What is the radical imagination? A Special Issue

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Abstract

In this introductory editorial we set out to (1) highlight the key themes, challenges and questions that animate this Special Issue of Affinities, (2) delineate a brief genealogy of the radical imagination in theory and practice and (3) to locate the work of the contributors to this Special Issue in this genealogy.

In the beginning of time God made the earth. Not one word was spoken at the beginning that one branch of mankind should rule over another, but selfish imaginations did set up one man to teach and rule over another – Garrard Winstanley

If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at the moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name – Adrienne Rich

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing - Arundhati Roy

There is a story that when Michelangelo sculpted his statue of David, he had to work on a secondhand piece of marble that already had holes in it. It is a mark of his talent that he was able to create a figure that took account of those limitations. The world we want to transform has already been worked on by history and is largely hollow. We must nevertheless be inventive enough to change it and build a new world. Take care and do not forget that ideas are also weapons - Subcomandante Marcos
1. What is the radical imagination? Why now?

The secret is out.

It was, of course, never a very well kept secret but today it seems more difficult to avoid uttering it than to speak its name: capitalism is the crisis, and it is a crisis of global proportions.

Crisis has always accompanied capitalism – indeed it is internal to it and infinitely productive of it. Today, the social crises of neoliberal capitalism, so evident and provocative throughout the rest of the world, have finally come "home" to the global North in the form of a cataclysmic financial crisis wreaking havoc on the lives of people, workers and communities, intensifying already intolerable injustices and inequalities and serving as a pretense for the acceleration of surveillance, policing and militarization. Amidst the current financial crisis we are catching a glimpse of the compounded nature of our global predicament: the social crisis of societies in shock after decades of neoliberal abuse; the ecological crisis born of 150 years of rapacious industrial expansion, colonialism, and "development"; the crisis of subjectivity as we lonely, atomized consumers seek out meaning and personal worth in a world of artifice, isolation, and relentless commodification.

Like stormclouds obscuring the political horizon, these overlapping crises occlude visions of other possible futures. Despite – or perhaps because of – them, those of us in the global North and especially North America have yet to see here the rise of radical mass political activity that has marked the landscape of political contention and alternative-building in the global South. From the Zapatista uprising to water and AIDS activism in sub-Saharan and southern Africa, to general strikes in Korea, to the Bolivarian revolution, the last 15 years has seen radical mass mobilizations animated by concrete and radical hope for a globalization from below. Yet in the North the question that has plagued Left scholars since the ‘60s has taken on new salience and urgency: why, in the face of increasing inequality, precariousness and exploitation, in the face, even, of imminent ecological collapse, do Northern elites and governments enjoy reckless accumulation untroubled by mass movements demanding radical social and political change? And what lessons can we learn from the recent radicalizations in France, Greece and elsewhere about how to move forward?

This issue of Affinities focuses on the importance of radical imagination to radical social change.

We step in to the terrain of the imagination cognizant of its promises and its pitfalls. On the one hand, imagination brings to mind utopian fancy, a dangerous and demobilizing escapism, and forms of collective or subjective
delusion which perpetuate the status-quo. On the other, the ability to imagine the world, social institutions and human (and non-human) relationships otherwise is vital to any radical project. Indeed, as numerous commentators and theorists point out, we can’t do without the radical imagination, both on the level of our movements and on the level of our everyday lives — the ability to believe that things can be better -- is a key part of our social, psychological and spiritual lives (for better or for worse). But even if we acknowledge that we can’t do without the radical imagination that still doesn’t tell us what it is or what we might be able to do with it. These are the kinds of provocations we take up in this issue of Affinities, but without suggesting we or our contributors have anything approaching definitive answers (indeed, definitive answers may not be possible). We do, however, have an abundance of questions.

Let’s begin with the obvious one. What is radical imagination and why is it worth caring about? We approach imagination as a process by which we collectively map “what is,” narrate it as the result of “what was,” and speculate on what “might be.” It is cognitive and corporeal, intensely creative and utterly mundane all at once. And while imagination is a terrain of political struggle it is not merely reducible to “ideology” in any simplistic sense of “false consciousness” or “fetishism.” Imagination represents a more rich, complex, agent-driven and ongoing working-out of affinity. It is a crucial aspect of the fundamentally political and always collective (though rarely autonomous) labour of reweaving the social world. Despite its problematic history as the fetish of the European “Enlightenment,” we cannot let go of a radicalizing idea of the imagination because it speaks to our ability to create something else, and to create it together. And the sort of hope, courage and possibility the term evokes are in short supply these days.

Throughout this collection, we and many of the authors take up the imagination in multiple valences and, unfortunately, no single definition will suffice to capture the range of meanings the term evokes. We, like philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, believe this is because the term inevitably refers back to an ineffable and restless collective potentiality that is the basis of all social forms. So terms like the “radical imagination” or the “political imagination” are slippery and difficult to pin down.

In general, however, this collection takes up the radical imagination in terms of horizons of socio-political possibility, the possibility of dynamic and shared visions animating and animated by individuals and collectives as they struggle. These visions guide their movements toward new social worlds. Exploring these horizons and their significance, the following questions guide us:

- What are the possibilities and perils of the radical imagination?
What is this mysterious thing, so often spoken of or gestured towards, but so seldom analyzed?

What is it we want the “radical imagination” to do for us? Why do we need it?

What is the relation of radical imagination to radical practice? To radical thought and criticism? To radical forms of and experiments in affinity, solidarity and activism?

How and where is the radical imagination manifest?

How can and do movements and communities nurture the radical imagination in struggle? When, where and how does it work or fail?

Are there criteria by which we can evaluate acts and expressions of the radical imagination? (i.e. is it always a good thing? What makes it “radical”? When? Where? How?)

In this vein, what do we make of “radical” imagination on the right and of the recent success in reactionary, xenophobic, bigoted and fascistic tendencies? Are the ways they pose their alternatives examples of a “radical” imagination?

In a moment when elites have tuned to hollow invocations of hope, imagination, and possibility, how is the (radical) imagination being colonized by the cultural and everyday matrixes of power relations? By the media? By racism? By patriarchy? By colonialism? By capitalism? How can this colonization be fought?

At a time when most of the Left seems all too eager to sacrifice it – and itself - on the altar of a ubiquitous and tepid neo-Keynesianism, how can radical imagination be shared, taught, learned or written?

Is radical imagination worth talking about at all?

At risk of demystifying a term whose mystique may be worth defending, this Special Issue has asked contributors to grapple with the radical imagination by bringing the concept into dialogue with material struggles (or their absences), past or present. But more than just an itinerary of examples of radical imagination, this Issue has asked contributors to reflect critically on these examples towards a better understanding of what radical imagination might be.

In the remainder of this editorial we, as editors, have provided a brief overview of the politics of the imagination and a cursory survey of some notable theories of the radical imagination. We have chosen to interlace radical theory and
radical practices to highlight the dialogic relationship at the heart of the radical imagination. We do not strive here for any sort of comprehensive history. Instead, we are trying to delineate a “genealogy” which tells one story of how our present moment came to be. As such, we beg the indulgence and forgiveness of all those who have struggled and thought whom we have omitted.

2. Roots of the radical imagination: romantics and revolutionaries

We can begin with taking apart the term “radical imagination” etymologically. The term radical stems from the Latin word for “root” and bespeaks a concern for the origins and “root causes” of things. It implies looking beyond surface or easy answers and a desire to uncover the deep reasons for our present reality. It also implies that answers to social problems will require fundamental solutions, not temporary fixes. Today, the term “radical” is contrasted to “moderate,” “liberal” or “reformist” and many activists and intellectuals brand themselves with the term, or are branded by it in attempts to discredit them. The term is, unfortunately, most widely recognized today in terms of “radical Islam,” the hobgoblin of the War on Terror with its racist implications of irrational hatred and perverse cultural atavism.

