The socio-ecological imagination: Young environmental activists constructing transformation in an era of crisis

Joe Herbert

In this paper, I call for geographers to engage further with a so far under-explored concept of the socio-ecological imagination, which I define as a variant of political-geographical imagination(s) concerned with envisioning (and progressing) the transformation of relationships between human society and the rest of the planetary environment. In response to escalating ecological breakdown, and a recent surge in environmental movement mobilisation(s) led in many places by young people, this paper seeks to contribute to expanding understandings of the socio-ecological imagination, drawing on interviews and participant observation with young environmental activists in the North East of England. The paper performs two major tasks. First, through analysing the ways in which the environmentalists narrate their imaginaries of socio-ecological transformation(s), it is argued that dominant oppositional tendencies within participant narratives result from a tension between antagonistic and imaginative forms of transformative politics. Second, the paper explores in more depth the main forces constraining the imagination of alternative socio-ecological futures, proposing three major interconnected barriers that emerge from the environmentalists’ narratives: crisis lock-in; colonisation of the social imaginary; and dualistic temporal imaginaries of transformation. In sum, I suggest that these barriers warn of an imaginative gap between our current social reality and just and sustainable futures, driven by structural and psychological pressures faced by activists in the current era of multidimensional crisis. Bridging this gap can be aided by a greater engagement of geographers and environmental movements with a socio-ecological imagination and a processual understanding of space–time.

KEYWORDS

crisis, environmental activists, futures, socio-ecological imagination, transformation

1 | INTRODUCTION

The geographical imagination has long been a central theme in geographical scholarship, “as a way of envisioning the world, experiencing and reshaping it too” (Daniels, 2011, p. 182). However, the concept has not always been sufficiently attuned to the imagination of alternative political-geographical futures (Braun, 2015; Caprotti & Gao, 2012). In response to escalating ecological breakdown and recent surges in environmental movement mobilisations, I call here for geographers to...
engage further with the under-explored notion of a socio-ecological imagination (SEI). I understand the SEI as a pluralistic variant of political-geographical imagination(s) concerned with envisioning (and progressing) the transformation of relationships between human society and the rest of the planetary environment. Such alternative socio-ecological imaginaries form a crucial driving force behind the type of popular mobilisations needed to overturn the immense political and structural barriers to just and sustainable futures beyond ecological crisis (Braun, 2015; Hajer & Versteeg, 2019; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Milkoreit, 2017).

This paper explores processes of the SEI drawing on qualitative research with a group of young environmental activists based in the North East of England. The paper performs two major tasks. First, through analysing the efforts of environmentalists to narrate their desired socio-ecological transformation(s), it argues that oppositional tendencies within participant imaginaries result from a tension between antagonistic and imaginative forms of transformative politics. Second, it investigates in more depth the key forces constraining the imagination of alternative socio-ecological futures, proposing three major barriers that emerge from participant narratives: crisis lock-in; colonisation of the social imaginary; and dualistic temporal imaginaries of transformation.

The concept of transformation in socio-ecological scholarship responds to the multi-dimensional crisis currently facing society (Asara et al., 2015; Bonaiuti, 2012) and the failure of previous paradigms (e.g., sustainable development) to acknowledge the scale and complexity of this predicament (Blythe et al., 2018; Brand, 2016). Transformation highlights the need for a radical diversion from existing societal pathways in order to address interconnected ecological and social crises (Asara et al., 2015; Beling et al., 2018; Görg et al., 2017). Socio-ecological transformation therefore aims to alter “the fundamental attributes of a system,” including “the economic mode of production, political institutions, ideologies, societal norms, everyday life, ecology (Brown et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2012) and so-called ‘social natures’” (Asara et al., 2015, p. 379), which are culturally specific socio-ecological assemblages that vary across space and time.

One rapidly burgeoning academic-activist discourse of socio-ecological transformation is degrowth, proponents of which have explored and emphasised the role of the imagination in social change (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Demaria et al., 2013; Kal- lis & March, 2015; Latouche, 2015). One of degrowth’s central theoretical influences, Cornelius Castoriadis, argued in The imaginary institution of society (1975) that social reality is not historically or technologically determined, but created through the implementation of “imaginary significations” that are materialised in institutions. These significations, Castoriadis claimed, are generated through the “radical imaginary,” comprised of the “radical imagination” at an individual scale and the “social imaginary” at a collective societal scale (Asara et al., 2013; Castoriadis, 1975). Haiven and Khasnabish (2010, p. iii) – building on Castoriadis – described the radical imagination as a process through which we can explore “horizons of socio-political possibility” and generate visions that guide “movements toward new social worlds.”

