sketch out parameters of alternative utopian futures that are relatable on an emotional level as well as an intellectual one.

It is through these fictional stories that we are able to think through what it might be like living in different ways that align with different ideologically grounded understandings of human nature and ways of living and working together.

An anti-capitalist future, I think I'm still becoming clear on what it looks like for me personally. I think it looks different for a lot of people, and a lot of leftists. It's also a really big point of contention, among a lot of organisations and groups. I think that inevitably my vision is like a communist future. . . . Or along the lines of what anarcho-syndicalists present . . . a kind of society where the power is no longer imbalanced . . . where all people have power to make the decisions that shape their lives. . . . you need to kind of have a vision of how it could look different. . . . Because you're still gonna have I think a lot of hangovers from the . . . capitalist mode of production. (Rachel, 27, she/her)

Rachel's conception of an alternative future draws more heavily on specific intellectual and political concepts, outlining near-term possibilities for organising society while deconstructing contemporary capitalist ways of doing things. Rachel also touches on the contestation within individual groups as well as ASEN as a whole regarding the role of different alternative visions and political ideological traditions in shaping group norms and movement goals. Like Shannon, Rachel is attempting to think through frameworks for

post-capitalist ways of living that aim to totally replace the current system. Both of these examples speak to the motivating potential of hopeful imaginings of what the medium to far future could look like which can then be linked up with current grounded campaign practices.

In addition to participants who spoke to the importance of some kind of hopeful vision to motivate engagement, many also spoke to what they saw as more pragmatic grounded concerns. These participants were somewhat critical of focusing too much on 'post-revolution' utopias, and further illustrated the tensions and nuance within the wider social movement field regarding the necessity of specific ideologically-bounded ideal futures.

> I like this idea of the pro-topia. Like I don't have the answer. . . . it's like a prototyping environment. Like to pretend that like a singular bullshit revolution is gonna solve everything is f*** dumb. ... The pro-topia is where we are all collectively trying to communicate in an empathetic way to move forward, and to decrease all this bullshit injustice that is so obvious to the majority of the world right now. So what am I fighting for? I'm fighting for empathy. I'm fighting for care. I'm fighting for redistribution . . . I am fighting for a world where I can't afford coffee any more. . . . like I'm wearing the same shoes. And I'm gonna learn how to [repair them]. That's what I'm fighting for. (James, 32, he/they)

> I wouldn't describe myself as a Utopian. I don't think we'll have a revolution . . . where one day everyone will just suddenly wake up and be like today's the day. . . . What I hope for is that we will gradually take more and more back from the system that's imposing on us. . . . that's gonna be a process, and it's never gonna be finished. ... I don't think that we'll ever reach a utopia. . . . you have to be okay with the idea that the revolution's never done. (Kelly, 24, she/her)

For James and Kelly, realism and nuance are necessary for informing ideology and projections for possible futures. Importantly, these futures are grounded in current material conditions but still hopeful. While utopian imaginings can be inspiring and emotive touchstones for motivating anti-capitalist practice, participants also recognise the importance of engaging with current material conditions and the need for realistic justice for all affected people at the same time as working towards addressing the climate crisis and extractive global capitalism. They also argue for complexity, suggesting the future is constantly being constructed through the here and now rather than being the result of a hoped for but never arriving revolution. These examples illustrate that the 'radical imagination' that grounds and motivates the way that the participants engage with activism is not simply utopic, rather it is based on critical examination and grounded in material contingent practice (Khasnabish and Haiven 2015).

Radical imagination as practice: hopeful imaginings and ideology in conversation

Participants noted that within their activist groups they are engaged in ongoing conversations around what a vision for a more equal and sustainable society might look like, grounded in their shared ideological positions and critiques of contemporary systems of inequality and oppression. Framing practices in this way forms part of a 'praxis of prefiguration', involving political action that seeks to build progressively within the overarching structure that activists are fighting to change (Khasnabish and Haiven 2015; Thompsett 2016: 63). Particularly for anarchist activists this incorporates the notions of mutual aid – reciprocal relationships of social and material support, re-localising community, and rebuilding community networks within local contexts – as approaches to resisting capitalist structure and building power.