The imagination is a little more difficult to define. The word also stems from the Latin, meaning an imitation or a copy but used in references to reflections (in a mirror) and, importantly, to mental images or ideas. The imagination’s etymological roots in the mind’s relation to the “real” world are still with us today: the imagination is widely considered to be mental space where we interpret and reflect on the world. But it has also come to mean the way we originate new ideas: the imagination is today understood to be the signature of our individuality and uniqueness. While in earlier periods the imagination had an ambivalent if not negative meaning (in terms of false understanding of the world or, in certain cases, treasonous ideas that flew in the face of conventional wisdom), today it enjoys an almost sickening celebrity.

The concept of the imagination as a political force in the West is ancient. There was, for instance, a famous “debate” between Plato and Aristotle on the matter, a debate whose basic disagreements remain with us to this day. For Plato, the imagination (and all forms of art and artifice, from stories to songs to poetry) was a social ill to be distrusted as a mere proxy for reality. Only philosopher-kings, the best and most rational minds of a society, finely honed by rigorous education, were fit to see beyond the world of appearances and comprehend the true essence of things and rule others correctly. Aristotle disagreed, arguing that imagination was always an important part of how we comprehend the world and that works of the imagination like theatre could be
important for creating and sustaining community and for the cultivation of full personhood. But for both Plato and Aristotle, the imagination was a passive organ of the mind, capable only of internalizing and reacting to the “real” world.

This ancient debate had tended to rehearse itself time and again, most famously in the controversies over the value of the arts in modern Western society. But the idea of the imagination that underscored these more recent discourses had a slightly different origin. The European Enlightenment of the 18th century elevated the imagination to a new centrality. Early skeptical thinkers like David Hume and René Descartes suggested that our whole sense of reality was beholden to the imagination, that we could know nothing outside of our own minds and that our experience of causality, or the way we put our experience of the world into some sort of coherent, linear order, was a necessary fabrication. Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, took this conclusion as his starting point, suggesting that the imagination was the very fulcrum of reality itself and that the self-contained individualistic human mind was the centre of the universe. For Kant and later philosophers of the German Romantic period, the imagination was humanity’s “divine spark” -- that quality of being that set humans apart from animals. It was out of the imagination that all other aspects of our mental life (and, therefore, social life) evolved, including reason, aesthetics and ethics. For these thinkers, all of whom were wealthy, white men whose personal and institutional wealth and power stemmed (directly or indirectly) from exploitation, the imagination had taken on a life of its own, but it was certainly not a life unmarked by differences in power and privilege. Many stories remain to be told about how and where the Romantic notion of the imagination really originated. David Graeber, for one, has suggested that the European fascination with culture, creativity and imagination was spurred by Europeans’ often violent encounters with radically “other” cultures through colonialism; cultures that, in many cases, posed an egalitarian model of social organization against the rigid hierarchies of feudal and mercantilist Europe. Similarly, as Debbie Lee has argued, the notion of the Romantic Imagination was fundamentally inspired by the forms of anti-slavery and anti-colonial resistance of the day. It is notable too that many of the early theorists of the imagination, including Descartes, Hume, Spinoza and Kant were aware of and responding to massive social upheaval within Europe where commoners were demanding radically new forms of governance and radical Protestant movements were pronouncing egalitarian and anarchistic approaches to scripture and social life.

For perhaps these reasons, the imagination was, for Romantic poets like Shelley, Coleridge, Byron, Blake and Goethe, a key means of resisting and critiquing the status quo. The imagination was at once the quality of humanity that was being destroyed by the advance of capitalist industrial modernity, the wellspring
of resistance and rebellion, and the power that could bring about a future society. Similarly, influential social critics like Max Stirner and avant-garde arts movements of the 19th century believed that the imagination was the key to resisting capitalist domination. After all, they reasoned, aren't most of the social institutions and relations that hold us under their power (the family, religion, money, nationalism) imaginary? Was revolution not, then, merely a matter of learning to imagine our relationships differently?

This approach came under two levels of critique. Critics like Karl Marx argued that social institutions were far from “merely imaginary” but were, instead, based in the material power relations and the institutionalization of power throughout society. These structures may have an imaginary dimension to them, but they were backed both by the repressive power of the state as well as the whole economic system of which they were a part. Simply imagining away the problem was no solution and art, in and of itself, was not a revolution. Conversely, Marx and others were to point out that the imagination is never a pure, unmediated effusion of the human soul but is always shaped, conditioned and guided by one’s socialization. In other words, we can never fully imagine our way out of our own prison precisely because what we can imagine is always based on what we have experienced in our lives (even vicariously through stories) and these experiences are forged within a particular set of power relations.

Indeed, the rise to prominence of the imagination during the 18th and 19th century was far from accidental. In the Eurocentric philosophical image of the self-contained imaginative individual at the centre of the universe the emerging class of the white, male bourgeoisie found a flattering representation of themselves. Who more than the “entrepreneur” embodied the willful imposition of their (economic or industrial) imagination upon the world? Indeed, this Enlightenment notion of the imagination contributed a key piece to the narrative of supremacism that propelled and legitimated the expansion of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Modernity and industrialization advanced as the imagination of owners and managers came to dominate that of workers in the factory and other sites of production. New forms of government emerged that saw bureaucrats and rulers impose their imagined plans for social concord on whole populations. Meanwhile, the Enlightenment idea of the imagination was to become a fetish by which European colonial and imperial regimes justified their domination. On the one hand, non-European cultures were seen as too imaginative: ascribing supernatural power to non-human actors, inanimate objects, “fetishes” and “false” gods. On the other hand, they were seen as not imaginative enough and incapable of real creativity or social evolution, locked in the benighted past and in need of Western “guidance” and “tutelage.” Similarly, women were seen as both too imaginative and not imaginative enough. On the one hand, women were
“scientifically” proven to be prone to a dangerous imaginative surplus, manifesting in “hysteria” and other maladies that skewed their sense of reality. Women were thought to be incapable of reason and proportion, thus justifying their exclusion from social power. On the other hand, women were seen as inherently banal and obsessed with the mundane and the petty, incapable of great creative acts of the imagination, and so their artistic, technological, intellectual and social labours were consistently stolen and/or degraded.

3. The radical imagination into the 20th century

By the 20th century, however, this Euro-Enlightenment notion of the imagination had begun to show signs of wear. Through the late 18th and early 19th centuries the Romantic literary and artistic movements mobilized the idea of the imagination as a triumphant counter-narrative to industrial modernity, arguing lyrically that the rise of bureaucracy, the ascent of money and commerce to social dominance, and the rule of icy rationality over sense, feeling, emotion and passion could be overturned by acts of the imagination. By the mid-19th century, however, the notion of the Romantic imagination had been largely corralled into a rarified sphere of “art” that became the near exclusive property of the ruling classes, defanged of its revolutionary zeal (although some artists continued and continue to be revolutionaries). The fall of imagination as a political rallying cry preceded a new skepticism towards the Enlightenment subject for whom the imagination had been so important.

Nevertheless, in other contexts, imagination continued to be discussed, debated, deconstructed, and deployed in a myriad of ways. Communism, one of the most successful social movements in modern history, held that the imagination was ultimately the product of its material conditions and emerged not from gifted geniuses but from cooperative labour. Freudian psychoanalysis, by contrast, agreed that the imagination was buried deep in the human psyche, but suggested that it was not under our conscious control, and that it produced and filtered dark, unconscious, anti-social drives that threatened to destroy civilization. In radical circles, debates began to rage as to whether the imagination was a ‘good-in-itself’ or whether it should be put towards social agitation, whether any true creativity could occur until after the revolution or if the revolution itself was the most imaginative act possible.

