

The Uneven Development of Radical Imagination

Justin Paulson¹

Abstract

Imagination is rooted in experience, and is thus born in difference and unevenness.

The relationship of imagination to social change is, at first glance, a straightforward one: imagination precedes change, at least change that's deliberate. You can't create something you can't conceive of, at least not deliberately. But what leads to that conception in the first place? Is the world made up of imaginative geniuses waiting to make their marks (as some of us learned in grammar school)? Or are there conditions and contexts that make it easier or more difficult to think in ways that are radically new?

Imagination begins in experience; it is here that the conditions of possibility are shaped and determined. But this is not a mechanistic determination, and it cannot be complete: if imagination were wholly shaped by experience, we'd of course be little more than automatons, drones going about our daily work. All literature, culture, and art would probably look like *Second Life* or other equally-dreadful online worlds in which all the possibilities of virtual reality are mustered to simply clone the world in which we already live (capitalism, bad fashion, and all). Clearly imagination is much broader than experience. But it begins here. And because our experiences of the world are different, it begins in difference: different social relations, different histories, different experiences of race, gender and sexuality, of identity and belonging. And thus imagination begins in unevenness.

If imagination begins with experience, *unradical* imagination never leaves it: when it acts on the world, it changes it, but only into something already recognizable. We can think of this as the imagination of liberalism: whether as a "natural" governing party, change that's easy to believe in, or liberal economics. It's *not* unimaginative; it's just not radically imaginative.

And this is an important caveat; it would be wrong to suggest that capital is

antagonistic to imagination as such. Capital is, rather, among the most imaginative and creative forms of social organization the world has seen. But it tries to pull all imagination into its orbit. Imagination, like any other kind of thought, becomes geared toward new regimes of efficiency, market innovations (whether shiny new things at the mall or complex financial derivatives), and more creative forms of exploitation, rather than better forms of social life. There are myriad examples, from literature to film, from graphic novels to video games, that are splendidly imaginative, but do not stray from the confines of existing social relations.ⁱⁱ There is nearly an unlimited freedom to imagine whatever you want, so long as you don't imagine a different foundation for our relationships with each other. When we conjure up something new, it's usually chained to the logic of capital, as experience of course would dictate.

By contrast, *radical* imagination *negates* experience, in whole or in part – which is to say, it negates the necessity of experience, and suggests as possible that which feels at some level inconceivable. It has to rupture the barrier of positivism, the artificial walls that bound what is and is not "realistic."

But our experience of capital, and specifically our experience of capital as normal, determines whether and how much of this negation is possible. Even when imagination bursts through that barrier, in art, music, literature, or the like, experience works to contain it again -- so that whenever we find it possible to imagine, for example, a socialist future, common sense reminds us 'it's just not realistic', and we lower our sights.

When we talk about the ways in which our daily and repeated involvement with capitalist social relations affect our ability to "think outside the box," to think negatively about the existing world, we're talking about a kind of reification. The term itself isn't crucial -- you can call it whatever you want -- but understanding the process is important: we don't think in capitalist ways because we've been duped or because we suffer from false consciousness, but because our daily routines, everything we encounter that sparks thought, is steeped in capitalist social relations. And the extent of reification isn't fixed; rather, it varies according to such factors as the length of time capital has been the dominant structuring force in a particular region, the actual level of economic stability or crisis, and the persistence of any traditional or residual, non-capitalist, social forms. All else being equal (to borrow a phrase from the economists), radical imagination is easier to form, easier to cultivate, easier to translate into policy, in contexts in which reification is weak, and it's much more difficult when and where the reification of capital is strongest.

Justin Paulson, "The Uneven Development of Radical Imagination," *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2010, pp. 33-38.

Social movements in the global North, on the whole, suffer from an imagination deficit as well as an organizational deficit. Mass movements in major capitalist centres, and where capitalism developed “organically,” have tended toward social democracy: reform of the system often seems like a real possibility, but revolutionary transformation typically appears impossible. Every socialist or anarchist has heard the phrase “well, it’s a nice idea, maybe someday—but it won’t happen in our lifetime.”

