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Political Imagination and Utopian Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the theorisation of utopian pedagogy by exploring how arts-based exercises can be used in engaged pedagogy to facilitate the cultivation of political imagination. Engaging with theoretical discussions of utopian thought and political imagination, we draw on pedagogical experiments from our sociology course "Exercises in Political Imagination" to pose the following questions: How can arts-based exercises be used in engaged pedagogy to foster political imagination? What kinds of tensions or difficulties does this process involve? What kinds of conceptions of politics and social change do these exercises produce? On the basis of our pedagogical experiments, we suggest that the notion and practice of utopian pedagogy is characterised by the following features: disengagement from—and disinvestment in—the status quo as a means by which to open up imaginative capacities; an approach to politics as something that emerges from the process of exercising imagination and that emphasises complex interconnections between the personal and political; an understanding of imagination as a collective process rather than an individual disposition; and encouragement to embrace a variety of scales for social change, observing both their entanglement and emancipatory potential in everyday life. The article concludes that utopian pedagogy can serve as an important tool of transformative politics by facilitating political imagination and widening the horizon of the possible in the context of the neoliberalisation of higher education.

KEYWORDS
Engaged pedagogy; arts-based exercises; political imagination; utopian pedagogy

Introduction

> Sociology studies bring me down. Sociology operates like glasses that forces one to see in the world the power structures that usually remain blurry and difficult to see. Seeing them and acknowledging that we live in an unsustainable world, in which every course of action throws us deeper into an ecological and human crisis, is often painful. The worst feelings of depression do not come from seeing the structures, but from understanding that we, as humankind, are unable to make the necessary moves to change our situation.

This quotation comes from an assignment submitted by a master's student in sociology who attended our course on political imagination. The sense of despair it conveys reflects a more

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general tendency in society. So, too, does its inability to see a meaningful route from crisis to change. Our current conjuncture is marked by a simultaneous decline of and an urgent need for utopian thought and political imagination. On the one hand, several scholars (e.g. Browne 2006; Weeks 2011b; Žižek 2000) have pointed out that utopian energies have been dissipating and that it is increasingly difficult to envisage political alternatives beyond "capitalist realism" (Fisher 2009), positing capitalism as a taken-for-granted frame of reference. Utopias have largely fallen into disrepute and tend to be regarded as "relics from a shameful past" (Jacobsen 2004, 75). However, the demise of utopia does not just concern the political realm but also affects the social sciences where, according to Jacobsen (2004, 63), utopia has relinquished its position as an important conceptual resource. On the other hand, the current crisis of capitalism—which is comprehensive, as it involves a complex mix of ecological, economic, democratic, and psychological crises (Rosa 2019)—creates an acute need to imagine more sustainable ways of organising our common life.

In this article, we explore arts-based exercises in engaged pedagogy as a way to revitalise political imagination and hope at this crisis-ridden conjuncture. The starting point for our analysis is that the imagination of better futures, while not easy or given, is absolutely necessary and something that can be taught and learnt. We draw on our pedagogical experiments developed in the course "Exercises in Political Imagination" for sociology students at the University of Turku. We pose the following questions: How can arts-based exercises be used in engaged pedagogy to foster political imagination? What kinds of tensions or difficulties does this process involve? What kinds of conceptions of politics and social change do these exercises produce?

By addressing these questions, we contribute to the development of *utopian pedagogy*. Coté, Day, and de Peuter (2007a, 317) define utopian pedagogy as "an ethos of experimentation … oriented toward carving out spaces for resistance and reconstruction here and now". It builds awareness of the existence and possibilities of a radical outside with the aim of transcending what is conceivable within the current socio-economic order (Coté, Day, and Peuter 2007b, 3, 15). We contribute to this theorisation by further specifying the features and contours of utopian pedagogy in the context of engaged pedagogy. We also explore how arts-based exercises can facilitate the cultivation of utopian thought and political imagination. Drawing on our pedagogical experiments in the course, we suggest that the notion and practice of utopian pedagogy can be defined by the following characteristics:

- disengagement from (and disinvestment in) the status quo to open up imaginative capacities;
- an approach to politics as something that emerges from the exercise of imagination and that emphasises complex interconnections between the personal and political;
- an understanding of imagination as a collective process rather than an individual disposition; and
- the embrace of a variety of scales and forms of social change (including their entanglement with each other) to identify emancipatory potential in everyday life.

In the sections that follow, we begin by detailing the context and theoretical ideas that inform our thinking. Next, we unpack our research into arts-based exercises in engaged pedagogy and discuss the difficulties and tensions the students faced in the exercises. We then discuss the politics and conceptions of social change articulated through the

exercises. Finally, we conclude with pedagogical reflections on the role of arts-based exercises for both engaged pedagogy and political imagination.