These debates often centred around what made the imagination radical. This question occupied later Marxist critics like the Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno who, in the lead up to and following World War II, suggested that what sets radical thought apart from conventional thinking was its ability to have one foot in the future. As Marcuse argued, radical thinking and imagination stands apart because, rather than accepting the world as it is, it always keeps in mind all the other ways the world could be. This isn’t just a...
matter of imagining endless fanciful utopias – it is a matter of imagining different tomorrows based on the “what if’s...” of today. What would the world be like if we shifted all military monies towards education? What would the factory look like if it were run by the workers? What would our city look like if it was run by popular committees rather than bought-off bureaucrats? But, importantly, this imagination should never reach the level of providing a schematic or a plan for what the future ought because any such plan would already be poisoned by our own time and place. Thus, we would use the tainted tools of our own current oppression to build a dystopian future. The sort of radical imagination these theorists dream of is one that is constantly being held open and one that “comes back” to us in the present to shake up our thinking and help us remember things are not as they must be and that they could be different.

Similarly, Ernst Bloch was to redevelop Marxist criticism from the standpoint of hope and the imagination – what Bloch referred to as a “forward dream”. Starting with the assertion that the world is an open, unfolding space and not a closed system of predetermined dimensions and relations, Bloch mined the radical possibilities inhabiting this “Not-Yet”, this space in the constant process of becoming, and finds in it the nagging suspicion that the world might be otherwise. But where in the midst of the capitalist experience of alienation and its relations of exploitation can the fuel for this “forward dream”, this radical imagination, be found? Bloch posits that lying latent in many actually existing works, whether they be works of art, literature, architecture, or political ideals, there is a latent utopian element that extends beyond the obvious connection of these forms to existing systems of power. Indeed, for Bloch, the future is always being made and remade and all our relationships and social forms are – at least potentially and only with the force and presence granted them by the prevailing socio-historical conditions – hopeful, fertile, and anticipatory. From out of these critical insights a picture begins to emerge: the perversion, mutation and distortion of our hopes and dreams is not only one of the greatest crimes of capitalist exploitation, it is essential to the system’s functioning.

While the influence of Marxism and the various forms of communism it spawned have been important, authors like Lucien Vanderwaalt and Michael Schmidt and Benedict Anderson have charted the subdued history of anarchist transnationalism across Europe, Asian and Latin America, noting that the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw popular mobilizations that not only demanded control over the economy but a radical transformation of everyday life in ways that imagined freedom beyond political-economic and nationalist change. Allan Antliff, in his contribution to this Special Issue, asks us to revisit these imaginaries in order to reflect on the way an anarchist rejection of authority poses a never-ending challenge to power relations and offers a perennial source of radical possibility.

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Indeed, the 19th century was rife with anti-colonial revolts inspired by national and transnational imaginaries. The Sepoy Rebellion in India, the Mexican Revolution, the Boxer Uprising in China, the wars in the Philippines against successive colonizers, the waves of resistance and revolt by indigenous North Americans all saw the vast mobilization of radical imaginations against empire.23 Particularly interesting, given that this Special Issue originates in Canada, are the radical mobilizations of indigenous people against genocide and colonialism here, from the Pontiac rebellions in Upper Canada to fabled visionary leaders like Tecumseh, Louis Riel, Sitting Bull and many more.24 The ways that indigenous forms of living and modes of resistance have inspired other struggles have also been critically important, although all too often such inspirations have come in the forms of uncritical glorification and despicable appropriation.25

Taiake Alfred’s contribution to this Special Issue suggests that overcoming colonialism today is less a matter of appropriating or borrowing indigenous inspirations and more a matter of taking Western Enlightenment claims at their word. He intimates that, were settler societies to actually value honesty, integrity, fair dealing, justice, democracy, peace and freedom, it would require a transformative restitution and a new relation to the land and its original peoples. For Alfred, this is the heart of a radical anti-colonial imagination for settlers.

Of course, we would be remiss in not mentioning the darker side of the radical imagination as well. While we may celebrate acts of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial resistance, any sober appraisal of the history of radicalism must contend with the success of radical fascism, notably in the rise of German, Italian and Japanese fascism in the lead up to World War II. While these pernicious imaginaries perpetuated, deepened and militarized historic forms of oppression and exploitation, they made devastatingly convincing claims to radicalism, posing themselves as alternatives to rapacious capitalist expansion. The imagination of racial supremacism was certainly not unique to fascist regimes but under fascism it was mobilized into a monstrously effective machine of social terror.

More disturbing still, as Chris Churchill illustrates in his contribution to this Special Issue, it is hard to separate out fascist, communist, anarchist and white supremacist imaginaries in the work of both pre- and post-war intellectuals. He notes that we must look beyond a politics of ideological paternity (i.e. the men who inspired other men) if we are to develop a theory of radical imagination and instead focus on the way ideas move in and out of diverse struggles for justice.

**What is Radial Imagination?**
4. Post-war: The anti-colonial imaginary, New Left, feminism and beyond

The imagination had its second great wave of political salience in the West following World War II. Across the ‘Third World’ - particularly Africa, Latin America, and Asia - anti-colonial liberation movements struggled not only to free themselves from the yolk of foreign domination but also to imagine post-colonial societies and rediscover the role of imaginative expression and culture outside a Western frame, critiquing the individualistic notion of imagination and creativity and experimenting with new, militant and collective forms of imagination and culture.26 These struggles not only emblematized and developed new forms of radical imagination and the integration of imagination in struggle, they also blew apart the confines of the Cold War political landscape, opening an imaginative space beyond the terrain dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union.27

Pushing the idea of the radical imagination far beyond the Western individualist frame, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements frequently demonstrated the historical and social rootedness of imagination and its centrality to struggle while not shying away from taking up some of its most problematic dimensions. For instance, Franz Fanon’s quest to develop an anti-colonial imaginary was situated in the midst of multiple and overlapping problems for the radical imagination28: to what extent could the products and processes of the Western/colonial imagination be trusted? What were the potentials and pitfalls of attempting to revivify or reclaim pre-colonial and “traditional” forms of imaginative expression? What were the dangers in mobilizing an imaginary of a pre-colonial past in the context of an anti-colonial struggle? What risks adhered to privileging the creative and imaginative work of an emerging class of Western-educated anti-colonial intellectuals? Was it even possible to imagine beyond colonialism in the colonizer’s language? How could one imagine a just and revolutionary relationship with anti-systemic and anti-imperial intellectuals, artists and activists in colonizing countries? Should anti-colonial struggle be based on a national imaginary or a transnational one (e.g. the “third world,” Negritude, the Non-Aligned Movement)?

So when Che Guevara heralded the “bright future” that could coalesce should “two, three or many Vietnams flourish” he spoke not only to the strategic necessity of transnational anti-imperialist war, he also invoked the radical imagination of a worldwide proletarian struggle and the liberated world that would emerge from it.29

In “minority” movements within Western capitalist “democracies” these anti-colonial movements found their echo as these struggles ‘within the belly of the beast’ marshaled claims to reformist or revolutionary rights that punctured the imaginary of post-war nationalist progress and cooperation. The Civil Rights

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movement in the United States, for instance, sought at once to show the incompleteness of the “American Dream” and to fundamentally redefine this imaginary. Organizations like the Southern Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, on the frontlines of the struggle against racial terror in the US, materialized these commitments through a reimagined politics that embodied not only militancy and direct action against oppression but love, mutual respect, and radicalism.30 Despite his reformist rhetoric, Martin Luther King’s speeches, as well as their famous references to dreams, better tomorrows and hopeful horizons, made claims on the system (e.g. an end to imperialist war, the redistribution of wealth) that opened onto radical social change. Conversely, Malcolm X was to develop a black separatist imaginary that fundamentally challenged the idea that minority claims could and should be adjudicated by the nation-state and that black demands for justice should be limited to asking for inclusion. Both inherited a long history of black radical imaginaries from figures like Markus Garvey, Harriet Tubmann, Frederick Douglass, C.L.R. James and W.E.B. DuBois who challenged both black and non-black thinkers and organizers to imagine liberation beyond the nation.31

