

Political Imagination



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Abstract

Political imagination can be defined as a way of transcending political reality, and thus challenging conformity. It can be used to visualize possible futures and to bring to life a real but distant past. It can be a consciously applied strategy or an unconscious way of processing desire. At a time when current politics seems woefully inadequate to face the monumental challenges of bigotry, demagoguery, inequality, climate change, and disease we face today, a revitalization of the political imagination may be necessary, not only to find new solutions but to fundamentally reexplore and reform the frames within which we participate and collaborate in finding these new solutions. Artists, activists, thinkers, and researchers, especially, have a responsibility to use their imagination to not only describe the world as it is and critique its shortcomings but to also conjure up visions of the world as it could be. In sum, *realpolitik* must be joined with a *dreampolitik* of political imagination.

Keywords

Political imagination · Utopia · Dystopia · Art · Avant-Garde · Vanguard

And your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams.

-- Acts 2:17, King James Bible

Introduction: Politics of the Possible and Impossible

Politics is often characterized not by imagination but by pragmatism. “Politics is the art of the possible,” Germany’s nineteenth century “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck argued in 1867 while making the case for a practical-minded *realpolitik*. And at the end of the twentieth century, Francis Fukuyama (1992) concluded that we can now no longer imagine a world at the same time different and better than the one ushered in with the end of the Cold War and the victory of liberal democracy. This is an understandable position as those in power have an interest in maintaining the status quo that keeps them in power. As British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was fond of saying in response to critics of her neoliberal rule: “There Is No Alternative.”

This lack of imagination infects even well-meaning politicians from relatively well-functioning democracies. The stability which is a trademark for the welfare state also means that creative disruption is typically frowned upon. Recently, a universal basic income and the establishment of a second chamber in Parliament consisting of randomly selected citizens have both been proposed in Denmark. But to many politicians, these proposals are seen as completely “utopian,” that is to say, impossible and therefore ridiculous. Former Danish climate minister Lars Christian Lilleholt characteristically argued against the idea of a permanent citizens assembly (May 2019) simply by pointing to how the *current* system works:

Citizens have every opportunity to influence who runs for Parliament. This is how democracy works in Denmark. To create a citizens assembly which would have a say in climate policies, I have a very hard time imagining.

The minister makes two symptomatic fallacies. Firstly, he argues that because things are as they are, they cannot and should not be any different. This circular reasoning is rooted in classical conservative thinking: what is, and has been, should also always be. Secondly, this is a case of self-confession: Lilleholt has “a very hard time imagining” what is being proposed. That may be the case. But his lack of imagination should not disempower other people’s dreams and initiative. In reality, unfortunately, it often does (Harrebye 2019: 1120–121).

Recently, the global pandemic of Covid-19 has been said to reopen the political space for philosophers, religious leaders, artists, activists, and others to fundamentally reimagine the values and principles on which to build a new world, exploiting the potential hidden in every crisis. But the politics of imagination is not a recent phenomenon. For as long as there have been those that counsel a sober recognition of the possible, there has been a tradition of envisioning the impossible, and history is full of examples – both inspiring and terrifying – of how the imagination has been used politically.

Definition: What Is Political Imagination?

Politics, as narrowly defined by the Cambridge dictionary, is: “the relationship within a group or organization that allows particular people to have power over others.” (Cambridge, def. 2). So, it can be said that politics constitutes activities involved in getting and using power in public life. *Imagination*, on the other hand, is the “ability to form pictures in your mind,” and the “ability to think of new ideas” (Cambridge, def. 1 and 2). This is the capability of the mind to be creative and resourceful in ways that are neither reliant on the reality one is faced with at present nor limited by personal experience. These new pictures in your mind, or what are commonly called *visions*, can be spatially or temporally distant, improbable, or even impossible. The transforming potential of imagination is that the “move” these visions require and lead to changes in our understanding of the present and how we act within it and towards it. *Political imagination* therefore, at one and the same time, is both political and personal, social and individual. It can be defined as a way of transcending political reality, and thus challenging conformity. It can be used to visualize possible futures and to bring to life a real but distant past. It can be a consciously applied strategy or an unconscious way of processing desire. In a broad sense, political imagination is meant to “designate all those imaginative processes by which collective life is symbolically experienced and this experience mobilised in view of achieving political aims.” (Glaveanu and Saint Laurent 2015: 559).