The only substantive expansion on the idea of a “socio-ecological imagination” so far comes from White et al. (2016) in their efforts to develop a hybrid conceptualisation of environmental social theory. They propose a SEI grounded in a recognition that “we live in social, ecological and material worlds, where natural and human history are intertwined and interacting” (2016, p. 2). Furthering this sentiment, I suggest a key function of a SEI –informed fittingly by social ecology (Bookchin, 2007) – should be contesting entrenched nature–culture binaries and highlighting the possibilities for just and sustainable futures that are opened up when an integrated conception of human and non-human wellbeing is adopted. A fusion of scholarship on degrowth, the radical imagination and social ecology therefore forms the theoretical framework through which I approach socio-ecological imagination(s).

Informed by these theoretical influences, I set about investigating the messier realities and tensions of enacting the SEI “on the ground.” An upsurge in young people’s involvement in environmental movements in recent years has attracted increasing scholarly and media attention to their role as agents for socio-ecological transformation (Marris, 2019; Turns, 2019). This paper draws on a research project consisting of semi-structured interviews and participant observation with young environmental activists (aged 16–28) in the North East of England; a social constituency in which I have myself engaged as a “participant” for several years before doing so as researcher. Accordingly, I locate myself on the same plane as the subjects of the study, with the aim of minimising hierarchy in the research process (Roseneil, 1993). Due to my (pre)embeddedness in the field, recruitment of interviewees was aided by existing relationships and contact networks, while shared experiences with many participants in particular campaigns and groups enabled a deeper appreciation of their accounts.

Various activist meetings and events were attended, and 30 young environmentalists were interviewed, accessed through pre-existing activist networks, social media call-outs, and snowballing. Between them, interviewees cited 35 different groups and campaigns they were engaged in. These included local branches of international environmental organisations, community action groups, student societies, political parties, direct action groups, as well as ad hoc demos and protests. These groups and campaigns clustered around intersecting concerns of climate and environmental justice, opposing fossil fuels, conservation, environmental education, waste and plastics, food and veganism. Interviewees were asked about their
personal environmental values and politics, and to narrate their current and future impressions of socio-ecological crisis and transformation. This paper focuses on how participants narrated their desired socio-ecological transformation(s). Interview transcripts were thematically coded and analysed. All participants are given pseudonyms here.

2 IMAGINARIES OF SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Among the environmentalists, there was a widespread consensus around the importance of communicating compelling alternative socio-ecological futures. Concerns were expressed that environmental movements “are falling down because we can’t offer a hopeful alternative vision of the future” (Andrew, 28), and that they are lacking “the imagination to create a different system” (Jake, 17). Emily (27) explained that the more immediate tasks of daily organising can distract activists from thinking about the bigger picture:

It’s so important that together we imagine these post-capitalist futures, and we should do that more often, because sometimes we’re just busy in the daily life of organising and talking about it on an abstract level and we forget about what we actually want and what it could look like. (Emily, 27)

At a personal scale, it was proposed that imagining alternative futures can help sustain “motivation for your activism” by signalling “something to work towards” (Sian, 20). Luke (20) argued that the imagination of alternative futures “gives people hope, which is one of the most important things.” As well as inspiring action and broadening mobilisations then, I reaffirm here Haiven and Khasnabish’s suggestion that radical imagination(s) can “take up an ethic of “therapy,” helping people survive and overcome the colonization of the imagination and the social, psychological and spiritual wounds” inflicted by the existing society (2010, p. xxvi).

Yet in practice, many of the environmentalists struggled or were reluctant to outline macro-scale visions of alternative socio-ecological futures, with transformative imaginaries often dominated by a politics of opposition towards existing societal structures. Narratives of socio-ecological transformation varied significantly in terms of content and language. One of the most common framings was that of “system change,” or changing the “system” in some way: “That’s the most important thing that I want to get out of this, is like, overhaul of the entire system” (Molly, 23); “We’re gonna have to restructure the whole of society and the whole of the economic and political systems as well” (Victoria, 26). Through a language of “system change,” an appetite was evidenced for an overhaul of society similar in scale to that discussed by scholars under the heading of socio-ecological transformation (Asara et al., 2015; Brand, 2016). Yet, details of possible alternative “systems” remained scarce.