Inspired by these movements, new kinds of radical subjects emerged out of the ranks of students, workers and citizens of the West and developed new political imaginaries that went beyond traditional communist and socialist parties. Indeed, this “New Left,” as it was to be called, demanded not only an end to the exploitation of labour and the perpetuation of imperialism but also a social revolution against the anti-imaginative culture of the post-War West.32 These were the days of the fabled “post-war compromise” which saw those element of the Western labour movement not destroyed by McCarthyism and other forms of anti-communist terror exchange their militancy for acceptance and recognition as partners in the cultivation of national prosperity. The imaginary of this “golden age” was that labour could gain its due not through a reclamation of the means of production but by integration into the “planner state” which would mediate and regulate class tensions (through legalized collective bargaining and labour laws) and also provide social services (employment insurance, social security, pensions, social housing, etc.).33 What grew up around this “compromise” was an imaginary of white, patriarchal middle-class normativity which prized nationalism, consumerism, conformity, hierarchy and an extremely narrow notion of civics. It was predicated, however, on the subjugation of women, the second-class citizenship of “minorities” (who had only extremely limited access to “middle-class” lifestyles) and heteronormative terrorism and fundamentally relied on the development of neocolonialism and American-led imperialism. Its stresses on industrial manufacturing, the massification of agricultural production, competitive and conspicuous consumption and individualist notions of freedom (emblematized in the fetish of the car and the suburban domicile) also paved the way for the ecological crisis of today.

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In response to the illusion of prosperity and peace the “compromise” trumpeted, many New Left movements, on both sides of the Atlantic, were to make imagination a key theme of struggle, arguing not only that the reigning economic and social system was unjust, but that it also fundamentally stifled political, social, sexual and creative expression. The imagination was frequently held up again as a wellspring of resistance, the expression of antagonism and the prize to be won from struggle. At its best, this led to new forms of organizing that stressed democratic process and the cultivation of a holistic political ethos, rather than obedience to radical party dogma (although there was still plenty of that). At its worst, this championing of the imagination gave way to individualistic movements of hedonism and cultural cliquishness which imagined that the gestural rejection of social norms and the valorization of a lifestyle politics oriented by drug use, sexual experimentation, alternative music and isolated acts of communal living would suffice to create a revolution.

Partly in response to the failures of the New Left – including its frequent internalization and reproduction of sexed, raced, and classed hierarchies it purported to reject - the second-wave feminist movement was to launch a strong critique of the masculinist notion of imagination and instead posit new ways of working, creating and living that mobilized the imagination as a cooperative, compassionate and militant force. Indeed, the feminist imaginary was pivotal to transforming not only Western society but radical movements and imaginaries. The challenge of recognizing and addressing “the personal as the political” fundamentally redrew the lines of radical imagination, insisting that activists and organizers dream beyond abstract systemic change towards the transformation of everyday life. It also challenged movements and radicals to understand the depth of patriarchal habituation and interrogate their own political imaginations for how they reproduced masculinist values of individualism, revolutionary machismo, and false “hierarchies” of oppression (the overvaluing of class over gender, race and other vectors of exploitation). Further, it insisted that radicals not “wait until after the revolution” to solve the problems of patriarchal culture but work tirelessly to rid their movements of it in the here and now. Notably, however, second-wave feminism itself was to come under strenuous criticism for its hubristic privileging of white women, its general inability to fully imagine the politics of trans people, and its insistence that gender was the fundamental axis of oppression, homogenizing women’s experiences and downplaying or ignoring the politics of class, race, migration, ethnicity and culture. What is too often forgotten by those eager to dismiss feminism is that these critiques were launched by feminist activists and that feminist movements have proven themselves to be among the most adaptive and responsive to these criticisms.

These post-war tendencies not only challenged the radical imagination, they led to new theorizations of the radical imagination itself. Two radical formations

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are notable in this regard, emerging in the lead-up to the famous events of May 1968 in Paris where street rebellions by students and factory workers almost toppled the government. On the one hand, the Situationists, an art/activist group, developed a theory of “the Society of the Spectacle,” arguing that capitalism had transformed everyday life into a world of artificial relationships, mediated by commodities, money and unquestioned routines. For Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, two leading figures in this tendency, the imagination had been kidnapped by industrial capitalism and needed to be freed by both new “artful” techniques deployed in the context of everyday life (for instance, the practice of détournement, the remixing of existing advertising to subvert the original intention of the ad, or the practice of derive a sort of renavigation of urban space outside of the routines of everyday life under industrial capitalism) and by outright rebellion against the powers that be. Similarly, for the group Socialisme ou Barbarie, and especially its leading theorist Comelius Castoriadis, the imagination was the very substance of reality: social institutions were the solidification of the collective imagination. For Castoriadis, the “radical imagination” was not a good or bad thing but the tectonic and ever-shifting substance of our social reality that both hardened into social institutions and swept those institutions away. The imagination was an elemental substance not only of our minds but of our social reality. Radical politics, then, was about developing new, radically democratic modes for organizing the imagination, ones that stressed autonomy, responsibility, compassion and ecology.

5. Neoliberalism, globalization and new theories of the imagination

In the 1970s, another (manufactured) crisis afforded capital the opportunity to end its compromise with elements of the working class and usher in a new model for its own organization followed by a new cycle of primitive accumulation. The new form of organization would be known as neoliberalism and the new cycle of “primitive accumulation” - terror, expropriation, enclosure, violence - was exacerbated by the fall of the Soviet Union which, while betraying the hopes and dreams of revolutionaries both within and beyond the Eastern Bloc, provided a foil to Western capitalism. With the collapse of the USSR many revolutionary social movements the world over, even those who disagreed with the Soviet agenda, felt disconnected and abandoned. Compounding this sense of disaffection, the illusion that the implosion of the Soviet system represented the decisive and unquestionable failure of communism would result in neoliberal elites and their intellectual defenders declaring the victory of capitalism over its challengers and proclaiming “the end of history” – the end of the great ideological battles – in the early 1990s.

Capitalizing on this moment global elites took the opportunity to systematically dismantle the forms of collective power, institutions of social welfare and

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frameworks of democratic governance that, while forged as capitalist compromises to much more radical demands, offered a partial bulwark against the predations of capitalism as well as a space for the nurturing of anti-capitalist values. With the neoliberal privatization of social life and the liquidation of the public sphere the space and time necessary for the cultivation of a shared social imagination has been almost totally foreclosed. Where capital has been unable to simply buy-up the means of social imagination (as is the case with the mass media) it has, through neoliberal restructuring, imposed such austerity that the radical imagination has come to be feared even in formally ‘public’ spaces such as the airwaves, schools and universities, and the civil service. Like a symptom of a disease rendering one unfit for social engagement, the radical imagination has, from the perspective of power, become pathological in relation to the world capital is in the process of remaking.

Against this restructuring, radical movements often posed forms of radical rejection and “subtraction” from the system. Squats, DIY and punk culture, and the reemergence of insurrectionary anarchism represented a radical imagination that saw the integration of capitalism, everyday lived culture and the repressive power of the state so tightly woven that extreme forms of personal and political exodus were the only effective means of resistance and the only grounds for revolution. Elsewhere, the fall of the Berlin Wall, combined with an aging generation of New Left activists in search of more permanent forms of employment saw a massive rise in the non-governmental sector and a renewed focus on international projects and solidarity, most famously successful in the struggle against South African Apartheid. These new forms of activism tended to be far more modest in scope and claims (reliant as they often were and are on government and private foundation funding) but also advanced new imaginaries of global interconnectedness, albeit often with tacit or explicit undercurrents of Western supremacism.

