A few notes on the question, what is radical imagination?

Petra Rethmann

Abstract

This piece tackles the question of what constitutes the radical imagination today? In arguing that there exists no true-for-all, factual, and spot-on answer to this question, it contends that we need to pay attention to notions and critiques of political failure, as well as possibility, potentiality, and the future.

When the editors first put the question of what constitutes the radical imagination today to me, I must confess that I had no consistent answer. In a way, I still don’t. What first occurred to me, I confess, was what I would call here the “usual suspects”: today’s new social movements, especially those of a more radical brand than others. But this entry left to me something to be desired: a less divisive approach between anarchist and some Marxist movements, as – in contrast to much lip-service to the contrary – is frequently the case; a more attentive approach to sexuality and gender; and, as opposed to a focus on the newness of the present moment, a rethinking of history with a view to the registers of potentiality and possibility. None of this is to say that I consider the forms of action suggested in a great variety of social and radical organizing today ineffective, redundant, or superfluous. On the contrary: I consider them extremely important to keep radical social practices and imaginations alive. Thus, what I would like to do here is simply point to a few considerations and facets that emerged while thinking further about the question. What you will find here is no coherent thesis, agenda, program. The comments offered are necessarily incomplete and diverse.

1. Radical Imaginations

Before beginning to map possible answers to the question what, today, could form the radical imagination, I would actually like to start with an observation. Basically, the problem I have with the question of what, today, could form the radical imagination is that it turns on a presupposition which seems to me problematic: namely that – somewhere out there – there may exist a true-for-all, factual, and spot-on conception of radicality, radical political imagination and conceivably even radical practice. As far as “the radical” or even “the political" is concerned, any single-shot, single-function definition of it is worse than

misleading. It can be paralyzing. Most of us are rather fragmented beings, after all, living in a host of separate reality compartments simultaneously. In each of these compartments a certain kind of politics is necessary and possible.

So, the “metaphysical question”: what is radical imagination? – the seizure of power? taking to the streets? organizing? talking socialism? resisting hierarchy and authority? demonstrating for disarmament? trying to save your neighborhood? fighting city hall? – this question seems worthwhile asking only when it leads to an enumeration of possible options, and not when it lures one into the mirage of one single great strategic idea.

As an aside: I do think that it is worthwhile asking from where the mirage of the great single-function political line or strategy draws its power. And one possible answer, I suggest (particularly for those who work in the academy), is that this mirage stems from an impatience with the mediated, with the long term; that it gets its power from the desire – quite in step with corporate society and thinking – to show immediate results: to feel some ego satisfaction, to make the tangible mark right now. That is a wonderful aspiration, but I am not sure that it can lead to much more than ephemeral thought and action.

2. Alliances and Divisions

The tendency to think “the radical” or “the political” univocally then reproduces itself elsewhere – as, for example, in the tiresome discussion of theory versus practice, socialism versus anarchism, etc. Somebody like David Graeber has argued that the divide between theory and practice has never been more palpable than today, and to some degree I agree with that statement. Yet what seems interesting to me here is not to come down on one side or the other of the debate (although there is much to be said for “a position,” and I am not arguing here for a sort of grab bag of political ideas), or to lament the apparent incommensurability of theory and practice, but rather to think about other terms that can be introduced into these debates to keep political possibilities open. Some suggestions have already been made: multitude, new forms of collectivism, etc.

There is then, of course, also always the practical political issue of micropolitics and alliance politics on the left, the problem of the relationship by difference between a host of groups organized around radically different slogans, strategies, and ideas – differences which cannot be subsumed under any unified political line. And yet: it seems important to me – every now and then – to seek a conjunction of energies, energies that are more often than not palpably related in spirit to each other.
3. Mediation and Representation

A brief note on the term mediation, a term that emerged in what I designated as point (and not “thesis”) one. It seems to me that a great deal of political organizing gets into this sticky problem of representation, in its multiple sense – not just (to make a rather scholastic argument) this whole distinction between presentation (Vorstellung) and representation (Darstellung), but also in the other sense – political representation (vertreten). In the more radical debates of which I am aware, this issue is often remarked upon in relation to the parliamentary system or “representational democracy”, and the way in which much of it is problematic. While I agree with the critique and the strategy, I do think that the issue exceeds the critical review of liberal or even social-democratic positions. For example, much of the literature on new social movements that I have recently read – especially and particularly when it is written by a single author– runs into the same problem: that of voice, of the one who speak for the many. I am saying this to point out how hard it seems to get away from a mediation of some kind, even if that’s a word almost nobody wants to use anymore.