And this leaves us in a situation in which, faced with the biggest financial crisis in eighty years, in which the banks were so starkly exposed as operating contrary to the interests of most of the people (and even of the capitalist class which they serve), we’re left to ask: where is the imagination? Reification weakens during such times of crisis, as our experiences of capital become more dissonant; but just because a door is opened for imagination doesn’t mean we’ll automatically walk through it. At the policy level, the so-called “smartest guys in the room” don’t have any imagination at all: they are so steeped in orthodoxy that even nationalizing the banks (neither radical nor particularly imaginative at this point) was never even on the table. And the social movements in the US and Canada that could be offering real alternatives remain sidelined – in part because they have to start from an imagination deficit that stems from the depth of reification here, born of all the processes involved in the circulation and accumulation of capital that’s been central to our lives. It should not be that surprising that the social movements that appear most prominent in the wake of the crisis -- tax revolts, teabaggers, proto-fascists and racists -- are reactionary rather than revolutionary.

And this points to why it’s so important, perhaps even most important, to do everything we can to cultivate radical imagination – especially in the North, and even when it’s most far-fetched. Most of the time, radical imagination – at least in a heavily-reified space – may exist only in the realm of thought, or in small-scale, circumscribed practical activities and cultural practices, or in art and literature; between crises, it may not seem to have much transformative potential at all. But it does at least two things for us. First, negative thinking, the radical element of the imagination, is always antagonistic toward reification. As reification tries to stultify and appropriate imagination, radical imagination is also its antidote -- even if only as a message in a bottle, keeping possibilities alive. Even vague, putative radical tropes like ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation’, when imagined in a broader context than the present, negate the pretence that existing social relations are natural or normal and refute the idea that we are at the “end of history”. Second, in moments of social or economic crisis, when

reification weakens, short-lived cracks and spaces open up. It's likely we were in one or two of these spaces last year at the height of the turmoil; but they close quickly. Social movements need to be able to fill those spaces on short notice, and to do so they need to already have imagined at least the possibility that alternatives may yet exist.

That hurdle – the belief that there is no alternative – must first be cleared if we are to, say, make banks public utilities, or turn the millions of abandoned and foreclosed homes into social housing co-ops, much less abolish capital all together.

Where do we find actually-existing radical imagination? Creative activity can of course generate it – from micro-level social relations to artistic activity. But we also find it in history (by its very conception, history negates the present!). It is especially powerful when we're able to look into history to conceptualize different social relations, not with the intention of returning to them, but because they put the social relations of the present in stark relief.

North American social movements have comparatively little to draw on in this regard. We keep looking back to history for the wrong kinds of inspirations; we look to past movements themselves, and we act under the presumption that certain kinds of new social movements of the 1930s or the 1960s or certain kinds of countercultural activities were successful because of their formal properties. So we try to duplicate them and puzzle over why they don't work today. This could be expected: in the US, for example, there's very little history, culture, or tradition in living memory that's not capitalist. ('Very little' is not the same as 'none', but the difference is enough to hide such alternatives from the experiences of the vast majority of Americans.) This is not to say that we don't have wonderful moments of resistance over the past 200 or 500 years from which we can draw inspiration; only that our histories of struggle, like our present-day lives, are significantly more closely tied to capital than in, for example, much of Meso- and South America, where many more people continue to collectively experience capital as an imperialistic imposition, and have living practices, memories and histories of non-capitalist life.