By enabling us to project an image of the world, “imagination allows us to perceive certain ends as deserving more or less priority over others and, more particularly, to envisage new ends” (Ferrara 2011, 40). Applied imagination can be seen in business in the entrepreneur who has a bold and daring plan for innovation. Or, in science, with the researcher who dares to follow a hypothesis that may seem ridiculous or fruitless. In politics, it is seen in activists who trust their vision of a world not yet made to guide their actions in the here and now, yet also understand

the current context and possesses the skills to make their vision seen by others in the present. The political imaginer is both prophet and evangelist.

History: Utopia as a Model of Political Imagination

Political imagination has a long history. In the West, the *Bible* provided images of mythical lands flowing with milk and honey, and glimpses of a world beyond where the lion lays down with the lamb. Even earlier, Plato laid out his model for an ideal political society in *The Republic*. But perhaps the best-known work of political imagination is *Utopia*, written 500 years ago by Thomas More. Because More's *Utopia* is an example of political imagination, an instruction guide on how to imagine politically, and literally names the practice, it is worth looking at in some depth.

The imaginary world that More describes is everything his sixteenth century European home was not. The Island of Utopia has a democratically elected government and priesthood, where women can attain positions of power; there is public health and education and Utopians are guaranteed the freedom of speech and religion; Utopia sends foreign aid to the poor of other countries; living and labor are rationally planned for the good of all and, perhaps most utopian of all: there are no lawyers (More was a lawyer himself.) At the root of Utopia, the source from which everything grows, is the shared wealth and the community of property. The quality of this society is best described thus:

Every house has a door to the street and another to the garden. The doors, which are made with two leaves, open easily and swing shut of their own accord, freely letting anyone in (for there is no private property). (More 1949, 31)

Utopia, however, is more than just a fictive vision of a world turned upside down, and for a book that gives birth to such a commonly used word, *Utopia* is an exceedingly curious text, full of contradictions, riddles, and paradoxes. The grandest – and best known – being the title itself. “Utopia” is a fabricated word, made up by More

from the Greek words *ou*, meaning “not,” and *topos*, meaning “place.” Utopia is a place which is, literally, No-Place. Over and over in his book, in all sorts of ways, More creates a vision of an ideal world and then tells us it is not possible. And this paradox is at the heart of More's understanding of political imagination.

The power of Utopia lies in its ability to be possible and impossible, real and unreal, all at the same time. Through telling the reader a story and leading them on a journey, More convinces them that Utopia is a real place. He gives specific details on how the Utopians live, what their mating customs are, and how their cities are constructed. The world that More sketches is so lucid, so convincing, that the reader imagines they are there. Like watching a good movie or seeing a great performance, they lose themselves into this other world. What is foreign becomes familiar and what is unnatural is naturalized. The reader is not just *told* that an alternative model for structuring society *could* be possible, they are *shown* and thus *feel* that it *is* possible; More is a master of affect. Through his vivid writing, he provides his reader with a vision of another, better world. And then More takes it away by calling the whole thing No-Place.

Map from First Edition of *Utopia*, public domain

The problem with most Utopias, be they prophesied by holy men, designed by Vanguard parties, or imposed by political dictators, is that the political imaginaries they propose are presented as The Answer. All the imagining and planning is done by the enlightened few and the job of the rest of the people is to get used to it. More solves this problem by refusing us the possibility to believe in *his* Utopia. He takes the reader there – lets them see it and feel it – but then reminds them that this place is just imaginary. But it is too late for one to go home; we have been exposed to the idea of an alternative and our desire to live in such a world has been stoked. We now believe that another world is possible. At this point, we are faced with a choice: we either go home to our world, knowing that something better has been imagined and wallow in despair, or we imagine a better world ourselves, our own

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Fig. 1



Utopias. *Utopia* is not a rational plan so much as it is a creative prompt: an *imagination machine*. When Fredric Jameson notes that, “utopia emerges at the moment of the suspension of the political” (2004, p. 43), he is stressing how day-to-day politics is a delimiting factor. But when those limits of the political are suspended, as they are through acts of religious, philosophical, and artistic imagination, utopia can become a map for a new political terrain.