Political imagination and the neoliberalisation of higher education

The task of teaching political imagination is particularly important in the current higher education context, wherein the preconditions for critical thinking and utopian thought are increasingly curtailed by neoliberalisation. Higher education has faced growing pressure to serve the task of generating economic growth and national wealth—partly by cultivating innovative, resilient, and entrepreneurial worker-subjects capable of securing national competitiveness. The value of education is primarily attributed to the development of human capital through market metrics that configure students and teachers as self-investing human capital (Brown 2015). Universities are thus re-imagined as sites whose key task is to create societal conditions that serve market interests and facilitate innovation and the creation of a competitive workforce.

These tendencies are visible in the daily life at universities. The traditional professional culture of open intellectual inquiry has given way to a growing emphasis on performativity, accompanied by the emergence of measured outputs such as performance indicators (Ball 2003). The objectives of education and the criteria for valuable and relevant knowledge are increasingly defined from market and working life perspective. The pedagogic relationship between students and teachers is geared towards a relationship between the consumers and providers of educational services (Morley 2003, 137–141). This reality sits uneasily with critical pedagogical approaches that emphasise collaborative knowledge-building and dialogical relationship between students and teachers and conceives of higher education as a vital part of democratic life (Giroux 2007).

Neoliberalisation is never a total and complete process, and there remain spaces for resistance and critical thought. It is on this ground that we build utopian pedagogy, working within and against neoliberalisation through the use of spaces that are open for cultivating political imagination. To do so, we engage with theoretical discussion of utopia and political imagination. We conceive political imagination as a transformative and emancipatory practice that is inherently intersubjective, affective and social, materialising in institutions, artefacts and spatial arrangements. Utopia can be seen as a method of political imagination (Eskelinen, Lakkala, and Laakso 2020): it criticises the present, explores alternatives, and invites us to imagine ourselves otherwise (Levitas 2013, 219). As an expression of desire for better ways of being and living (Levitas 2013, 8), utopias can help us formulate radical alternatives to our current reality. In this way, they contribute to expanding publicly available and conceivable repertoires of political alternatives along with our sense of what is possible, and invigorate our collective political imagination (Eskelinen, Lakkala, and Laakso 2020). Contemporary utopian theory rejects the idea of utopia as a detailed blueprint of ideal society to instead emphasise open-endedness, dynamism, and relationality (Levitas 2013; Sargisson 1996). Rather than naming a destination, utopias suggest a direction; they provoke and experiment rather than prescribe; they are speculative rather than predictive (Bammer 2015; Weeks 2011b). Ambivalence and contradiction are also always part and parcel of utopian thought and practice.

In addition to political imagination and utopian thought, we also draw on theoretical discussions around politics, agency, experience, and subjectivity. We adopt a broad

definition of politics that encompasses not only contentious and organised actions but also more covert and everyday forms of action (Haenfler, Brett, and Jones 2012). Crucial to this understanding is the notion of politicisation, that is, the process of opening an arena for political action or raising an issue to political debate (Luhtakallio 2012, 6). This allows action and sites that would otherwise easily slip "below the radar" to be made visible, enabling us to appreciate the different forms in which people understand and engage with politics and seek to pursue social change.

Experience and subjectivity are crucial concepts undergirding our pedagogical experiments and understanding of social change. We draw on feminist theorisation that has approached experience and subjectivity as pivotal sites in and through which power relations operate and are lived (de Lauretis 1985; hooks 1994). It has emphasised how the personal is always inseparably bound with the material and ideological conditions and underlined the paramount importance of exploring and sharing experience as a way of producing knowledge and transforming society. This exploration and sharing potentially enables a process of learning and feeling towards alternative relationships from those which predominate in capitalism (Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright 2013, 153, 221). This is also related to agency. We engage with Lois McNay's (2003) generative framework of agency that appreciates creative and imaginative aspects immanent to agency. These aspects are important for understanding how individuals may respond in unexpected and innovative ways when faced with complexity and difference and in ways that may hinder, reinforce, or catalyse social change. This notion provides an important alternative to the Foucauldian and Lacanian theories of subjectification resting on a conception of a passive subject that is a correlate of discursive determinism (McNay 2003.).