Popular movements in Latin America thus draw on history and imagination differently – or, at least, they have a more substantial ability to do so. The participants often have a collective historical memory that is already “negative”; movements are able to begin by saying 'this isn't progress, at least not for us' which opens a space to imagine what real progress might look like. So radical imagination might spring from a reaction to something in the present,

Justin Paulson, “The Uneven Development of Radical Imagination,” *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2010, pp. 33-38.

but it is rooted in a memory of difference that offers a set of resources for imagining the future. Consider how, for example, the revolt against water privatization in Cochabamba, Bolivia grew into the Movement Toward Socialism. Or the numerous examples of Zapatista imagination: these aren't indigenous movements that try to recreate a pre-capitalist, pre-colonial society but movements that insist on a future built on *new* forms and amalgams of indigenous traditions, built atop of the remains of colonialism, centred around the resurrection of a radical imagination of dignity. Far from an anti-modern imagination, they offer us a counter-modernity. Zapatista writers noted from the inception of the rebellion that all possibilities for the future begin with a negation of the pretences of capital (that it should shape social and economic relationships, that it should provide a good model of development, that it represents progress in the face of tradition); it's the recognition that capital is an alien imposition that makes a wider range of imagination possible.

Yet even where radical imagination might flourish (and thus articulate alternative possibilities), bringing these possibilities into existence is neither easy nor straightforward. In Chiapas, the collective historical memory and imagination that constitutes Zapatismo acted as a formidable barrier against capitalist and especially neoliberal ideas and practices for nearly twenty years; but the trick is in shifting from the imaginative to the formative. In Chiapas, this has taken the form of autonomy – spaces in which alternative forms of collective social organization and alternative institutions can be experimented with. But in the face of continued army and paramilitary aggression, autonomous growth has been severely hampered and will likely continue to be limited to forms of resistance until broader changes occur in the region and indeed the world.

To a large extent, we haven't yet gone beyond the first step of radical imagination: the negation of the given reality. Even when we accept that another world is possible, the obstacles to creating it remain substantial. Even in the South, radical imagination is more likely to produce limited, regional bulwarks against capital than it is to supersede it; the movements in Mexico, Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Uruguay, and elsewhere cannot produce a post-capitalist world on their own. Nevertheless, we can hope that their very existence can also spur on the growth of more radical imagination elsewhere.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the end of the day, successful and lasting social transformation(s) will require capitalism to be superseded as an entire system, not only in a specific place. Capital has always shown a capacity to survive because of its strongest links, even when the weakest are broken. From this perspective, the uneven

Justin Paulson, "The Uneven Development of Radical Imagination," *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2010, pp. 33-38.

development of radical imagination may need to be itself transcended before all the vicissitudes of imagination can transcend capital itself.

ⁱ **Justin Paulson** is an Assistant Professor with the Department of Sociology and the Institute of Political Economy at Carleton University, in Ottawa.

ⁱⁱ An exception is found of course in apocalyptic narratives: whether through an asteroid strike or zombie attack or nuclear holocaust, the end of capitalism can be imagined readily (but only) as the end of the world.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the case of Chiapas, it's perhaps worth highlighting, however, the striking contrast between the Zapatistas' own radical imagination, and the imagination (or lack thereof) of solidarity movements in the North. The very best thing for activists to do to support the Zapatistas was (and remains) to fight neoliberalism wherever they are, and to cultivate their own radical imagination. Instead, they made an Che-like icon out of Marcos' image, and fetishized the technological means with which Zapatismo made its message available. At one level, this is fine, but it's not a substitute. The cry "We are all Marcos" – which actually did mean something substantial in Mexico – loses its meaning in an American or Canadian context. Marcos very quickly became a person to be supported, rather than an idea of resistance to spark more imagination. But this, again, is instructive: not only does radical imagination not spring up nearly so easily among movements in the North, but even when a movement with such a powerful imagination as Zapatismo is able to push against our bounds of imagination, and inspire us to think outside of capitalism precisely when it seemed so inevitable – the Battle of Seattle and northern participation in the World Social Forum stemmed in part from this – we get stuck in the realm of vague rhetoric. "Another world is possible" is cautiously accepted – but we have little experience or memory to guide us into what that might look like.

Justin Paulson, "The Uneven Development of Radical Imagination," *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2010, pp. 33-38.

Justin Paulson, "The Uneven Development of Radical Imagination," *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2010, pp. 33-38.

Endnotes