Critiques of “capitalism” emerged as one of the most common themes across the environmentalists’ narratives of transformation. Tom argued for replacing capitalism with an alternative economic system:

I don’t think the capitalist economy is very good at being environmental. So therefore we should not accept it as the norm and we should try and make something different. We should try and invest our time in creating a new system, that isn’t like this one. (Tom, 20)

Notably, Tom’s narrative of transformation remains distinctly oppositional, where the defining characteristic of the desired new “system” is that it “isn’t like this one.” Jake (17) communicated more explicitly a similarly oppositional stance, saying “we don’t all agree on exactly how the world should look, but we certainly all want a planet to live on, and we all want to challenge this destructive capitalist agenda.” This kind of struggle or reluctance to detail a vision of alternative socio-ecological futures, particularly at a macro-scale, was common. Opposition to fossil fuels unsurprisingly formed a point of consensus, but again, without laying out much detail of alternatives. For example, Lily (20) simply stated that she would like for “fossil fuels to not be a thing,” while Emily (27) suggested that “it would be nice if maybe in 20 years we found other sources of clean energy.”

The discovery of predominant oppositional tendencies in the transformative imaginaries of environmental activists resonates with previous research on the topic. Notably, Kenis and Mathijs (2014) found in their work with climate justice movements that activists were much more adept at making critiques of the current “system” than they were at articulating a vision of alternative socio-ecological futures. This brings to the fore a long-running tension in social movements between antagonism and imagination as two different “modalities of social resistance” (Schmid & Smith, 2020, p. 4). While antagonism focuses on the “exclusion of ‘undesirable’ practices,” imagination emphasises “plurality, possibility, and openness” (Schmid & Smith, 2020, p. 2). Schmid (2019) illustrates this tension through the example of two prominent forms of transformative politics among critical scholars and movements: anti-capitalism, which seeks to build a universalistic opposition
to capitalism as a singular hegemonic totality, and postcapitalism, which is characterised by pluralistic efforts to identify cracks within and spaces outside of current systems where alternative futures can be prefigured. Among the environmentalists I spoke with, a similar tension between antagonistic and imaginative politics contributed to predominantly oppositional imaginaries of transformation, with visions of alternative socio-ecological futures lacking in comparison.

Where some progress was made in detailing possible alternative socio-ecological futures, this often related to more localised scales of transformation or key principles around which alternative futures should be oriented. A common point of interest, for example, was in alternatives to the growth-based economy. Victoria (26) argued for a move away from growth towards an economy based on redistribution and was one of seven participants who explicitly cited the degrowth discourse as an influence on their imaginaries of socio-ecological transformation. Yet little further detail was offered in terms of the steps towards post-growth futures, or how such an economy might form a macro-scale alternative to capitalism.

Alongside more radical anti-capitalist and anti-growth narratives were a smaller segment of more reformist imaginaries. Three participants envisaged the possibility of a sustainable economy based on decoupling growth from ecological degradation, or in other words, “green growth” (Dale et al., 2016; Hickel & Kallis, 2019). For example, Erin (25) viewed proposals to “get rid of” capitalism or growth as “idealistic.” Notably, like their more radical counterparts, such reformist narratives of “greening” growth and capitalism also provided little evidence or detail as to how these changes might operate in practice.

One of the more detailed alternative socio-ecological imaginaries that did emerge from several of the environmentalists was a call for more “simplistic” lifestyles, and the revaluing of relationships and community as key sources of well-being (see Büchs & Koch, 2019). Tom (20) stated he was “optimistic that more people will see that degrowth, and living in community, and living in an ecological way, is more fulfilling as a lifestyle.” Proponents of such visions also often described their efforts to embody these desired socio-ecological futures in their own lives and the types of environmental action they engaged in.

Such narratives can be seen as seeking to contest hegemonic “imaginary significations” (Castoriadis, 1975), such as growth, individualism and consumerism, with suggestions of alternative significations including simplicity and community. Building on Castoriadis, Latouche (2009, 2015) referred to this process of undoing taken-for-granted social significations as “decolonising the imaginary,” which has become a central concept in degrowth narratives of socio-ecological transformation (Asara et al., 2013; Varvarousis, 2019). By contesting dominant social imaginary significations with alternatives based on ecological and social well-being, a move is made beyond antagonism in order to enact an imaginative politics of transformation.