While on the one hand neoliberalism represents a dangerous new plateau of corporate power, it also marks the emergence of the promise of “globalization” as a means to imagine human potential and community beyond the more limited confines of the nation – at least theoretically. While large sectors of the academy remained remarkably invulnerable to interest in and critical thinking about the imagination (let alone its radical manifestation) others found inspiration or at least cause for further inquiry in these theories of the imagination – so much so that ‘imagination’ was to become a key theme in the social sciences over the past 30 years as researchers sought to describe the creativity and agency of social actors in ways that didn’t, on the one hand, reduce people’s behaviour to their social conditioning or biological bases and, on the other, didn’t naively assume that people acted entirely on the basis of their own free will without any societal influence.
These conceptualizations of the imagination as a shared, collective, and political practice have arisen at the same time as critical theorists have sought to destabilize the individualist concept of the imagination. Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin⁴³, for instance, was to suggest that the imagination is “dialogic,” that it emerges not out of the purity of the individual soul but out of dialogues between people, ideas, texts and contexts. In other words, our imagination is never simply our own because it comes into being out of interactive social experience. When social life becomes too routinized, when social roles and institutions become too rigid, the dialogic imagination is sluggish and banal. For Bakhtin, this implies a politics of what he calls the “carnivalesque,” forms of culture and conviviality that court chaos and uncertainty, to break us out of routines and preconceived expectations.

From another angle, Benedict Anderson⁴⁴ was to famously pick up on the work of Marxist historians to suggest that all communities (especially large ones, like nation-states) are, “imagined” in the sense that such collectivities are brought constantly into being through various techniques (for example, nationalism and the cultivation of linguistic vernaculars) and technologies (for example, the print media or museums). For Anderson, the question of how people who have never met and may live hundreds or even thousands of kilometers apart can imagine themselves as belonging to a shared community of fate is key to understanding the power of nationalism, imperialism and the forms of global capitalism that they both facilitated and relied upon.

Similarly, the recent work of influential liberal theorist Charles Taylor⁴⁵ is part of a renewed scholarly interest in issues such as the imagination, hope, creativity, and possibility. While Taylor, in a rather predictably liberal mode, considers “theory” to be the possession of only an elect few intellectuals, he asserts that the “social imaginary” is broadly shared and understood (albeit implicitly) by all members of a society as a horizon of shared expectations. While undoubtedly problematic, Taylor importantly rejects the false dichotomy between ideas and material factors in the shaping of human action, arguing that “what we see in human history is ranges of human practices that are both at once, that is, material practices carried out by human beings in space and time, and very often coercively maintained, and at the same time, self-conceptions, modes of understanding.”⁴⁶ He offers that older paradigms of the social imagination, when they fail to accurately or functionally explain reality, give way to new social imaginaries. Taylor’s model highlights that politics is more than a matter of power and relies upon groups seeking to shift the social imagination.

On this note, in her compelling explorations of the eerily paired “dreamworlds” of U.S. and Soviet Cold War culture, cultural critic Susan Buck-Morss⁴⁷ has argued that rather than representing the other’s antithesis, the major political poles of the 20th Century were underscored by a shared utopian imaginary. Buck-Morss
characterizes the political imaginary as a “topographical concept,” a concrete visualized political field in which actors are positioned amidst both horizons of possibility and the actually existing power structures within which people live, desire, and dream. She highlights the fact that political regimes are grounded not merely in their broad promises of equality, justice, prosperity and freedom but also in the everyday lived reality of people’s sense of collectivity and possibility and the way these senses are expressed through material culture and especially private and public space. For instance, Buck-Morss is attentive to the way “dreamworlds” operated through things like public monuments, commodity advertising, domestic technologies, and public architecture, insisting that the political imagination is far from immaterial.

In this vein, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has called the imagination, not entirely without irony for our purposes here, a “constitutive feature of modern subjectivity.”48 But he’s also gone further, suggesting that as the imagination has broken out of the rarefied spaces within which it was once celebrated – in myth, art, and ritual – and become a part of the work done by many on a daily basis, it has become a “collective, social fact.”49 The consequence of this is that in this context the imagination’s common expression “can become the fuel for action.”50 Appadurai traces this possibility to mass media and mass migrations, both of which he sees as characteristic features of globalization and capable of cultivating “diasporic public spheres,” the first manifestations of a truly “postnational political order.”51 The relevance of this assertion for us here is not so much Appadurai’s analysis of globalizing forces as his conviction that the imagination, when expressed collectively, is a potentially world-changing force. For Appadurai, as globalization continues to destabilize older modes of social collectivity (from nations to religions, from tribes to castes) the possibilities and perils of new imaginaries are almost unlimited leading both to new struggles for justice and new reactionary movements.

6. Radicalizing the radical imagination: beyond individualism, beyond globalization

Yet while these theoretical treatments have challenged the individualism of the imagination, they have, in some unfortunate ways, inherited the Enlightenment fixation on the imagination as a single universal thing. Indeed, as Petra Rethmann warns us in her contribution to this special issue, we must question and distrust our own impulse to define the radical imagination and our desire to understand it as a single thing. She challenges us to employ the idea of the imagination to open up and revisit debates on the anti-capitalist left about the meaning of terms and ideas like representation, memory, utopia, failure, the future, militancy, and attitude.
Other authors have been insistent that we attend to the ways imagination manifests itself across different struggles and different communities. Robin D.G. Kelley, for instance, has illustrated the way that the black radical imagination has always been indelibly tied to community and to struggle, even when it has become associated with certain luminary political and artistic figures. For Kelley, understanding imagination as merely a realm of mental play does not reflect the transatlantic black experience of seeing the imagination as a means of building solidarity and charting possibilities beyond oppression and exploitation. Indeed, Kelley rightly points out the black radical imagination has not only been critical to the dialogic relations between black arts and organizing but has been pivotal to the history of the Western radical imagination more broadly, provoking and insisting white social movements (from communist parties to the student movements to feminists to environmentalists) broaden and revisit their visions of the past, present and future.

Similarly, as feminist theorists Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis have noted, theories like those of the Romantics but even those of Adorno, Bloch and Marcuse (and, in some ways, even Castoriadis) continue to posit the imagination as enthroned in the individual (male, white) mind. This approach not only rehashes the problematic mind/body dualism at the heart of patriarchal and imperialist projects, it also discounts the way our imaginations might look very different depending on where we stand in relation to social power relations. Our sense of what is possible and what is imaginable, they argue, is shaped by our privilege, our experience of exploitation and how we are intersected by vectors of oppression like racism, sexism, class, ableism, or citizenship status. Further, they note that the imagination is corporeal and embodied, that our imagination is not seated in the mind but involves our senses, feeling and the way we move our bodies in the world. Bodies that are marked, exploited or circumscribed, will imagine the world and their personal and political potentialities very differently than those that “pass” without notice, fear or exploitation in the world. For Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, this means that the politics of the imagination can’t just be about imagining universal, one-size-fits-all alternatives to the current order. It must be about working “transversally” to bridge our imaginations and create common imaginaries of the way the world might be. For Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, we might say that the radical imagination is an ever-unfinished process of solidarity.

In a similar vein, Randy Martin, in his contribution to this Special Issue, highlights the way structural, economic and political realities resonate in the body and, in particular, in the movement of the body. Beginning and ending his meditations with the crisis of finance and the way it reaches deep into everyday life, he suggests that dance (broadly conceived as the intentionality of movement in the world) offers us a new way to imagine a radical politics within and beyond
our moment of neoliberalism and risk that is based in the tactile, somatic and expressive reality of our shared existence.

From still another angle, post-humanist and feminist writers like Donna Haraway have problematized the human-centric notion of imagination, suggesting that our imaginations and our bodies are always already collaborations with human-made technology and the non-human, and that we cannot speak of the imagination except as it emerges from a whole web of relations to the non-human and more-than-human world. This resonates with theorist, critic, poet and novelist Larissa Lai’s intervention in this Special Issue as she asks us to imagine the imagination in a post-human register that acknowledges the way capitalist technology has already infiltrated the body and developed its own imaginaries. In her lyrical meditation she insists that, against the mantra “it’s all been done before” we pose the radical difference of the imagination against the claustrophobia of money’s empire over social life and collective possibility.