Research: The Field of Imagination

Research on political imagination occurs, often in indirect ways, in different scientific domains: in psychology (e.g., Freud 1899; Vygotsky 2004), in anthropology (Riisgaard and Thomassen 2016), in sociology (e.g., Beck 2011; Taylor 2004), in political science (e.g., Browne and Diehl 2019), in philosophy (e.g., Bottici and Challand 2011; Bottici 2019), organizational theory (e.g., Laloux 2014), and in social movement studies (e.g., Duncombe 2007; Haiven and Khasnabish 2014; Solnit 2006). While there are

too many research endeavors to do justice to here, several are worthy of special attention.

The conception of imagination that emerges from the German philosopher Hannah Arendt's work on the interrelation between freedom, action, and judgment is one that stresses the capacities for imagination to allow our thinking to "go visiting" outside the political sphere bounded by individuality and experience. As she writes, critical thinking,

goes on in isolation, but by the force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides; in other words, it adopts the position of Kant's world citizen. To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visit-
ing. (Arendt 1992, 43)

However, imagination needs limits provided by the realities in which one lives. It must be tied to reality, as it is only within this "bounded imagination" that political action is ensured to remain morally grounded (Tyner 2017).

In his book on envisioning real utopias, Erik Olin Wright analyzes cases of institutional innovation that "embody in one way or another emancipatory alternatives to the dominant forms of social organization" (2009, 1). Wright shows how the strategic elements are dependent on historical settings and complex political systems. The best thing we can do, he argues, is to build social empowerment through experimental processes where we "continually test and retest the limits of possibility and try, as best as we can, to create new institutions which expand the limits of themselves" (Wright 2009: 281). In doing so we not only *envision* utopias – and for Wright they are always plural – but contribute to making them real.

For Benedict Anderson, imagination was essential for the creation of political "realities" like the modern nation state as other, previous, social formations based on religion or kinship crumbled. In his celebrated volume, *Imagined Communities* (1991), Anderson argues that this national imagination is, in part, enabled by forms of mass communication like newspapers and novels, printed in national vernacular languages, which provide a cultural space through which

people who may never see or know one another can imagine themselves as having a "national consciousness" and "formed, in their secular particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (Anderson 1991: 44).

Queer theorist José Muñoz stresses the importance of imagination as a way of creating new possibilities for "minoritarian" people like LGBTQ+ people of color as they renegotiate and reimagine mainstream culture. This "project of world making," as he calls it, "offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present." It is often through creative art practices that these worlds are imagined and shared (Muñoz 1999, 200).

Inspiration: Art as Model for Political Imagination

As Anderson and Muñoz remind us, no definition of political imagination is complete without a discussion of the use of art and culture as means of imagining. The poet Audre Lorde writes, "I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems." (Lorde 1984, 3). With these words, Lorde imparts two important lessons: The first is that fear is the warden of the imagination. (As the Danish climate minister Lilleholt showed us.) What is unfamiliar, uncommon, or unimaginable is deeply frightening; it upsets our expectations of how the world is supposed to operate. Lorde's second lesson, however, is equally important: Art can free the imagination from this prison.

It has long been a role of avant garde art to expand the limits of political imagination. The Surrealist André Breton, for example, considered himself a revolutionary: He was a member of the French Communist Party, co-authored a "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" with Leon Trotsky, and considered imagination one of the most important tools to bring about revolution. Breton believed that the enemy of imagination is thought. Not thought per se, but conscious

thought that has been rationalized and socialized; thought that has been taught to categorize, judge, edit, and correct. As Breton writes in the first *Surrealist Manifesto*:

Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that might rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for the truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices. (Breton 1972, 10)