Several participants indicated that they were engaged in slowly growing networks of support in order to achieve the critical mass needed to replace capitalism. Multiple participants spoke about the need for critical mass of public engagement to actually affect the status quo, and that this needed to be done with a mix of gradual supported growth taking advantage of specific moments. Sometimes these moments may be big and visible like with what is happening currently around the Black Lives Matter movement, but they also occur in the background between the heightened moments in big political campaigns.

From the perspective of participants, environmental and social justice issues are understood to be bound up with the logics of capitalism. This critical position is grounded in rational argument coupled with an emotional response to witnessed injustice.

> Fuck capitalism. . . . people are trying to create spaces outside of that. . . . there's ways of undermining the system so that it doesn't crush your soul. (Ben, 24, he/him)

Here, Ben argues that until capitalism is replaced the dominant system will still be there, but it is not always necessary to abide by the system's rules, and it is possible to build up spaces that attempt to exist outside of or in opposition to the rules of capitalism. This is a key understanding that underpins anti-capitalist practice.

> We have to be putting up a resistance. But we also have to be proposing something. We also need to be showcasing the alternatives, and living the alternatives right now. And if you're not doing both of those things at the same time then you're gonna lose. (Shannon, 25, they/them)

Shannon argues for a theory of change which incorporates prefiguration in the groups that they are a part of,

particularly collective care and self-care work to avoid burnout and sustain healthy communities rather than engaging in activism in a self-destructive way. In this theory of change both community building and activism must work in tandem – if either exists in isolation then it will not be successful for achieving long-term system change goals.

Participants chose to engage primarily with groups where the means were necessarily seen as being bound up in the ends. Groups where there was significant overlap in ideological commitments and organising practices. As a result of that they see value in trying to live and create the world they want to see through their everyday actions and the way they organise. This means that community and supportive friendships, along with non-hierarchical organising, are crucial elements to their activist practice. Several participants expressed an understanding of wider social change being driven through slowly scaling up alternative communities and radical sharing networks that are connected through activism. In this view, it is important to try and simultaneously balance protest activism and fighting against oppressive systems with trying to create radical systems in the spaces opened up within the wider capitalist system through those protest actions.

Common to grassroots organising are anti-hierarchical structures and processes, grounded in and accountable to the local community. These require maintaining an active awareness and management of hierarchies that might arise. This preference for non-hierarchical grassroots organising is clearly expressed by Kelly:

> I don't do hierarchy very well. [laughs] so um I prefer to work in spaces where they're organised a-hierarchically … Y'know operating on consensus and that sort of stuff. Because I think that the means should be the ends. So if we're trying to build a more free democratic open and caring world, the spaces where we organise should be free democratic open and caring. (Kelly, 24, she/her)

The preference of most of the participants for working with explicitly non-hierarchical organisations is informed by their anti-capitalist stance, with all of the participants indicating a self-identified anarchist or socialist ideological position. Two strategies for managing hierarchies are consensus decision making and skill sharing. For example, despite being a national scale network, members of ASEN strive to put their principles into practice in the running of the organisation:

> … there's a little anarchist contingent you know who are all about that. And I think that they do strive to implement that into their structure … they rotate roles quite often. … the network itself is all about re-skilling and sharing knowledge and breaking down hierarchies. (Emma, 21, she/her)

Implementing non-hierarchical organising practices means that knowledge, skills, and responsibilities are ideally spread around the group and roles rotate regularly (Wolfson 2013; Sutherland, Land, and Steffen 2014). This approach to organising aims to, firstly, reduce the load felt by any one individual and, secondly, distribute skills and knowledge so that any other member can step up into any role that is vacated by someone reaching the limit of their capacity.

The ways that the participants understand and engage with activism and community building are informed by the ideological and moral critiques that underpin their involvement with anti-capitalism, which themselves build upon several centuries of anarchist and socialist political analysis that provide the foundation for radical progressive mobilising in much of the Global North. Echoing the literature regarding prefigurative practice in socialist and anarchist activist groups, tensions regarding the centrality and effectiveness of prefigurative politics in different groups were discussed by several of the participants. Self-identified socialist activists critiqued a perceived over-focus on 'lifestyle-ist' prefigurative politics divorced from disruptive political action to force systemic change. Self-identified anarchist activists argued that prefigurative practices were crucial for supporting activist engagement, creating inclusive spaces for a more diverse range of potential activists, and illustrating that the principles of their hoped for alternative future society were actually achievable and functional even in the current capitalist context.