In their book The Native Creative Process, Okanagan writer Jeanette Armstrong and Métis/Blackfoot architect Douglas Cardinal, intimate that, from an indigenous perspective, all imagination and creativity is a collaboration between human beings, our community, our ancestors, future generations, other creatures, spiritual beings and the world itself. In a complementary fashion, Glen Coulthard, in his contribution to this Special Issue, highlights the way indigenous relations to land and place are at the core of an anti-colonial and anti-capitalist radical imagination. He characterizes this relationship as a deep and ontological form of ethics: a responsibility to a reciprocity with the world – the same reciprocity that is the condition of existence and life. This approach highlights “ethico-political norms, which stresses, among other things, the importance of sharing, egalitarianism, respecting the freedom and autonomy of both individuals and groups, and recognizing the obligations that one has not only to other people, but to the natural world as a whole.”

These sorts of approaches go a long way to destabilizing the legacy of the patriarchal, Western, Enlightenment conceptualizations of the imagination and the triumphant individualism that it both depends on and reinforces. Understanding imagination as always embodied and relational, and recognizing that the radical imagination is a space of encounter, learning and disruption takes us beyond vague calls for more “political consciousness” and allows us to critically explore the radical imagination – to take it and its possibilities and limitations seriously.

In this spirit, and in the midst of the material and symbolic wreckage wrought by capitalism, we find one example of the radical imagination to be particularly instructive.

Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish
Out of a decade of clandestine organizing and five centuries of resistance to genocide, colonialism, imperialism, exploitation, and neglect, on the first day of 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) rose up in arms in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, shattering the myth of the “end of history” and in many ways sparking what would become the alter-globalization movement. While the Zapatistas’ revolutionary trajectory emerged out of an interweaving of indigenous Mayan realities and traditions, insurgent Marxist worldviews, and the revolutionary tradition of Mexico “from below,” they were to pioneer a new way of imagining, articulating, and practicing radical politics. The Zapatistas opened a new horizon of the radical imagination by refusing to accept the false dichotomies of (post)modern politics. The Zapatistas have advanced a politics of national liberation while also working diligently to build transnational links with a diversity of others in struggle; they have elaborated an unapologetically bold vision of radical social transformation without offering a blueprint or singular destination for it or privileging a specific site or actor as the agent of revolutionary change; they have built and defended autonomy in their rebel territory in the far southeast of Mexico while seeking to foment revolution on a transnational scale. Indeed, the power of Zapatismo, and the reason it has enjoyed such global success as an inspiration and provocatio to the radical imagination against the capitalist “end of history” is that it authentically embodied an effort to reclaim both the stolen past and the foreclosed future, to imagine both locally and globally. Not merely another Maoist or Guevarist mission in the jungle, Zapatismo at once advanced the struggle of “place” against the “placeless” terror of global capital and the struggle of global solidarity against the individualization and isolation of neoliberal capitalist rule.

Neither “traditional” nor “modern” in its orientation, Zapatismo as political imagination and practice has troubled existing power structures and visions of revolution without offering a singular vision of the way forward. It has drawn a variety of disparate threads together including – to name only a few - Mexican revolutionary history, urban guerrilla struggles, radical and Marxist-inspired political-economic analysis, Liberation theology, and the experience of migrant Indigenous communities experimenting with new forms of organization and decision-making while defending themselves against predatory landowners. The Zapatistas have described their approach to radical social transformation as caminar preguntando – to walk questioning – in an explicit recognition of the work of elaborating a new politics grounded in ongoing critical reflection, the importance of listening as well as speaking, and the construction of horizontal dialogic linkages amongst a multiplicity of subjects in struggle. While its political effects within Mexico have not been inconsiderable, including facilitating the end to the longest-running dictatorship in the world and consolidating autonomous territory in rebellion in Chiapas, the Zapatistas also made a profound mark upon the alter-globalization/global anti-capitalist movement.

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Conveyed through direct encounter, communiqué, documentary film, activist report back, various written accounts, and a plethora of other media, Zapatismo’s radical imagination has altered the terrain of radical political possibility on a transnational scale. Speaking in a language of metaphor, myth, allegory, and poetry as often as clever, cutting, bawdy, and satirical political commentary, and serving as a catalyst for a new vision of transnational anti-capitalist and radically democratic communication and coordination in pursuit not of conquering the world but of making a world capable of holding many worlds, the Zapatistas have been one of the most unabashed and most successful movements in recent decades to demonstrate the socio-political force of the radical imagination.56

As Justin Paulson argues in his contribution to this Special Issue, the radical imagination is to a certain extent dependent on the depth of the integration of capitalism into lived reality. Struggles like those of the Zapatistas and other peasant and indigenous groups can draw on and radicalize memories and practices of community and culture outside of a capitalist frame. But he suggests that, in general in the global North, history and social intercourse are so overburdened by the circuits of capitalist accumulation that radical imagination is far harder to cultivate. For Paulson, the ability to “negate” lived reality, to refuse the capitalist imaginary of what is valuable, who is worthwhile and what is “good,” demands we cultivate the radical imagination between movements.

Similarly, Judy Rebick, in her contribution, meditates on the indigenous and campesino movements in Bolivia and government of Evo Morales and his MAS party. For Rebick, key to the radical imagination is being challenged from the Global South, from movements and struggles that have not forgotten the pre-capitalist and pre-colonial past. Particularly, she highlights the Cochabamba Declaration and anti-capitalist/colonialist response to climate (in)justice. With these inspirations in mind Rebick encourages those in the global North to move beyond a politics that satisfies itself with (either) a bloodless and pedantic “exposure of reality” and/or an unproductive moralizing to towards an approach based on the promise of common values.

7. The fate of the imagination in an age of “cognitive capitalism”

While the Zapatistas represent a bright point in the radical imagination in an age of neoliberalism, the broader politics of the imagination witnessed another sort of transformation in the global North. For one, the imagination went from a relatively distasteful and distrusted term to a mainstream concept. Since the 1970s, for example, encouraging children’s imagination has become an unquestionable good in schooling, which could not have been said of education prior to that time. We are, today, constantly exhorted in self-help books and in advertising to imagine as an antidote to social dislocation and
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anomie. But these shifts occurred apace with a general social transformation as capitalism evolved to meet, quash, redirect and co-opt the struggles of the ‘60s and ‘70s. Neoliberalism, post-Fordism or globalization, by whatever name, marks a period over the last 30-40 years that has witnessed a massive expansion of the market into everyday life, the global redistribution of the production of commodities and a wholesale rise in corporate and financial power. So too has it witnessed terrifying new advances in the repressive power of the state and its punitive institutions at the expense of social welfare programs and forms of collective wealth and insurance. The result has been the rise of virulent, consumerist and depoliticizing individualism spurred by increasingly isolated and community-starved lifestyles and the transformation of social cooperation into ever more fragmented, “flexibilized” and precarious work.

Within this shift, imagination has gone from a shorthand for liberation and possibility to a rhetoric of economic and personal restructuring for the new economy. On the one hand we now have the vaunted “creative class” who are held up as the solution to corporate and governmental crises and whose mere presence is supposed to revivify urban areas and be the midwife of the new economy. In this economy, as Angela McRobbie points out, we are told that “everyone is creative” and we ought to be “free” of the fetters of societal obligations; artists, no longer social reprobates, have become the iconic “pioneers” of this brave new world. Under the sign of unleashing the imagination we are encouraged to “liberate” ourselves from an understanding of work as a lifelong career (characterized by stability, hierarchy and firm bonds) and leap gleefully into the entropy of the market, cultivating and hawking a portfolio of skills for part-time, temporary contracts that allow us maximal personal freedom and earn us “intangible” rewards like “personal satisfaction” and “professional recognition.” Neoliberal ideology holds that the market is the best system for harnessing the power of the imagination for social good: only under the free market will “useful” imagination be encouraged and rewarded.