Arts-based exercises in engaged pedagogy

We draw on research materials collected in 2021 and 2022 in the course "Exercises in Political Imagination" for master's students in sociology at the University of Turku.[1] The materials included arts-based exercises, classroom discussions, group work, and assignments, along with a field diary documenting the course and personal reflections from teachers.[2]

Our pedagogical vision was inspired by engaged pedagogy that aims at empowerment via education (hooks 1994). Following bell hooks (1994), we maintain that universities should encourage students and teachers to transgress racial, sexual, and class boundaries; provoke critical thought via dialogical and collaborative knowledge-building; and seek ways to make learning more engaging for students and teachers. Engaged pedagogy emphasises experimentation, reflexivity, and interconnections between theory and practice and between power and knowledge (Coté, Day, and de Peuter 2007a; Giroux 2007). We understand utopian thought as an important tool for engaged pedagogy owing to its critical function.

[1]The first course was taught by Suvi Salmenniemi and Pilvi Porkola. Hanna Ylöstalo and Salome Tuomaala-Özdemir participated in the course by making observations and keeping a field diary of classroom sessions. The second course was taught by Suvi Salmenniemi, with Pilvi Porkola taking charge of the arts-based exercises. The course evaluation was based on the students' essays and learning diaries as well as group work.

[2]The students provided informed consent to use materials produced in the course. They were invited to give a separate consent for individual course assignments and the group work. One student did not provide the required consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the students could complete the course without taking part in our research. The students were also informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time. We stressed that discussions in the classroom would be used in the research on a general level without identifying any of the participants.

From a pedagogical perspective, utopian thought encourages experimentation and the creation of new social imaginaries through a criticism of mainstream society.

We believe that imagination is a crucial skill that sociology studies should equip students with. Sociology does not merely deal with the actual but also with the possible (Olin Wright 2011, 37). Sociology does not simply describe and explain the social world as it is but also seeks to understand and envisage how a different mode of living and being could be possible. Through utopian thought and political imagination, sociology students can learn to translate sociological knowledge to understanding and also potentially transforming the symbolic and material structures of society and the processes of domination and heteronomy associated with them. This is a particularly acute task today, as Rhiannon Firth (2013, 257) has noted, since the space for studying and thinking about utopias in higher education tends to be highly limited. Instead, there is a tendency to individualise collective praxis and recuperate the radical "otherness' of utopian thought for broader, hegemonic aims.

Our course aimed to address this problem through arts-based exercises, embracing "utopianism without apology" (Weeks 2011b, 173), seeking to instil hope for a better world. We employed arts-based exercises as a way to "educate desire", to use Miguel Abensour's term (Levitas 2013, 4), creating interconnections that would not otherwise exist and highlighting connections between individual lives and broader social contexts (Leavy 2018, 9). The starting point of the course was the idea that political imagination can and should be trained and practised as part of higher education and that arts-based practices can be particularly useful for this task. Nancy Gerber (2022, 42) has called for an "artistic mind" in research, by which she means attentiveness to free associative wandering, tolerance, and receptivity to the unknown and ambiguity. She has also emphasised the importance of intersubjective, aesthetic, and sensory-embodied knowledge. We connected these thoughts together with utopian thinking in our course.

Pilvi Porkola, who is an artist-researcher, developed a host of arts-based exercises for the course based on Live Art and participatory performance practices that focus on collaborative working. Live Art as a basis for arts-based exercises offers an approach that combines easy-to-implement practices with critical social thinking, enabling playfulness and unpredictability to be incorporated into the learning process. The exercises were specifically tailored to teaching sociology. They were participatory and conversational, seeking to disrupt habitual ways of thinking but easily approachable and not requiring any special skills. Although the background of the exercises was in Live Art, the aim was not to make art but to make use of arts-based exercises. Throughout the course, we emphasised the openness of the exercises: there was no right or wrong way of doing them. Rather, the exercise itself was a way of practising imagination and critical thought. Following art pedagogy, exercises were designed to train the students to observe mindfully and create associations on the basis of what they saw, felt, and experienced. By doing so, they would become more attuned to the possibilities that emerge from our everyday environment. In line with engaged pedagogy, we put theory and practice in dialogue by encouraging the students to interpret their observations in light of the theoretical literature covered in the course.

Our first exercise was called "Observing the Future in an Urban Space". The students were given the following instruction:

> Observe the urban space around you. The city is full of history, it is here and now, but it also has a future. What kinds of hints about the future can you find in the city space around you?

> Stop to see the various details. What do they tell you about the future? Walk, stand, run, sit, or take a few dance steps. How does movement affect your perception?

The goal of the exercise was to pay attention to the surrounding environment that we often take for granted. We are used to thinking about the urban environment through its history, so we rarely think about its future. The exercise encouraged the students to look at the environment as constantly changing and to envision the future from the present. The future often seems to point to large-scale changes, which is why imagining it can be challenging. By narrowing down the perspective and focusing on small changes, the task becomes easier. The main idea was that the future is not detached from the present but rooted in current reality. The students were advised to do this exercise first by themselves (10 min) and then as a pair with another student (10 min).