Ultimately, however, an oppositional politics towards structures of the existing society emerged as a more dominant tendency within the environmentalists’ imaginaries of transformation, leaving their macro-scale visions of alternative socio-ecological futures underdeveloped in comparison.

3 | BARRIERS TO IMAGINING SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

While processes of the radical imagination shape political and social reality, so too does this reality influence and constrict processes of the radical imagination (Castoriadis, 1975; Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010). The narratives of young environmental activists in this study illuminate barriers both structural and psychological in nature, which obstruct capacities to imagine just and sustainable socio-ecological futures. I argue that three major (interconnected) barriers can be identified based on the most common themes within participant narratives, which I refer to as: crisis lock-in; colonisation of the social imaginary; and dualistic temporal imaginaries of transformation.

3.1 | Crisis lock-in

The first barrier describes a sense among the environmentalists that the scale of ecological crisis, and the power of political-economic structures and actors that perpetuate this crisis, are so vast that it is hard to imagine a radical diversion. This relates closely to Blythe et al.’s (2018) warning that an underestimation of power and politics threatens to undermine the legitimacy of transformation discourse. Several of the environmentalists acknowledged this challenge:

The people in power benefit from the current system. They benefit from capitalism which drives climate change and drives all these environmental issues, and therefore, they’re not going to be like: “oh, yeah, cool, let’s just like change everything.” (Molly, 23)

Spash has also clarified that “in responding to social ecological crises, a specific elite aspire not just to maintain but actually to expand the growth society and capital accumulating economy” (2019, p. 264).
For this reason, scholars have urged more strategic considerations of the gap between burgeoning visions of alternative socio-ecological futures (e.g., degrowth) and our current society, which struggles tirelessly to resist change (Alexander, 2020; Herbert et al., 2018). I claim here, however, that this gap constitutes not only an immense political and structural barrier to alternative socio-ecological futures, but that it also creates a substantial psychological barrier that forecloses capacities to even imagine such transformations (e.g., Fisher, 2009). For many of the environmentalists I spoke with, the imagination of socio-ecological transformation was constantly competing with a perception of extensive – or even insurmountable – structural barriers preventing the realisation of these visions. This contributed to the dominant oppositional tendencies of their imaginations.

Büchs and Koch have discussed the difficulties of transforming our existing economic system, which is intimately intertwined with institutions such as the “nation state, representative democracy, the rule of law and current legal, financial, labour market, education, research, and welfare systems” (2019, p. 160). Envisaging just and sustainable socio-ecological futures therefore becomes extremely difficult given that this would require parallel transformation(s) of so many different institutions, for which there is seemingly no historical precedent (Büchs & Koch, 2019).

The sense of crisis lock-in that emerges reflects what Schmid (2019) calls a “double utopia” facing movements and research calling for socio-ecological transformation (though perhaps double dystopia is more appropriate): while we know the trajectory of our crisis-ridden society is unsustainable, prospects for fundamental systemic change also seem incredibly slim.

### 3.2 Colonisation of the social imaginary

The second barrier recognises that even activists and those making political critiques of the status quo are not immune from the preoccupation of the collective imagination by values and norms of the existing society.

Van Apeldoorn and Overbeek argue that for a democratic political project to become hegemonic, it needs to mobilise “a sufficient measure of at least passive consent” from the general population (2012, pp. 5–6). This was widely acknowledged among environmentalists in the current study, yet prospects of achieving this goal were perceived as bleak:

> The reality is that most people would love to save the Antarctic and most people would love to save the penguins and like reverse climate change and all of that, but not many people are willing to say “oh we need to restructure the way our whole society is built.” (Victoria, 26)

From Emily’s perspective, the reason for this disconnect, whereby people recognise the severity of ecological crisis yet are reluctant to support transformation(s) of society that could address it, is a deeply embedded sense that capitalism is the only – or at least most effective – way of organising society: “The ‘there is no alternative’ discourse of Margaret Thatcher worked out pretty well. So most people really think that there is no alternative to neoliberalism, and it's really hard to change that” (Emily, 27).

Understood in degrowth terms, Emily’s comment articulates a view that the social imaginary – in countries like the UK – is colonised by neoliberal significations, obstructing the widespread proliferation of imaginaries of alternative socio-ecological futures. In comparison to the structurally rooted barrier described as crisis lock-in then, colonisation of the social imaginary describes the existence of “ideational path-dependencies” (Buch-Hansen, 2018, p.161) that restrict capacities of a population to imagine alternative socio-ecological futures.