For instance, in their contribution to this Special Issue, Phanuel Antwi and Amber Dean illustrate the way this neoliberal notion of the imagination is employed to “transform” the post-industrial landscape of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada towards an individualized (and middle-class) notion of a “creative” city. They highlight the stakes and players in “imagining” a city and how to “fix” its problems, and the way the urban imaginary is a site of struggle over class and belonging.

While emergent discourses of creativity and creative cities promise a brand new world of liberated, fun and rewarding employment, the reality is that the vast majority of work has become even less imaginative even as it has become even more precarious. The “global sweatshop” has seen the manufacture of commodities fragmented and globalized, with individual workers in “emerging economies” performing mind-numbing de-skilled piecework that affords virtually
no imaginative element. Within the growing service sector, labour has become even more routinized, fragmented and deskillled with even human emotions and reactions scripted to conform to a monolithic “corporate culture.”62 Within the “knowledge economy,” personal freedom and imagination are rarely valued and most workers feel themselves having to conform to an ever tighter, if less tangible set of “invisible” rules in order to advance in an ever more tangible if unnamed hierarchy.63 And while pundits proclaim the end of industrial and agricultural toil, the reality is that these have been moved “offshore” where wages are lower, labour and environmental laws laxer, and corporate profits higher. Flexibility and creativity for economic elites has meant record profits as they divest themselves of the meager responsibilities they once bore towards workers while effectively “externaizing” to these very same workers the responsibility for innovation, self-organization, and production. For workers, flexibility and creativity as hallmarks of this new regime of capitalism have meant more insecurity, more precarity, and more exploitation.64

Ironically though, today capitalism offers more opportunities for imagination than ever before. In the age of the “prosumer” and the internet we are given more and more tools and opportunities to remix and customize, to enter into (and leave) sub-cultures, and to express our individuality, so long as we do so in the “vernacular” of the market.65 That is, so long as we continue to make or spend money. There is even room under our present capitalist order for some activities to exist largely outside the market (religion, schooling, self-marginalizing activism, urban gardening) so long as it remains insulated and does not threaten the overall global order.66 In fact, these non-market activities are held out as the “reward” for working and buying through the rest of our lives.

Ironically, many of the struggles for emancipation and social justice that characterized the 20th century have now become fodder for the restructuring of the capitalist economy. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello67 have illustrated in their study of The New Spirit of Capitalism, many of the cultural and systemic critiques of capitalism from the 1960s and ’70s have been co-opted and integrated into a new capitalist paradigm that highlights personal flexibility (rather than institutional rigidity), networks (as opposed to hierarchies) and personal expression of limited creativity. Similarly, Julie Dowsett, in her contribution to this Special Issue, details the appropriation of feminist discourse by the iconic “Dove [soap] campaign for real beauty” over the past decade. She makes clear that Unilever’s (Dove’s parent transnational corporation) minimal efforts to ameliorate the misogyny of the beauty industry is not only hypocritical (they also sell other products that do use highly sexist advertising, as well as an infamous yet extremely popular skin-whitening cream in Asia) it also fails to challenge the broader systemic realities of gendered inequality under capitalism and diminish real radical feminist efforts to do so.
So while contemporary capitalism may cynically solicit our imaginations at every turn, what cannot be imagined, however, is an end to the economic system as we know it. As Frederic Jameson documents, today the grip of capitalism on our imagination is so strong that our images of the future are increasingly apocalyptic: we can imagine no other escape from the endless present of neoliberalism except calamity and catastrophe, so ingrained in our thinking is the world of commodities and commodified social relations.  

But as mentioned above, today the imagination has become ever more central to emerging economic and political formations. This shift has been charted by a group of Marxist thinkers who emerged out of the raucous and revolutionary struggles of Italy in the 1970s, struggles that saw the use of tactics like hostage-taking and assassination, met by the state in the form of political murders, mass incarceration, and preventative detention. The intellectuals of the Autonomist or Oparaismo (Workerist) movement were to write from exile or prison over the next thirty years, charting a shift in the “composition” of capitalism as countries like Italy shifted from a post-war manufacturing economy to a so-called “knowledge economy” – from material to immaterial labour. Autonomists see this shift as one where, thanks to the computer, transportation, and communications revolutions that have accompanied globalization, capitalism is revolutionizing itself. The radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s represented a monumental threat to global capitalism in that they demanded not only a bigger piece of the economic pie but a whole new society, one that offered workers and others real solidarity, autonomy, democracy, fulfillment, and creativity.

In response to this and to the no-longer-profitable “class compromise” of the New Deal in the US and similar social democratic economic measures elsewhere, capitalism mutated sending manufacturing offshore, smashing mainstream organized labour, and relying increasingly on the network form and “just-in-time” production protocols to keep profits high and costs as low as possible. In order to facilitate this new cycle of accumulation, as a system capitalism also began to rely more heavily on what Autonomists call “cognitive” or “immaterial” labour or the labour of people to create information, community and commercial networks. In response to demands for autonomy, creativity and community, capitalism began to offer more and more targeted and agent-driven commodities, particularly in the form of new technologies like computers, better (cheaper) transportation and communication infrastructure. It also took the opportunity to find new ways of fragmenting work, offering precarious, temporary, part-time employment as “liberation” from routine and hierarchy. 

For Autonomists, capitalism today is not merely interested in harvesting and controlling the labour-time of workers in order to extract surplus value. Rather, capitalism has dissolved into society and social relationships themselves and

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seeks to shape the way people make community, networks, and even their own “subjectivity” or personhood – it has become properly “biopolitical.” From this perspective, imagination becomes a key battleground over what these theorists term “the general intellect” – the sort of baseline of social knowledges, competencies and understandings that allow us to communicate and work together. Under this new moment of capitalism we are taught to understand ourselves as self-contained economic units, going about our daily lives like mini-corporations, maximizing our personal gains and ignoring any calls to social responsibility or solidarity. Under global “cognitive capitalism” or what luminary Autonomists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call Empire (not to be mistaken for an older moment of imperialism), the free market must be allowed to organize the cooperation and the possibilities of this “multitude” of fragmented human actors.71

For the Autonomists, the challenge today is reimagining how we might combine as people and as communities, how we might use today’s new communication technologies and new situations to cooperate otherwise, in ways that go beyond capitalism and chart near futures. This attempt to go beyond capitalism, in some sense, by going through it is by no means assured. It is woven through with ambivalences, dangers, and contradictions. As Autonomist theorist Paolo Virno argues, rather than resulting in either exclusively liberatory or exploitative outcomes, capitalism’s transformation has allowed for its survival in the face of profound challenges to it while simultaneously opening new paths for resistance and alternative-building. Virno names this seemingly paradoxical situation the “communism of capital” as capitalism has increasingly come to rely on the social commons of the general intellect for its innovative, organizational, and productive processes.72 The consequence of all of this is that even as capitalist globalization accelerates dynamics of exploitation, commodification, enclosure, and destruction the possibilities for the articulation and emergence of new forms, terrains, and subjectivities of and in struggle similarly accelerate. Again, there is nothing inherently or automatically liberatory about this situation, it is as fraught with risk as it is with possibility, but it remains fundamentally ambivalent, ambiguous, and – most importantly – open to radical alternatives. Its outcome will undoubtedly depend upon the ends to which the imagination, so necessarily and powerfully active within it, will be directed. Importantly, for the Autonomists, this act of the imagination is not merely mental, it is also material. We must imagine with our feet or, in the idiom of the Zapatistas, think while we walk. Creating anti-capitalist alternatives, new modes of being and working together beyond the profit motive, in the present is a form of “exodus” from Empire: not so much an explosive revolution but an abandonment of exploitation.