Incidentally, I do think that the question of mediation is also linked to the question of single authorship – and, by extension, the aesthetic tradition of the auteur. There do exist approaches to address this issue from what I consider to be a more radical perspective: collective authorship, for example. The Wu Ming collective in Italy comes to mind. There exist similar approaches in anthropology, for example the work of Julie Cruikshank, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned. I am certain that a variety of other examples can be found. Whatever one may think about these examples, they certainly raise the crucial question of whether there can exist a politics without a logic of political representation.

4. Radical Imaginations: Where?

In the last few years it has been said, in a variety of contexts, that new and radical innovations in forms of organizing and in the political will emerge out of the global South. It is certainly the case that a great deal of contemporary discussions are inspired by the Zapatistas and not, let’s say, the ideas of the social and radical revolutionaries of the 1920s, many of whom were also Marxists. This emergence, of course, raises questions about the potentials and problems of critique, as well as one’s own position within them, perhaps more for Western activists than for others. There is, for example, the problem of the residual that emerges in some (Western-style) ideas and writings, where, for example, more tradition-oriented, peasant and indigenous modes of production have become the key source of inspiration. I do understand this appreciation, but it seems to me that it has also become harder for us to remove ourselves mentally or physically from our own time of capitalism (it has certainly become harder to go to the countryside and start a commune. Or has it? I am not quite
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sure.). At the same time, I think, that notions of the utopian need to be kept open if new energies and possibilities are to emerge.

In my own case, much of my thinking about possibilities does not emerge out of the global South but out of the Russian and post-Soviet cultural and political context, which today is rather neglected. Although it has been argued that the notion of the global South comprises most of the world’s countries, except for those situated in Western Europe and North America, it is also the case that only very few pay attention to what’s currently happening in Russia. Perhaps some of this is related to the fact that the political atrocities of Stalinism and the Gulag have discredited the Soviet experiment, and that the fall of communism in 1989 has spawned a shaming of Marxism in all possible forms. Whatever may be the case, it is certainly true that new and exciting movements are also emerging in that part of the world. And I do think that a truly “global” or internationalist perspective would have to include and pay attention to the energies and projects situated there, to forge entirely new networks.

5. Utopia and History

We need to provide a vision of history. There is currently much talk about the end of history, and I think that when we talk about the end of history what we are also talking about is the difficulty many people have in imagining another social system beyond this one. The utopian vision of things no longer works, but this does not mean that we should debunk the term. By utopia here I do not mean a totalizing model of a world to come or a secret blueprint somewhere to show what this world might look like, but a proper effort to debate alternative forms of life. This is being done, it seems, among feminists or in environmental and anarchist movements, rather than Marxist thought. Definitively after the fall of Soviet or “actually existing socialism,” but surely also before (just think of Hungary 1956, Prague 1968, the Gulag, and the events that unfolded in Cambodia and Vietnam), there has been an excessive nervousness in Marxism about this sort of discussion. If the term “utopian,” then, is misleading, let’s replace it with something else.

6. Rethinking Failure

A pervasive cynicism at work today claims that any attempt at radical or militant projects or resistance is futile: it has all been “done before,” and it will get you nowhere. History, they say, has taught us that such attempts can and do result only in failure. We need to rethink the notion of failure to examine the unrealized visions of radical politics, including anti-colonial and militant projects, as well as the sites where these unrealized visions continue to assert their power. This may actually be one of the reasons why Walter Benjamin’s statement even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins is so often quoted today.
The aim of such an exercise – rethinking failure – is not to revive dead voices of the past but to trace the continuing resonances of the rebellions and dreams that drove them. Instead of reading Benjamin’s statement as one exclusively concerned with history (or understanding Benjamin as a philosopher whose work defies systematization but circles around questions of temporality, memory, history, and the relationship between oppression and cultural production), we may also read it as a statement concerned with possibility, moved by a spirit of rebellion against history as the graveyard of possibility and the museum of failure. What survives many anti-colonial movements, for example, is an imagined but as yet unrealized future that continues to have political force – not merely memories of fallen heroes or of some primordial past.