Our second exercise was called “Objects and Change”. It was based on the notion of invisibility of everyday life and its materialities. The students were given the following instruction:

> We all have different items with us all the time, such as clothes, keys, a phone, or a bag. Choose three to five items you have with you. Think about what kinds of ideological and utopian thinking is associated with these objects. What are the objects created for? What kind of world do they describe? Is the object’s meaning personal and can it be shared? Does the object have a future—where will it be in five years?

The objects we carry with us have more than just a personal history; they also provide access to our collective history and ideologies. The exercise was designed to help the students think beyond the values and ethics embedded in the material world around us so as to identify the individual habits we have committed to it. The students were given 15 min to choose the items they would like to focus on and think how they would present them to others. Each student shared in turn their ideas, after which we discussed together what kinds of possible futures these ideas suggest.

The third exercise was called “Hints of the Utopian Future”. We spread a long white sheet on the table and covered it with colourful pens and small everyday objects such as toy animals, kitchen utensils, and stones. The idea behind the small objects on the table was to encourage the students to think symbolically and to uncover other, more playful aspects to their thinking. We listed some key themes on the sheet—climate, work, mental health, and livelihood—as possible orientations while thinking about the future. The students were instructed as follows:

1. Walk around space and tune in to think about the future. Look for different hints in the space about what the future will be like and what you find important there. You can think about both your personal future and the future of society. If you wish, you can use the key themes written on the table and approach the future through them. (15 min)
2. Gather in small groups or in pairs around the table. Tell each other what you found about the future. Choose four themes. Then, select symbols for these themes based on the objects on the table (if you cannot find a symbol, one can also be drawn). Write down notes summarising the key points of your discussion. (15 min)
3. Share your ideas with the other students. Draw a mind map from your ideas to those of others as well as the key themes on the table. Write a collective 10-point utopian manifesto based on all of the ideas that are shared.

The structure of the exercise was three-fold. First, the students followed their own views and immediate thoughts. Second, they shared their thoughts with other students in a small group. Third, the groups shared their ideas with everyone and brought them together. This helped to show how personal ideas relate to one another, facilitating discussion that linked personal ideas and experiences to broader societal issues and processes. The exercise focused equally on each student's own observations and collective sharing. Working with symbols was not strictly defined, but the symbols rather worked as prompts for discussion, encouraging the students to negotiate their meanings. As the meaning of the symbols was not fixed but created in the process, new insights and meanings were added to the initial observations.

Disengagement and difficulties

To envision alternative social formations and imagine something that does not yet exist, one must disengage from the current state of reality. We reasoned that disengagement does not necessarily happen just by sitting in the classroom. Rather, it requires more corporeal and multisensory ways of working. Consistent with utopian thought, the arts-based exercises sought to alter our connection to the present and the future by destabilising conventional ways of thinking that tend to keep us locked within a narrow repertoire of political possibilities (Weeks 2011b). The exercises potentially operated as "dereifying techniques" rendering "unfamiliar the all-too-recognizable contours of the present configuration of social relations and the experiences and meanings to which we have become habituated" (Weeks 2011b, 205). By creating at least partial disengagement from reality as it exists, arts-based exercises allowed us to think and desire what was previously unthinkable (Sargisson 1996, 59).

The students did not, as a rule, have any prior experience of arts-based exercises in their studies. This is not surprising given that arts-based research—and the arts overall—has yet to find a firm foothold in sociology (Smartt Guillon and Schäfer 2018). Many students initially experienced the exercises as difficult, uncomfortable, and even slightly frightening. One student recounted, "When we heard the instructions for the exercise, my brain went to an error state. I walked around the building and desperately tried to come up with symbols about the future, but the exercise felt really hard". Despite the initial difficulty, the students grew accustomed to performing the exercises. They later reflected on their experiences, including the effects and affects they had set in motion:

> It was difficult, odd, and embarrassing to throw oneself into play but at the same time, it felt liberating. I felt that my thoughts ran faster and more easily after the exercises. It was also astonishing and interesting to hear how others had thrown themselves into play … The unusual situation and joint storytelling also created a sense of togetherness.

Many of the students attributed the difficulty to the feeling that they were "completely devoid of any imagination". They conceived of imagination as an individual disposition they felt they lacked, saying:

> I felt nervous before coming to the first session—maybe because I was afraid that my imagination was inadequate.

> The themes addressed in the course seemed really interesting but challenging for me personally, because I see myself as a really unimaginative, non-creative and cynical person.