Having said this, many participants took hope from the perception that they are part of a younger generation among whom more radical politics are proliferating in response to spiralling social injustices and the threat of ecological collapse within their lifetimes. Yet, participants such as Andrew (28) contended that those mobilising around environmental issues are a minority, while most young people continue to buy into capitalist society and live incredibly high-consumption lifestyles, despite some awareness of ecological breakdown.

Crucially, I propose here that a colonisation of the social imaginary constrains not only the SEI of less politically radical fellow citizens, but also that of activists such as those participating in this study. Jake (17) was one of the environmentalists who made this recognition explicitly: “people – ourselves, environmentalists included – are so like, our whole mindset is already so determined by the society we live in that we are already very conditioned to think along these lines of growth and consumption.” Similarly, Sam (20) admitted his concern that even as someone engaged in environmental activism, he struggled to imagine socio-ecological transformation: “I think that's what makes it a problem: even within myself I'm not fully sure what I think the alternative is … I don’t have a concrete idea as to how we get through this … So it’s quite scary, in a way.”

A troubling finding of this research is therefore that even individuals who are discernibly active in pursuing progressive socio-ecological change, and hold sophisticated critiques of the existing society, ultimately still suffer from a colonisation
of the imaginary by prevailing norms. It seems then that while restrictive pressures on the SEI can be fought against, they cannot be escaped entirely.

3.3 | Dualistic temporal imaginaries of transformation

A third barrier to imagining socio-ecological transformation relates to a strain of thought among the environmentalists that positions the present and the future in a dualistic temporal framework of transformation, with the development of alternative socio-ecological imaginaries deferred for the latter.

For example, Molly (23) explained that she was too consumed by anger towards the existing society to have a clear vision of alternative socio-ecological futures, the possibility of which she described as “too far away.” This perspective is indicative of a pattern whereby several environmentalists reserved the present moment for an oppositional politics towards undesirable structures of the existing society. Correspondingly, the development (and enaction) of alternative socio-ecological imaginaries is designated as a matter for an abstract future moment, once the most problematic elements of the current society have been dismantled.

Similarly, Charlie characterised the imagination of alternative socio-ecological futures as an unaffordable luxury in the current moment of ecological crisis:

I don’t know if the focus should be on providing loads and loads of really detailed solutions right now. Because right now it’s time to panic, and just do whatever you can to reduce the damage you’re doing to the environment, and then we can really focus on what we’re going to do as a long-term solution, and how we’re going to reconfigure the system that’s built on fossil fuels and stuff. (Charlie, 16)

I argue, then, that this dualistic view of the present and the future as dichotomised temporalities of transformation interacts with the tension between antagonistic and imaginative politics as described above in order to form a fundamental barrier to imagining alternative socio-ecological futures. For many environmentalists, an antagonistic politics towards the present society is seen as a sufficient basis for pursuing transformation, or else is all-consuming of their political energies, leading to a neglect of alternative socio-ecological imaginaries.

This phenomenon presents a fundamental tension with a view of the radical imagination as an “ineffable and restless collective potentiality that is the basis of all social forms” (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010, p. iii). From a Castoridian perspective, new institutions do not simply emerge out of the chaos of political antagonism towards the existing society, but as the materialisation of new social imaginary significations (Asara et al., 2013; Castoriadis, 1975).

Postponing the development of alternative socio-ecological imaginaries until “after the revolution” therefore neglects possibilities to prefigure alternative futures in the here and now (Springer, 2014). Reflecting on the arguments throughout this paper then, I contend that a more promising route towards socio-ecological transformation is presented by the integration of a more actively engaged SEI with a processual understanding of “space–time as a constantly folding, unfolding, and refolding story, where direct action, radical democracy, and mutual aid allow us to instantaneously reconfigure its parameters” (Springer, 2014, p. 263).

4 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper has investigated processes of the SEI as a means to envision (and progress) possible transformation(s) towards just and sustainable futures, drawing on fieldwork with young environmental activists. I argued that an underdevelopment of imaginaries of alternative socio-ecological futures is driven by a fundamental tension between antagonistic and imaginative dimensions of transformative politics (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Schmid & Smith, 2020). The young environmentalists spoke to widely recognised an important role for a SEI in transforming society and held sophisticated critiques of structures such as capitalism, economic growth, and the fossil fuel industry, yet there was a significant degree of uncertainty around macro-scale alternative social, economic, and political systems.