7. Radical Historical Method

The possibilities for such reexaminations are deeply connected to the questions we ask about history and historiography. For example, frequently comments about movements’ or radical visions’ failures are made “after the fact.” But that is not truth, just a way of framing history. Part of what is needed are accounts that do not simply chronicle a process but denote relationships that people have to time. That is, we should take Benjamin’s statement quoted above not only as an important warning but also as a statement on historical method. It is this duality that is crucial for understanding how “the dead” (without trying to sound too necromantic) ask us, in Benjamin’s sense, to imagine the past as incomplete and time as multiple and recursive. Benjamin’s notion of Jetztzeit – the pregnant “time of the now” that is the antithesis to what Benjamin famously called “homogenous, empty time,” is instructive both for its sense of the historical potential of unrealized hopes in the past and for its relevance to the idea of tracing radical afterlives as an interpretive practice of radical imagination.

8. Possibilities I

As far as the radical imagination is concerned, I also tend to side with Ernst Bloch, Benjamin’s friend and rival. Like Benjamin, Bloch was concerned with the potential of the incomplete, the unfinished and the unrealized - what he calls utopian surplus - an effort of the imagination without which political action seems to me impossible. Bloch insists on the possibilities of an open, undetermined “real future:” he writes about the role of art and literature in confronting alienation and anticipating the new. Together, Benjamin and Bloch can help us to confront the knife edge of utopian thinking, attending to its openness toward the new and mindfulness of the unfinished, as well as to the devastations of its disappointments and the losses that it has also sought to justify.

Petra Rethmann
9. Possibilities II

Bloch’s notion of a “real future,” I think, is particularly important in teasing out the hidden possibilities of radical imaginations. For example, I am currently working on a project tentatively (and at the moment rather un-inspiringly) entitled *Radical Militancy in Germany, 1975-1995: History, Failure, Potentiality*. In writing about militant and autonomous projects and movements – including radical journalism and film – I actively work against teleological assumptions of militancy’s inevitable failures. Looking at radical practices retrospectively, while holding a sense of inevitability in abeyance – either inevitable devastation or (as some believed at certain moments) inevitable success – I seek to recover modes of radical imagining that could (or can?) help to transform putatively devastating histories of failure into inspiring accounts of possible change.

10. Attitude

It’s not just a question of analysis but also of attitude. It has been said, for example, that all the North American left can hope for right now is to support movements in the global South. But no matter how sterile our world has become, there are all kinds of places in which interesting tendencies are starting up: not only the movements of the global South but also literary experiments and experiments in living, all kinds of exciting artistic developments. These are interesting tendencies in spite of cultural homogenization and commodification. If we want, this can be an exciting time.
1 Dr. Petra Rethmann is Associate professor of Anthropology at McMaster University in Canada, a faculty member in the Cultural Studies & Critical Theory program, and a member of the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition. She writes and teaches on the relationship between history, memory, and politics, as well as on aesthetics, art, political possibility, potentially, and imagination. Currently she is working on two book-length projects. The first one examines the cultural politics of left-wing collectives and movements that emerged in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s (titled, Radical Militancy in Germany, 1975-1995: History, Failure, Potentiality). The second project involves a critical interrogation of museal politics around the notion of “revolution,” analyzed through sites in Russia, South Africa, and Germany. She is the author of Tundra Passages (2001), co-editor of Globality: Frictions and Connections (2010), and the author of numerous articles that have appeared in edited volumes and in journals such as American Anthropologist, American Ethnologist, Anthropologica, Cultural Critique, and Anthropologie et Société. She is also the recipient of a three-year research grant entitled “Return to the Future: the Collective and Political Afterlife of the Soviet Union,” and in the process of preparing a conference on the politics of documentary photography and film.