The course sought to decentre an individualist approach to imagination and approach imagination as a collective practice. Imagination is not something that one "has" or "has not" but a skill and capacity that varies contextually and can be trained and practised. Many students reported the pleasure they drew out of these exercises and how the exercises altered their way of thinking and learning. One student remarked, "I genuinely feel that contemplating utopias has vacated some room in my brain. I have somehow gotten rid of a constant, vicious circle of pessimism and the fear of being labelled naïve".

That arts-based methods were initially experienced as difficult recalls the need to appreciate difficulty as an important stage in intellectual development (hooks 1994). Engaged pedagogy cannot promise pleasure or immediate gratification because learning, as well as unlearning, can be arduous and painful. Experimenting with new pedagogical practices is not necessarily easy for either students or teachers as both have to endure uncertainty and potential failure. Experimentation requires openness to the unexpected and unknown, and willingness to disengage from conventional ways of learning and knowing.

The students also expressed difficulty with utopian thought. We invited the students to envisage alternative social formations and identify possibilities for social change by moving beyond the bleak, paralysing diagnosis of anti-utopianism and capitalist realism. It was striking to see how deeply capitalist realism had shaped the students' ways of thinking, although in ambivalent and sometimes painful ways:

> We have internalised capitalism so thoroughly that we try to fit even alternative ideas to the existing capitalist frames, although the goal would be to get rid of the economy-centred performance society.

> I recognise that I'm pessimistic and cautious. It would be important to dare to let myself think freely at least, without the constant critical, pessimistic voice in the back of my head.

The students' imaginative capacities were evidently hampered by a demand for "realism", which prevented them from formulating radically different political imaginaries. Realism is, as Jacobsen (2004, 64) notes, the worst enemy of utopianism. As a yardstick of realism, economic rationality interpellates us as *homo economicus* and persuades us to understand everything through a cost–benefit calculus that withers utopian impulses. The expectation that everything should be "implementable" and "realistic" from the perspective of the current social order cuts the wings of imagination. The students were also acutely aware of the trivialisation of utopia in public discourse as useless, naïve, and childish. The students reflected on all of this, writing,

> When you try to imagine a different world, a flattening question immediately comes to mind: "How is this going to be funded?"

> It's in a way rather tragicomic that when we were playfully invited to use our imagination and think about our own utopian society, I pre-emptively shot down my own utopia because I felt that it would in no way pass, ever. This was quite a revelation for me as a social scientist because if utopian thinking is this difficult for me, I wonder how difficult it is for those who are not studying social sciences.

Some students noted that they did not dare articulate alternatives "because [to do so], I should be able to fully rationalise them". Before suggesting alternatives, one must have fully considered and solved even the smallest details and "whatabauts", creating a

flawlessly detailed blueprint for a better world. The course sought to disengage the students from such blueprint thinking, encouraging them to dream without consideration for realism or feasibility. As one student noted, "It was really liberating to dream about utopian alternatives without pressure to explain and solve all potential problems". Another student remarked, "In the process of imagination, you are allowed to be naïve and dream about a world that does not yet exist".

The hegemonic position of (capitalist) realism can be seen as signalling a certain "closure of the political universe" wherein "ideas, aspirations, and objectives that … transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to the terms of this universe" (Marcuse 1964, 27). This whittles down political imagination and obscures the fact that closure is an effect of power, making it arbitrary and illusionary. During the course, we sought to destabilise this closure and critically deconstruct the symbolic garotte of realism by asking the following questions: Realist from whose perspective? Realism for economy or for climate—is it realistic to extract ever more natural resources? Whose interpretation of realism counts and gains hegemony?

In their course assignments, the students contemplated the fear of humiliation that made it difficult to engage with arts-based exercises. They feared exposure through not knowing enough or not thinking in the "right" way and worried that their views and thoughts had no value. It seems that the neoliberal university—with its emphasis on competition, the instrumentalisation of knowledge, and individual achievement or excellence—causes "hidden injuries" (cf. Sennett and Cobb 1972) that effectively curtail imaginative faculties. As one student put it,

> Classrooms are often not particularly safe spaces. They create pressure to sound smart and competent. Fear of being humiliated is often present, and fear is an effective way to prevent creative thinking. We need space for unfinished thoughts and observations both in academia and in life, in general. Permission to be wrong and courage to present nascent ideas liberates thinking and removes obstacles to the use of imagination.

It was important to build trust within the classroom so that the students would dare to experiment with arts-based exercises. As teachers, we tried to emphasise that utopian thought is not about finding unanimity; instead, it allows tensions and contradictions to emerge. The classroom was approached as a space in which to collectively explore and negotiate different views and desires. The students' reflections revealed that collective discussions helped them disengage from the competition-driven and achievement-centred ethos:

> I sometimes feel it difficult and frightening to voice my views in public, and that's why I was really nervous about the first class. I was, however, wrong this time, because the positive and encouraging atmosphere in the group made this exercise pleasant. Everyone's views were appreciated in the group, which made it easier to voice my own views.