So how to escape the conformity of accepted practices and ideas? For Breton, the path lay through the unconscious. He put great store in dreams as a way of sidestepping around consciousness, and thus providing alternative perspectives and solutions. “Can’t the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?”, he asks (Breton 1972: 12). In terms of artistic practice, Breton, as a writer, counseled a technique of automatic writing in which one sits down and writes, fast and furious, before the censors of consciousness can enter (along with the importance of dreams, this method of free association was another of Freud’s influences). Surrealist visual artists like Hans Arp, André Masson, and even the non-Surrealist, but deeply mystical, Hilma af Klint practiced “automatic” drawing and painting: Letting their unconscious guide their hand across a canvas. Max Ernst and Salvador Dali painted imaginary landscapes and objects pulled from their dreams (a practice continued by artists such as the filmmaker David Lynch today). All these art practices were creative efforts to slip by the censors of consciousness and tap into senses and experiences unavailable in the rational, waking life. As Breton concludes, “Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete nonconformism clearly enough so that there can be no question of translating it, at the trial of the real world, as evidence for the defense” (Breton 1972: 47). Alas, the forces of “the real world” were to also transform Surrealism into a respected art movement and an endless stream of posters, tote bags, and melting clocks sold in museum gift shops.

Other artists of the avant garde were less interested in escaping the strictures of the old “real world” that constrained imagination than they

were in using their imagination to create models of a new one. Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* is an instructive example. Tatlin’s tower was commissioned soon after the revolution in Russia, in 1919, by The Department of Artistic Work of the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment. The tower was to stand 400 meters tall, almost a quarter higher than the Eiffel Tower, and straddle the Neva river in central Petrograd. Tilting at the same angle as the Earth (23.5 degrees), and taking the idea of “revolution” quite literally, the tower was constructed of three internal revolving levels. At the bottom was a massive glass and steel cube to house the Soviet legislative assemblies, rotating once a year. Above this was a pyramid, where the executive committees would meet, revolving once a month. And over this was a cylinder which held information and propaganda services, that spun once a day. This cylinder was to be faced with a giant screen to show the latest cultural and political news, and equipped with massive loudspeakers to broadcast revolutionary news. At the very top of Tatlin’s tower was a hemisphere to house radio equipment, topped by radio towers capable of transmitting world-wide, and a projector with the ability to project propaganda images on the clouds.

Photo of Tatlin’s Tower, public domain

Needless to say, Tatlin’s Tower was never built. There was not enough steel in all of Russia to construct it, and even if there had been the material to erect it, it is unclear whether it was stable enough to stand. The monument’s impracticality was recognized and criticized at the time by Tatlin’s cultural and political comrades. Leon Trotsky had this to say, reflecting upon the monument in his book *Literature and Revolution*, “I remember seeing once, when a child, a wooden temple built in a beer bottle. This fired my imagination, but I did not ask myself at that time what it was for...” But now, regarding Tatlin’s monument, he writes: “I cannot refrain from the question: What is it for?” (Trotsky 1957: 247–8). Trotsky, or course, unknowingly answered his own question: What is Tatlin’s monument for? “*To fire the imagination!*” Tatlin himself, as much as he wrapped himself in the utilitarian rhetoric of the

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Fig. 2



revolutionary Russian avant garde, was clear that his design could have another function. The ideal of “uniting purely artistic forms with purely utilitarian aims,” Tatlin writes in his proclamation *Art into Technology*, is to create “models which stimulate inventions in the business of creating a new world.” (cited in Lodden 1983, 65). It is in this vein that the contemporary Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez, who creates large dream-city installations out of scraps of garbage, says that, “A visionary is someone who dreams of what doesn’t exist yet. He has to make feasible what he has seen.” (Duman 2003).

Avant garde art is not the only cultural arena in which political imagination is expressed. Popular

culture – genre literature, songs, movies, TV dramas, video games, social media, and even advertising – are also platforms for political imagination. One strain of popular culture, science fiction (and fantasy fiction more generally) has been a particularly fruitful field for political imaginings. Arguably the first work of science fiction, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, written in 1818, was a way to imagine a world of technological innovation and question its consequences. Science fiction has attracted political writers such as the socialist H.G. Wells and the libertarian Robert Heinlein and, more recently, popular SF writers such as Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler have used the genre as a way to imagine a world outside

of patriarchy and white supremacy. These pop culture fantasy imaginings can be dystopian, as is the vision of the mechanized capitalist city in Fritz Lange's 1927 film *Metropolis*, or more recently in the TV series *A Handmaid's Tale* (2017–2018). Or they can be utopian as in the ideal of the Afro-Futurist City-State of Wakanda in the film *Black Panther* (2018). Such fictional imaginings can even lead to real-world actions. For example, fans of the popular Harry Potter series of books and films created an activist group, The Harry Potter Alliance, to take concrete steps to combat gender inequality, climate change, and other issues.

