

Title: Concrete Utopia as education of desire: the role of social experiments in the transformation of the Social Imaginary

Submission to the special session: Concrete utopias, heterotopias, nowtopias: chance or danger for the societal transformation envisioned by degrowth?

Summary

Aim of the paper is to explore how far social experiments gravitating around the idea of degrowth can contribute to a radical (social ecological) transformation of society. After a brief introduction about societal transformation, I will focus on the transformation of the Social Imaginary and the role of concrete utopias in enhancing it. By following Levitas I consider the 'education of desire' as a core function of concrete utopias. Social experiments considered in terms of concrete utopias can become subversive and emancipatory spaces for experimenting, experiencing, and negotiating alternative ways of understanding desires and needs.

Conference Objectives and Themes:

This abstract addresses following topics:

Mainly:

- 4. Power, politics, institutions and the reality of achieving change:
 - 4.1. Power relations and overcoming vested interests
 - 4.2. The role of social movements in the sustainability revolution
 - 4.4. Interrelations between societal, cultural, and economic and political values

Marginally also:

- 1. Post-growth economics (1.1. Degrowth and steady-state economics)
- 3. Development, consumption and well-being (3.5. Patterns of trade, production, and consumption)

Abstract

Societal transformation can take place along at least three dimensions. First, the structural and institutional dimension that encompasses economic relations, relations of power and domination, and institutions. Second, the dimension of both collective and individual practices including the agency of societal actors. Third, the cultural and value-related dimension of societal transformation. Serge Latouche's claim for a 'decolonization of the imaginary' is usually intended in terms of a cultural transformation (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010). However, the reference background of such a concept does not only refer to cultural values and norms, but includes in a more general way what Cornelius Castoriadis has termed the Social Imaginary (SI) (Castoriadis 1997).

In this paper I will focus specifically on the second and third dimension of societal transformation and on the role that social experiments in their variety and multitude can

play in renegotiating, shifting, and re-instituting the shared imaginary of society towards a social ecological transformation.

The SI refers to a deep, collective self-understanding that confers sense to institutions and practices within a society. It justifies what we do in the face of others, legitimates reciprocal expectations, keeps the society together as the fabric of shared meanings. According to Castoriadis, every society constitutes itself as more or less coherent whole of institutions, by creating a comprehensive universe of meaning, which is not determined by historical necessity (Castoriadis 2010). In other words, each society is a system for interpreting the world. Far from being simply immersed in a given set of values that are justified by ideology, a society can become aware that it explicitly creates its own imaginary and that its institutions are its own creation. When a society becomes aware of its self-instituting character it turns into what Castoriadis terms an autonomous society (ibidem, 41).

Growth, competition, and accumulation are not only structural mechanisms for societal stabilization and accumulation; they are also modes of *subjectivation* (i.e. regimes and discourses that forms subjects, see Foucault) that shape the social imaginary through patterns of recognition, conceptions of needs and modes of desiring. A socioecological transformation of society cannot be achieved without a process of liberation from dominant constraints that constitute what is considered to be 'obvious' and feed TINA-narratives. Social experiments can become spaces in which subversive modes of subjectivation can be experimented. In such spaces alternative ways of conceiving needs, desires, and their satisfaction, are not only envisioned, but also experimented and experienced. By provisionally suspending the pervasive impact of dominant societal imaginaries, social experiments can crack open the established understanding of what is considered to be real and give room to alternative imaginaries, practices, and experiments of common living.

Thus, social experiments can effectively work as concrete utopias. While abstract utopias amount to merely wishful thinking, concrete utopias envision and anticipate the real-possible, which is already slumbering in the meanders of the actual world, as Bloch has shown. The real-possible is possible not only in a general way, but on the ground of existing potentials and tendencies that can unfold and be actualized in the future.

Alternative tendencies also include the established values of a society: no ideology or form of domination can maintain itself in power without some kind of widespread legitimation.

Manipulation and false consciousness alone would not suffice in the long run. This is why the Social Imaginary of each dominant ideology that justifies and legitimize current institutions, practices, and actions, always bears a surplus of meaning that goes beyond the mode in which it is actually realized, interpreted, and implemented. Each ideology has somehow to address the quest for disalienation and to embody a promise for a better life. This surplus of meaning is the point of leverage for concrete utopias. Concrete Utopias do not need fully new value. Rather, they rest on already established values and subversively

transforms them by shifting their meaning, re-interpreting them, and embodying them in alternative practices (Muraca 2014).

By grasping and enhancing the contradictions in the legitimation of dominant systems, concrete utopias can thus appeal to different people who share a similar discontent and a desire for a better way of being. Such a discontent might take the explicit form of critique and resistance against structural forms of oppression, discrimination, and deprivation (as it is the case with antagonistic protest, boycotting, social conflicts). But it may also be a rather vague sense of frustration that bears a subjective concern for disalienation.

Concrete utopias have both an **anticipatory** and a **performative** power. On the one hand, they **envision** alternative imaginaries no matter how hidden they are. They anticipate future possibilities and already contribute to create the space in which these possibilities can be experienced, lived and tested. They operate as laboratories where social innovation is literally forged and where people participating in them can find the power and the motivation for resisting, building alliances, and continue the transformation in other areas of life.

On the other hand, they also **embody** alternative practices in the numerous laboratories in which new spaces are created and protected for actual experimentation and for new experiences. We need to know how it feels to live differently – otherwise we cannot figure it out. Concrete utopias are spaces in which we can collectively learn about our desires, we can provisionally suspend and thus start questioning pseudo-desires and the satisfaction of needs imposed by the existing structures. Thus we can start a collective learning process about needs, desires, and what it means to live well together. According to Levitas, the education of desire is the most important function of (concrete) utopias for a radical transformation of the status quo (Levitas 2010). In the paper I will explore how far degrowth and the social experiments that more or less explicitly share similar claims can be considered in terms of concrete utopias for the transformation of the Social Imaginary.

References

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