In academia, credibility is often associated with certain seriousness that undermines play. This is unfortunate because play enables us to try new ways of thinking that can lead to unpredictable thoughts. For many artists, play is an integral part of their work; it can take the form of renaming things, switching between different languages, or combining things in a non-linear fashion. The arts-based exercises in the course were founded on the idea of play and its radical potential for seeing, knowing, and feeling the world in a different way. Play and playfulness turned out to be important for alleviating anxiety related to

individual achievement, directing the students towards experimentation and the collective process of exploration:

> When I entered the classroom, I saw a table with all sorts of small objects and figures. … the colourful objects on the table made me smile and somehow relaxed me. Maybe they made me feel more playful, all those small objects and toys. I didn't feel frightened anymore about whether I would be able to say something smart in the class.

> I like the certain kind of playfulness in the course and I feel that my thinking somehow genuinely opened. The course completely lacked … harrowing seriousness and I feel that [this] was one of the most important reasons for the liberating atmosphere that existed … I have been really frozen, insecure, and fearful in my previous studies. This kind of course, in which one could express one's thoughts freely without making sure that they comply with scientific criteria, helped break the ice. From my perspective, this is completely undervalued in academic studies.

The course demonstrated to us the importance of political imagination as a collective and shared process. Student reflections brought into a sharp relief how important it is to share the insights emerging from arts-based exercises with others. Many felt that it was easier to envision political alternatives collectively. As one student pointed out, "[The] imagination and perspectives of others [are enriching] as they can reveal the limitations of my thinking or broaden it to dimensions that have been alien to me". This way, the collaborative learning characteristic of engaged pedagogy unfolded not only in dialogue between students and teachers but also—and sometimes mainly—among students.

Experience and politics

The art-based exercises brought together personal desires with politics and social change. This is also an important aspect of sociological imagination that "enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in the society" (Mills 2000, 6). It allows us to imagine how historically conditioned social forces shape our inner lives and individual experiences and how individual acts can shape the social structures in which they are situated (Mills 2000; Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019, 48). Utopian desires in the exercises were often first articulated on a personal level, originating from personal experiences, sensations, observations, or thoughts. Although this is characteristic of sociological imagination, it evoked mixed feelings from the students:

> My own experience, also shared by many other students, was at first that my utopia was somehow wrong or useless because it was so personal and aimed only at improving my own well-being instead of [societal] … Doing the exercises step by step helped me to see how the personal is political; how things based on personal desires can operate as ground for social change.

Critical analyses have also been wary of personal experience at times, seeing it as an individualistic and therapeutic mode of analysis that easily leads to the privatisation and depoliticisation of political change (Eskelinen, Lakkala, and Pyykkönen 2020, 40–45). However, experience can also be interpreted otherwise. Feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis (1985) rejects the individualistic understanding of experience that conceives it as something that belongs to the individual. Instead, she conceptualises experience as a process

> by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective … those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social, and in a larger perspective, historical. Subjectivity is thus an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction. (de Lauretis 1985, 159)

This conceptualisation of subjectivity and experience is productive for a utopian pedagogy that seeks to bridge the personal and political, theory and practice, and subjectivity and social reality. hooks (1994, 90) also notes the epistemological centrality of experience in engaged pedagogy, arguing that "experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know". The use of their own experience led the students to rethink the processes of knowing. As one of the students noted, "It was nice for once to have a chance to think through in practice what different concepts would feel like on a personal level and, perhaps more broadly, as corporeal and mental experiences—not merely as abstract constructions of thought".

Experience can serve as an important ground for transformative politics, providing analytical clues to the dynamics of domination. In utopian pedagogy, the bridging of personal and political can be understood as a "recollectivization of hope": it takes people's actual desires as a starting point and then asks how they might translate into social change (Eskelinen, Lakkala, and Pyykkönen 2020, 48). While the students often began utopian practice from personal experiences, the process of making sense of these experiences collectively led to a gradual transformation and expansion into societal questions. The exercises helped link the personal with the political through observation, affect, and movement based on theoretical conceptions. Starting from the personal and working towards the social and political turned out to be important as working in the reverse direction could have led to static or abstract blueprint thinking. Critical interrogation of experience can be a route to understanding how society bears on us. It reveals the politics of lived experience and how material and symbolic structures shape our ways of being, acting, and feeling.