I claimed accordingly that the narratives of these environmentalists shed light on three major barriers to imagining socio-ecological transformation. First, the severe state of ecological crisis and entrenched power of the structures and actors that perpetuate it make it difficult to envisage political pathways towards just and sustainable socio-ecological futures (Schmid, 2019; Spash, 2019). Second, activists and politically engaged citizens are not immune to the colonisation of the social imaginary by significations of the existing society, which restrict capacities to imagine alternative arrangements (Latouche, 2015). Third, dualistic temporal imaginaries of transformation lead to a deferral of envisioning alternative socio-ecological
realities, while antagonism towards undesirable structures of the existing society dominates political energies and action in the present.

While there is a substantial political-structural gap between our current social reality and just and sustainable socio-ecological futures, this paper highlights an additional imaginative gap exacerbated by structural and psychological pressures faced by activists (and others) in the current era of multidimensional crisis. This combined structural–imaginative gap requires tremendous amounts of work to overturn, while creating conditions that make this work so hard to do. Yet, fragments of alternative futures already exist throughout our current society. Geographers, together with environmental movements, can contribute to proliferating these fragments and gradually piecing them together, which I propose can be aided by a greater engagement with the SEI and a processual understanding of space–time.

Accordingly, in confronting the barriers to imagining socio-ecological transformation outlined here, a starting point would be to carve out more regular spaces for activists, scholars, and citizens to come together to collectively envision desired socio-ecological futures. This can begin at a local level, in the form of community or municipal assemblies, for example. Such spaces could learn from Khasnabish and Haiven’s (2012, p. 411) efforts to create zones “for the radical imagination to flourish,” and the tensions they encountered. From here, these assemblies could develop action plans to bring their alternative socio-ecological imaginaries into reality through prefigurative action and projects that embody these desired futures, alongside ongoing political antagonism – such as protest and civil disobedience – towards the systemic drivers of ecological breakdown.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the participants who made this research and paper possible. I also thank Helen Jarvis, Gareth Powells, Alastair Bonnett, and Ricardo Fuentesalba for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of the paper. Finally, I thank the reviewers for their extremely thoughtful comments that improved the paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not available for viewing due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Joe Herbert https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1066-157X

REFERENCES

Alexander, S. (2020). Post-capitalism by design not disaster. The Ecological Citizen, 3, 13–21. https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/article.php?t=post-capitalism-by-design-not-disaster

Asara, V., Otero, I., Demaria, F., & Corbera, E. (2015). Socially sustainable degrowth as a social–ecological transformation: Repoliticizing sustainability. Sustainability Science, 10, 375–384. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-015-0321-9

Asara, V., Profumi, E., & Kallis, G. (2013). Degrowth, democracy and autonomy. Environmental Values, 22, 217–239. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327113X13581561725239

Beling, A. E., Vanhulst, J., Demaria, F., Rabi, V., Carballo, A. E., & Pelenc, J. (2018). Discursive synergies for a ‘great transformation’ towards sustainability: Pragmatic contributions to a necessary dialogue between human development, degrowth, and Buen Vivir. Ecological Economics, 144, 304–313. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.08.025

Blythe, J., Silver, J., Evans, L., Armitage, D., Bennett, N. J., Moore, M.-L., Morrison, T. H., & Brown, K. (2018). The dark side of transformation: Latent risks in contemporary sustainability discourse. Antipode, 50, 1206–1223. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12405

Bonaiuti, M. (2012). Degrowth: Tools for a complex analysis of the multidimensional crisis. Capitalism Nature Socialism, 23, 30–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2011.648838

Bookchin, M. (2007). Social ecology and communalism. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Brand, U. (2016). How to get out of the multiple crisis? Contours of a critical theory of social-ecological transformation. Environmental Values, 25, 503–525. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644568.2016.1192437

Braun, B. (2015). Futures: Imagining socioecological transformation — An introduction. Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 105, 239–243. https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2014.1008093

Brown, G., Kraftl, P., Pickering, I., & Upton, C. (2012). Holding the future together: Towards a theorisation of the spaces and times of transition. Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 44(7), 1607–1623. http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/a44608
Brown, K., O’Neill, S., & Fabruicis, C. (2013). Social science understandings of transformations. *World social science report 2013: Changing global environments* (pp. 100–106). Paris, France: OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/978926403419-en

Buch-Hansen, H. (2018). The prerequisites for a degrowth paradigm shift: Insights from critical political economy. *Ecological Economics*, 146, 157–163. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.10.021

Büchs, M., & Koch, M. (2019). Challenges for the degrowth transition: The debate about wellbeing. *Futures*, 105, 155–165. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2018.09.002

Caprotti, F., & Gao, E. X. (2012). Static imaginations and the possibilities of radical change: Reflecting on the Arab Spring. *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, 4, i–xxvii.