In this Special Issue, Franco Birardi, a renowned Autonomist activist and cultural critic, suggests that we can barely imagine liberation anymore, that the
imagination is everywhere “blackmailed” by capital. But his optimism lies in that which he cannot imagine, those forms of anti-capitalist fellow-feeling and antagonism that, because of his own location and the limits of his own experience, he cannot even predict. Meanwhile, he suggests that radical politics should take up an ethic of “therapy,” helping people survive and overcome the colonization of the imagination and the social, psychological and spiritual wounds of existing in a society saturated with a value system that will sacrifice absolutely everything in the name of profit.

Michael Truscello, in his feature-length article for this collection, offers a thoughtful example of the possibilities and pitfalls of resistance in the digital economy under cognitive capitalism in his treatment of Free and Open Source software development. He argues that these techniques, which seek to develop the primordial substance of digital reality – software- outside of, beyond, or against corporate monopoly do offer forms of resistance to the dominant “proprietary” model of digital creation, they are not in and of themselves sufficient to overcome capital’s domination of this field. Nor do they live up to the claims of media theorists and pundits who lionize the “gift economy” of FOSS development as an example of the creative and egalitarian spaces that can be forged within cognitive capitalism. Indeed, Truscello argues that a true ethos of the gift implies a radical decentring of the competitive, self-contained subject and, hence, an anti-capitalist imaginary.

Within the context of the ever-deeper integration of capital into social life, subjectivity, community and the imagination, we have seen the rise, recently, of calls for more radical imagination and suggestions that even imagining different worlds is, today, a radical act against the closure of history. Many of these assembled (or were pigeon-holed) under the banner of the alter- or anti-globalization movement or “global justice movement” which saw new forms of protest, alliances and movement strategy to confront corporate rule.73 As Rachel Strasinger reports in this Special Issue, this loose federation of movements stress radical process (in addition to ultimate objectives), the cultivation of non-hierarchical alliances and affinities (instead of unified and homogeneous ideological orientations), and the integration of a politics of class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality and social justice (as opposed to privileging a single axis of oppression).

The World Social Forum, for instance, was almost immediately heralded as the unleashing of the imagination for global justice and greete with intense optimism, especially by the Northern Left. But the failure of the WSF to manifest the mass movements against global capitalism we recognize as necessary has put the value of “talking politics” and the radical imagination into question. Similarly, as Terry Maley notes in his contribution to this Special Issue, the politics of participatory budgets, while initially spurring hope for new forms of grassroots

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democracy, have encountered significant institutional and procedural problems, all too often succumbing to an unimaginative and professionalized economism, rather than a broad, consultative and empowering process of radical imagination.

At the same time, we have witnessed over the past ten years a terrifying rise in reactionary imaginations: new ethnic nationalisms, fundamentalisms and militarisms that demand justice and decry the effects of global neoliberal capitalism (the breakdown of faith, community, nation, older styles of patriarchy) but do so in despicable ways and towards despicable ends. Yet an honest look at the landscape of the radical imagination today cannot avoid the success of Al Qaida, the Tea Party, and new right-wing xenophobes in capturing the imagination of and radicalizing millions of disaffected people.

For Patrick Reinsborough, what the right has mobilized and the anti-capitalist left has forgotten is the power of stories. In his contribution to this Special Issue he suggests that cultivating the radical imagination in the face of the ongoing “slow-motion apocalypse” of ecologically- and socially-destructive capitalism is a matter of building collective and shared narratives of possibility and resistance. For Reinsborough, narratives of resistance emerge from shared struggle, but the anti-capitalist left needs to develop better techniques for “winning the battle of the story” by which people explain how the present came to be and what can be done about it. He suggests several new tendencies and initiatives that seek to do just this.

8. What is the radical imagination: the Special Issue

While we have offered here a relatively Eurocentric and academic delineation of theories of the radical imagination it is important to note that theorizing the imagination is itself an imaginative act, and one not exclusive to authors and academics. Social movements must, by necessity, theorize the imagination in their efforts to provoke, inspire and activate social change. These theorizations take many forms. Sometimes they are explicit and concrete discussions about strategy and vision within and between movements. More often than not they are unspoken assumptions about how people’s political imaginations function. For instance, many insurrectionist tactics are based, in part, on the assumption that radical direct action against institutions of social oppression and exploitation will be inspiring to onlookers and encourage them to see those institutions, which they once imagines as permanent and monolithic, as vulnerable and possible to destroy. Many social democratic movements assume that the problem is that average citizens lack the proper information to make informed democratic decisions, which encourages strategies that highlight public education campaigns. In other words, our theorizations of the imagination lead directly to what sorts of strategies, organizations and tactics
we consider effective. But unfortunately, movements rarely take the time to talk about the imagination explicitly. This Special Issue is an invitation for us to open up the question.

Despite this deep and rich history of struggles and theories of the radical imagination when we hear the term it tends to be in vague, generally celebratory ways. This Special Issue is dedicated to helping us complicate, deepen and radicalize our conception of what the radical imagination might be. To this end, we have brought together a critical and diverse group of thinkers to offer their perspectives. We ask you to read this collection as a dossier of possibilities: you will not find a singular answer to the question that brings these pieces together, only possibilities and provocations to think differently about what we think we know.

Yes, reimagining the imagination is a radical act, but like all radical acts, especially the more cerebral and theoretical, it is not enough. We, the editors, are of the belief that the radical imagination is no one thing, that it doesn’t exist “out there” for us to find, identify, categorize, sort, and enumerate its qualities, features, causes or effects. We cannot trap it in a shadowbox and dissect it to divine its inner workings. The radical imagination emerges out of radical practices, ways of living otherwise, of cooperating differently, that reject, strain against, or seek to escape from the capitalist, racist, patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial, imperial, militaristic, and fundamentalist forms of oppression that undergird our lives. These radical practices are happening everywhere, all the time, in small ways and big ways, as our love, our hope, our solidarity, our critical thinking, our optimism, our skepticism, our anger and our communities fight against the powers that be. Reading and thinking can be such an act, so can teaching and protest marches and spiritual awakenings and family and squats and communes. But none alone will ever be enough to overcome the problems we now face as the earth bleeds from the hole we cut in the ocean floor, as the warming atmosphere releases new and more ferocious storms, floods and droughts on the world’s poorest, and as the forces of profit and repression amass arsenals of violence and surveillance to put down those unhappy with this state of affairs.

This Special Issue, then, hopes to put on display some radical ways of reimagining the radical imagination. But it also hopes to be a modest example of a venue where these reimaginings weave themselves together (which doesn’t mean they all agree!) and one that resonates, in some small way, with the future we are going to create together.
Endnotes

1 Max Haiven is a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. His research focuses on the fate of the imagination under globalization. His work on financialization and financial imaginaries is forthcoming in Social Text and Cultural Logic. His work on the radical imagination has been published in The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies and is forthcoming in Cultural Critique. He is currently working on a book about the racialization of creative labour and another about the intersections and tensions between financial and social value.

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13 Ibid., Marx.


16 Ibid., Federici.


25 For instance, the famous “Boston Tea Party” that triggered the American War of Independence saw the perpetrators of the raid dress as stereotypical indians (for reasons that are still not entirely clear). Subsequently, the new American government was to appropriate the spirit and, some would argue, the letter of the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace for their constitution… while at the exact same time destroying Haudenosaunee villages in upstate New York and allowing settlers to rape, murder and destroy indigenous peoples and cultures with utter impunity as a form of “economic development.” See Ibid., Hall.


29 Guevara.
34 See Katsiaficas; Plant; Ross.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., Plant.
40 For iconic example, see Fukuyama, Francis. 1993. The End of History and the Last Man. New York: Perennial.
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For a cogent example, see Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig de Peuter. Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games. Minneapolis, MN: University Minnesota Press, 2009.


Ibid., Boltanski and Chiapello,


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