The exercises further approached politics as something that emerges out of the practice of imagining, which involves taking a critical attitude towards the present alongside a political commitment to experiment with the coordinates of the future (see Coté, Day, and de Peuter 2007a, 48). The politics in question did not precede the exercises. Instead, they were its effect as the exercises evoked a host of questions unlikely to arise from simply staying put in the classroom. An emerging and recurring theme was a sense of exhaustion and hope for a more peaceful and serene life. At first, these experiences and feelings seemed personal. However, they were shared among the students and teachers alike. They were connected to the larger neoliberal context of the university and continuous pressure to build future-proof human capacities via higher education (cf. Brown 2015, 176). They were further connected to the general sense of social acceleration characteristic of late modernity (Rosa 2013) and as part of it, the blurring of categories for work time and free time. The students discussed how work infiltrated their free time and how work-related demands, such as using time "efficiently", were seen as dictating their free time. The students thus experienced both tiredness and exhaustion and constant feelings of guilt in relation to time. They expressed concern that time "just passes by" and were conscious about using time "in the right way". These experiences led to

discussions about the politics of time and the broader dynamics of capitalism and how they subtly shape and orient subjectivities in particular ways. The arts-based exercise that began from what seemed to be a personal experience of exhaustion grew into a collectively articulated, politicised desire for a slower society and more free time—the starting point for many anti-capitalist social movements such as the degrowth movement.

Another recurring theme was the politics of space and place. Some of the exercises employed the method of *dérive* or "drifting", an aimless urban research journey that uses spaces and places as a source of inspiration and imagination, aiming to capture the unexpected from familiar and habitual surroundings (Sotkasiira et al. 2020). In some of the exercises, the students drifted aimlessly around the campus searching for hints about possible and desirable futures. Experiencing the campus through drifting allowed the students to question the existing arrangements of space and imagine alternatives to it. Drifting also broke the normative expectation of efficient or purposeful movement. This was not easy, as one of the students emphasised:

> I personally felt that it was especially difficult to walk around aimlessly looking at the surroundings. I couldn't avoid thinking about what others thought I was doing.

This perception and the discomfort experienced in drifting reveal how our experience of the university as a space is entangled with a certain target orientation. It also shows how experimental pedagogical practices in which the benefit is not self-evident or immediately visible sit somewhat uneasily in the neoliberal university.

Although the observations of the politics of time and the politics of space and place were important learning experiences for the students, the main pedagogical purpose of the exercises was to teach the students to use their personal experiences in collective knowledge-building and to re-imagine the political. Afterwards, the students sometimes struggled to verbalise the experienced and embodied learning process:

> It's difficult to put into words everything I learnt in the course. What I learnt feels [both] … very comprehensive and deeply personal. I learnt that there can be space for imagination, creativity, and playfulness in the scientific world. I also learnt that there is room for me in this world, that my thoughts and musings do matter.

Difficulty verbalising the learning process should be understood as an inherent part of utopian pedagogy, as utopian thought always gestures towards the "not yet", making it difficult to access through words. The students seemed to recognise they had learnt something, but what this something was needed time to become clear. Davina Cooper emphasises that such embodied, affective, and sensuous aspects of knowledge are important for utopian thought. She suggests that "conceptual lines may be captured linguistically, but conceptual lines do not require conscious, explicit expression in order to become forged, and conceptual lines should not be reduced to what is sayable or said" (Cooper 2014, 41).

The students also tackled this question of limits on existing symbolic repertoires by inventing new concepts. Such conceptual invention is in itself a political act as concepts can transform both the representation and perception of reality and thus carry the potential to alter social reality (de Lauretis 1985, 55). For instance, the students introduced the concept of "conscious dropping of the ball" (*tiedostettu pallon pudottaminen*) that sought to capture a form of resistance to the alienating power of waged work. The concept

sketched a way to consciously give up and let go of some oppressive practices in the everyday, gesturing towards less alienating forms of life. Another concept was "expropriation of the self" (*itsen pakkolunastus*), which addressed the experience of having our subjectivities hijacked by capitalism and envisioned a strategy to free them from this grip. Through such conceptualisations, the students interrogated and tried to identify the emancipatory possibilities in their reach.

"You have to start somewhere": conceptions of social change

The course rethought and transformed understandings of social change. The exercises invited the students to reflect on what social change means and locate its potential in their everyday lives. The course sought to decentre dominating conceptions of social change, which often revolve around comprehensive political revolutions (Federici 2019). Such conceptions may unnecessarily limit our repertoires and preclude us from seeing the possibilities for change. Federici (2020, 126) argues that if we continually resign our achievements to a distant future, we easily become blind to what is possible in the present. By emphasising the idea of utopia as an active possibility in the here and now rather than a blueprint for future revolution, the course highlighted the everyday as a meaningful locus of social change. It aligned with the politics of possibility outlined by Gibson-Graham (2006), which rest on a political imaginary that emphasises ethical practices of self-cultivation as a meaningful dimension of social change, the role of place in transformative politics, the uneven spatiality and negotiability of power, and "the everyday temporality of change and the vision of transformation as a continual struggle to change subjects, places, and conditions of life under inherited conditions of difficulty and uncertainty" (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii).