Alongside explicit campaigning on environmental and economic issues, many anti-capitalists are engaged in building alternative communities that incorporate bartering, sharing, squatting, and dumpster diving. This is evident in Kelly's explanation of how her understanding of anarchism influences her involvement with the activist community:

> I would describe myself as an anarchist. And there's a lot of stuff that goes on in anarchist communities … setting up systems where you can try to push capitalism out of more and more areas of your life. So like setting up networks of people who share food. Or exchange things or y'know have complementary skill-sets. So I'll come over to your house and y'know help you fix a tap or something. And then you come over to my house and fix my fridge 'cause it broke or something. And like mutual exchange kind of networks. … like yeah building up networks of helping each other because it's nice, not because you're being paid. (Kelly, 24, she/her)

This quote from Kelly illustrates the ways that an anarchist ideological position combines critiques of capitalism with expectations for practice and theories on how to achieve social change. The anarchist principles that Kelly and others in these groups draw upon explicitly aim to link contemporary activities and organising

principles with the kinds of solidarity sharing of resources and skills they hope to see in a sustainable and socially equitable future. This shows a strong connection between ideology, engagement in radical imagination, and material practices that many participants attempt to implement through their activism. This has implications for how different individuals and groups allocate time, resources, and energy for different types of activities. It also has strong influences on the dynamics, norms, and practices of the activist community in different localities. This leads to a praxis of prefiguration which prioritises practices that align with anti-capitalist principles, and which are argued to be the building blocks of sustainable and socially just post-capitalist ways of organising society informed by the shared process of radical imagination. Given the realities of the wider capitalist market, though, these attempted practices are always operating in the margins with varying success and longevity as the subcultural field of anti-capitalist and environmental activism ebbs and flows.

Conclusion

Whether it is the anthropocene or the covid-19 pandemic, the need for both new everyday practices, building community, and an alternative social order is no longer – if it ever was – an extreme ideological view. The multiple crises we face make it apparent that it is increasingly urgent to engage in our collective 'radical imagination'. Our research suggests that for this project, we can turn to activists who have a range of experience and multiple alternative structures which may be of value. Rather than a dangerous, naïve, or utopian 'other', we suggest that anti-capitalist activism, especially as developed within the existing material constraints of Western capitalism, in fact has much to offer. In this way, we argue that there are great possibilities in the *praxis of prefiguration* which is occurring in the present.

Anti-capitalist groups aim to weave together non-capitalist ways of sharing resources and relating to one another at the same time as organising to fight against the system of capitalism that structures wider society. Ideologically informed critiques of capitalism and hierarchy drive attempts to organise and live in ways that not only allow resistance and effective campaigning but also abide by the principles of hoped for post-revolutionary life. Prefigurative praxis requires linking current practice with imagined alternative futures in order to create pockets of those alternatives within the cracks of the capitalist system. Because of this, it can only ever be partial – thus, it is pro-topian, involving implementations and experimental dialogue between utopian imaginings and current practices that co-create each other. It also allows groups to showcase the viability of the alternatives they advocate for, while attempting to avoid the failings of past revolutionary movements that expected utopia to be achieved simply through overthrowing the current regime.

The failures of past revolutionary projects have led to contemporary anarchist anti-capitalist arguments that the 'means must match the ends' – with the ends being hopeful alternative post-capitalist futures built upon intersectionality, justice, and non-hierarchical relations. These approaches also provide frameworks for supporting diverse groups of marginalised activists to continue engaging with activism despite a lack of resources and power compared to the system they are oriented against. Thus, the importance of radical imaginings and prefiguration for anti-capitalist practice. While negative perceptions of injustice are important for driving initial involvement, visions of potential positive alternative futures to work towards can be crucial for motivating and shaping activist engagement across social and environmental issues.

This, then, illustrates the importance of individuals and groups engaging with the radical imagination. Rather than merely utopic escapist fantasy, working through discussion of hopeful stories and alternative future trajectories informs and motivates current practices and political action. It also allows activists to explore constructive ways of addressing the intersecting issues that shape a present context that is increasingly dystopic for many people. It is the productive conversation between critiques of the present and potential pathways to more hopeful possible futures that drives and sustains political and community action. While the radical imagination is particularly evident in the case of anti-capitalist activists, we argue that it is a useful practice to engage with for everyone who would like to see the world move towards greater sustainability and justice.

Disclosure statement

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