Even sport can be an arena for political imagination. In 2014, Iran played South Korea for a spot in the soccer World Cup. Since women are not allowed to attend games in Iran, two female fans, Fatma Iktasari and Shabnam Kazimi, had to dress up as men in order to get in. Once they were in and the game was underway, they ditched their disguises and made it clear to everyone that real women were joining the happy occasion. The stunt went viral on social media. The intervention not only functioned as a *dilemma action* exposing police powerlessness, it also became a symbol of hope, helping women all around Iran to visibly imagine a world where all citizens, regardless of their gender, could watch a soccer match out in the open (Popovic 2015, 108–110). More generally, sport – like art – is a space of play and playfulness within which to experience and imagine a world operating according to an alternative set of principles.

Critiques: The Dark Side of Political Imagination

Several specters, however, haunt political imagination. Reading what is written above one might well imagine that imagination is almost always on the side of the angels. But probably the most impactful political imagination has been enacted by repressive regimes. Nazism, to take an extreme but influential example, was nothing if not an act of political imagination made manifest. How else to explain the fantasy of a racially homogeneous

state and a glorious Third Reich all dressed up with sign, symbol, story, and spectacle? Similarly, the excesses of Stalin's purges and China's Cultural Revolution were equal parts cynical power manipulations and the articulation of an imaginary "pure" politics. Arguably, the most imaginative politics at the moment is that of the far right with their dreams of national greatness, e.g., US President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again," and nightmares of foreign contagion.

If one problem of political imagination has to do with its effective, repressive implementation, another possible pitfall swings in the opposite direction: That imagination serves as a sort of cultural palliative that retards its political application. Karl Marx located this dilemma in the Utopian visions that reside within religious traditions, describing this "inverted consciousness of the world" as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." (Marx 1844, np). Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies took up this critique later, recognizing the positive power of people's ability to create their own resistant (sub)cultures while at the same time identifying the problem of what they called the "magical resolution" of real-world problems through cultural expression (Hall and Jefferson 1993).

It is important to recognize, however, that opium does not just dull pain or put one into a stupor, but can also aid in the dreaming of new realities to be built. Such was the purpose of Dr. Martin Luther King's famous "I Have A Dream" speech delivered in 1963. King begins his speech with a vivid and chilling account of the nightmare of white supremacy, but then, about half way through, his rhetoric changes as he describes a phantasmagorical dreamworld in which his, and all children, "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." (King 1963: np). The function of King's speech was not only to reveal current reality but to imagine the future, inspiring the Civil Rights Movement and giving them a vision to work toward. To paraphrase Jacques Rancière, the revolution starts when the workers stop resting

at night to be ready for another day at work, and start dreaming instead (Rancière 1991).

Conclusion: Real and Dreampolitik

At a time when current politics seems woefully inadequate to face the monumental challenges of bigotry, demagoguery, inequality, climate change, and disease we face today, a revitalization of the political imagination may be necessary, not only to find new solutions but to fundamentally re-explore and reform the frames within which we participate and collaborate in finding these new solutions. Artists, activists, thinkers, and researchers, especially, have a responsibility to use their imagination to not only describe the world as it is and critique its shortcomings, but to also conjure up visions of the world as it could be. In sum, the *realpolitik* of Bismark must be joined with a *dreampolitik* of political imagination. This may already be happening. With accelerated communications technology and the social media revolution, political imagination seems to be more fertile and widespread than ever. It is still to be seen, however, whether the overstimulation of information and impressions leads to new and more political imagination or whether there is a saturation point that, if crossed, leads to political apathy and stagnation of imagination or worse: conspiracy thinking, confirmation bias, and delusional politics. For it must also always be remembered that political imagination has led to history's greatest accomplishments as well as its worst horrors. The qualities and the intentions of our visions matter.

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