These politics resonate with Cooper's (2014) work on everyday utopias, which identifies small-scale spaces and practices experimenting with non-hegemonic ways of life as a meaningful way to pursue social change. Critical scholarship sometimes dismisses such sites as "trivial, messy distractions, taking attention away from the major social relations structuring the world" (Cooper 2014, 30), although such a view of social change can be conceptually impoverishing. As Kate Soper (2020, 74) shows, small-scale experiments can "envisage the larger-scale shifts in both experience and policy-making that will be essential in any transition to a sustainable economic order". A focus on the small and everyday does not preclude large-scale systemic social change. Rather, it highlights the overdetermination of social change by specifying different analytical and practical levels for change that are not mutually exclusive.

As discussed above, capitalist realism engendered in the students a profound sense of political disenfranchisement and the lack of a horizon for a better future. Our course sought to destabilise this pessimistic view and foster a sense of agency. The exercises encouraged the students to imagine potential forms and vehicles of social change in their everyday lives, cultivating the belief that action for social change is possible and worth taking up (cf. Giroux 2007, 28). The student responses indicated that the course helped them conjure a sense of agency and hope, approach social change from a different angle, and look at their everyday milieu in a slightly different manner:

> I feel now that a utopian change is achievable and possible because my understanding of change changed during the course. It does not have to be an armed rebellion where the government is put down and the social order is overthrown. … Although it often feels that small changes are not enough and we are doomed anyway … it's true that small creeks can generate a strong current.

> I was glad to notice that the course strengthened my societal creativity. I often noticed pondering outside the classroom how certain services provided by society could be organised otherwise and whether there was something completely new that could help us to act in an ecologically more sustainable manner in society.

The course made social change more contingent and reachable for the students who pondered its scales. One student concluded, "After all, who knows what kind of social change is big enough or too small? You have to start somewhere".

Concluding reflections

This article has discussed arts-based exercises in engaged pedagogy with the aim of cultivating a capacity for political imagination. We suggest that utopian pedagogy requires the following: disengagement from—and disinvestment in—the status quo as a way to open up imaginative capacities; an approach to politics as something that emerges from the process of exercising imagination and emphasises complex interconnections between the personal and political; an understanding of imagination as a collective process rather than an individual disposition; and encouragement to embrace a variety of scales for social change, observing both their entanglement and emancipatory potential in everyday life. Political imagination does not denote closure, harmony, or unanimity; rather, it embraces dialogue and negotiation about political alternatives. It is an open-ended process of exploring how both the world and ourselves could be imagined otherwise. We suggest that utopian pedagogy can be an important tool of transformative politics by helping foster political imagination and widen the horizon of the possible in the context of the neoliberalisation of higher education.

Student learning occurred performatively and corporeally, not just conceptually and linguistically. As a form of play, arts-based exercises highlight the embodied aspects of imagination: observations, and insights are born in and out of encounters with the movement, touch, smell and noise that are interwoven into surrounding material realities. Although we are unaccustomed to integrating playfulness into our academic practices, we have shown here that play carries radical potential for engaged pedagogy. At the same time, our experiences further reveal how arts-based exercises can involve confusion and difficulty as they introduce a new way of knowing and learning that requires throwing oneself into the process.

Utopian pedagogy challenged the students and teachers alike. We reminded ourselves not to direct student thinking too much and instead gave the students the space to interpret things independently. We thus found it important to avoid immediately explaining away the possible discomfort that comes with new methods of learning; instead, we embraced it to see where it would lead. In lieu of a linear and target-oriented "banking system" (hooks 1994), utopian pedagogy emphasises a processual understanding of learning. Learning processes can be slow and unpredictable: they are initiated during the course but continue on outside it and assume shapes that we cannot know in

advance. The students left the course with a process that, unlike something more definite, is actually ongoing—one with an unknown destination.

Although the experience of practising political imagination was initially often difficult and even frightening, many students felt that their imaginative capacities were energised and expanded. The course empowered them to use sociological knowledge inside and outside academia. It enabled the students to understand the sociological craft as an act of imagination in itself, capturing not simply what is but what can be. It seems appropriate to conclude with Derrida's (quoted in Giroux 2007, 40) remark, "We must do and think the impossible. If only the possible happened, nothing more would happen" (Giroux 2007, 40).

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