Daniels, S. (2011). Geographical imagination. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36, 182–187. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00440.x

Demaria, F., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Martinez-Alier, J. (2013). What is degrowth? From an activist slogan to a social movement. *Environmental Values*, 22, 191–215. https://doi.org/10.31970/096327113X13581561725194

Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books.

Görg, C., Brand, U., Haberl, H., Hummel, D., Jahn, T., & Liehr, S. (2017). Challenges for social-ecological transformations: Contributions from social and political ecology. *Sustainability*, 9, 1045. https://doi.org/10.3390/su9071045

Haiven, M., & Khasnabish, A. (2010). What is the radical imagination? A special issue. *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, 4, i–xxvii.

Hajer, M., & Versteeg, W. (2019). Imagining the post-fossil city: Why is it so difficult to think of new possible worlds? *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 7, 122–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2018.1510339

Herbert, J., Barlow, N., Frey, I., Ambach, C., & Cigna, P. (2018). Beyond visions and projects: the need for a debate on strategy in the degrowth movement. *degrowth.info*. Retrieved from degrowth.info: https://www.degrowth.info/en/2018/10/beyond-visions-and-projects-the-need-for-a-debate-on-strategy-in-the-degrowth-movement/

Hickel, J., & Kallis, G. (2019). Is green growth possible? *New Political Economy*, 25, 469–486. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964

Kallis, G., & March, H. (2015). Imaginaries of hope: The utopianism of degrowth. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 105, 360–368. https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2014.973803

Kenis, A., & Mathijs, E. (2014). Climate change and post-politics: Repoliticizing the present by imagining the future? *Geoforum*, 52, 148–156. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.01.009

Khasnabish, A., & Haiven, M. (2012). Convoking the radical imagination. *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies*, 12, 408–421. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525876912453126

Latouche, S. (2009). *Farewell to Growth*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Latouche, S. (2015). Imaginary, decolonization of. In G. D’Alisa, F. Demaria, & G. Kallis (Eds.), *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era* (pp. 117–120). New York, NY: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203796146-35

Marris, E. (2019). Why young climate activists have captured the world’s attention. *Nature*, 573, 471–472. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-02696-0

Milkreit, M. (2017). Imaginary politics: Climate change and making the future. *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, 5, 62. https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.249

Rose, S. (1993). *Greenham revisited: Researching myself and my sisters*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Schmid, B. (2019). Degrowth and postcapitalism: Transformative geographies beyond accumulation and growth. *Geography Compass*, 13, 12470. https://doi.org/10.1111/gecc.12470

Schmid, B., & Smith, T. S. J. (2020). Social transformation and postcapitalist possibility: Emerging dialogues between practice theory and diverse economies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520905642

Spash, C. L. (2019). June 1). Social ecological transformation, whether you like it or not! *Environmental Values*, 28, 263–274. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327119X15519764197982

Springer, S. (2014). Why a radical geography must be anarchist. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 4, 249–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820614540851

Turms, A. (2019). *Meet generation Greta: Young climate activists around the world*. The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/28/generation-greta-young-climate-activists-around-world

van Apeldoorn, B., & Overbeek, H. (2012). The life course of the neoliberal project and the global crisis. In H. Overbeek, & B. van Apeldoorn (Eds.), *Neoliberalism in crisis* (pp. 1–20). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Varvarousis, A. (2019). Crisis, liminality and the decolonization of the social imaginary. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 2, 493–512. https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848619841809

White, D., Rudy, A., & Gareau, B. (2016). *Environments, natures and social theory: Towards a critical hybridity*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

---

**How to cite this article:** Herbert J. The socio-ecological imagination: Young environmental activists constructing transformation in an era of crisis. *Area*. 2021;53:373–380. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12704