Hope against hope: COVID-19 and the space for political imagination

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Abstract
COVID-19 has loosened neoliberalism’s hegemonic grip on the future. Amid the enormous suffering experienced internationally, there is much discussion of how to ‘Build Back Better’, and hope for a more caring, just and sustainable world. But competing futures are being imagined and planned. Hope is never politically neutral, and the content of collective hope is a key site of political struggle. This is partly a question of space: who has the literal and discursive space in which to develop visions of the future? The following article considers the role that cultural studies can play in this struggle. ‘Conjunctural analysis’ has a key task, making visible the competing futures contained within the present. But cultural studies should go further: combining conjunctural analysis with methods drawn from a range of scholarly and activist traditions – including critical pedagogy, devised theatre and the interdisciplinary field of futures studies – that deliberately create spaces for imagining new futures.

Keywords
COVID-19, cultural studies, futures, hope, political imagination

Soon after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom, the language of hope appeared frequently in public discourse. It accompanied the paintings and drawings of rainbows placed in windows across the country – symbols of survival, solidarity and brighter tomorrows. And when the 99-year-old World War II veteran Captain Tom Moore came to public attention, walking lengths of his garden to raise £1000 for the National Health Service and unexpectedly reaching £32.8 million, he was hailed as a ‘beacon of hope’ (Rogers, 2021). Moore’s subsequent death in February 2021 from COVID became
Gross

a national event. The flag atop 10 Downing Street was lowered to half-mast, a minute’s silence was observed in both houses of parliament, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson encouraged the British public to join in a doorstep clap for Captain Tom and NHS staff, reviving the ‘clap for carers’ format that featured in the first wave of the pandemic (Wood and Skeggs, 2020). We might wonder at both the intended and unintended symbolism of the Prime Minister lowering the flag at news of Moore’s passing: a centenarian feted for fundraising in support of a National Health Service cash-strapped by 10 years of austerity, killed by a virus whose spread the government failed to manage, leading to thousands of unnecessary deaths. If Captain Tom was a beacon of hope, the question is: whose hope? For what future?

On the day of Moore’s death, Johnson concluded his COVID press briefing with a by-then famous quote from the former soldier. He assured viewers that the efforts of the British people in administering the vaccine and observing social distancing made him confident that, as Captain Tom had said, ‘tomorrow will be a good day’. The Prime Minister’s use of this quote was not surprising. A particular brand of bullish, ‘British’ optimism has long been central to his politics (Lott, 2019). But notwithstanding its apparent efficacy in securing Britain’s exit from the European Union, the deep inadequacy of Johnson’s optimism as the basis for meeting the real needs of the vast majority of the UK population has been starkly exposed by COVID. And for much of the pandemic it has seemed to me that Johnson’s public appearances have been marked by the visible deflation of his signature bumbling buoyancy. The point here is not to debunk hope, but to contest its content. The content of hope is a key site of political struggle.

Recent philosophical work on hope suggests it has three components: the desire for an outcome, the belief in its possibility, and imagination of what that future will be like. That the clap for Tom Moore became a matter of dispute on social media – with contention over its justification and political meanings – should reassure any cultural studies scholars haunted by the figure of the ‘useless academic’ (Hage, 2020). They are still needed. But the work to be done is not only the analysis of the contemporary conjuncture and its crises. It is also the creation of the spaces – literal and discursive – in which what comes next can be imagined. As has been discussed in the Cultural Commons pages of this journal (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020; Kay and Wood, 2020a, 2020b), COVID-19 has derailed hegemonic accounts of the future, making it possible and necessary to reimagine many dimensions of human life. But who will do the imagining? Who will write the scripts of hope? And where exactly will this writing happen?

**The material conditions of political imagination**

To understand the political potentials of the moment, we need to consider what COVID has done to the material conditions of imagination. What happens to imagination – and to our relationships with the future – when people stay home? Does a sudden limitation on movement narrow worldviews, or do our homes become spaces of travel-by-other-means? Let’s begin by focusing specifically on leisure time, a resource that has been, as ever, extremely unequally distributed during the pandemic. What happens to our relationships with the world and its possibilities when we have few opportunities to meet
with friends, go to pubs, restaurants, cinemas or gigs; and perhaps spend more time watching TV, Netflix or reading books? The screen and the page are very different technologies of imagination, with their own specific affordances. What are books if not one of the most indestructibly generative spaces for imagination? Part of their potential to expand political possibility lies in their capacity to resist the saturation of everyday experience by digitally mediated information. As I’ve discussed elsewhere (Gross, 2020), there is much to be said for the imagination-expanding potentials of analogue technologies and ‘old’ art during times of crisis, including their capacity to reconnect us with suppressed or forgotten futures. They can open up different temporalities of thought and experience, making connections quite unlike the endless chains of linkages that digital experience affords. This is not to champion a crude anti-digitalism. But I want to at least raise the possibility that non-digital technologies and offline experiences might have particularly consequential roles to play in any concerted project of expanding space for political imagination.

We can recognise, nonetheless, the enormous amount of human connection and imaginative exchange afforded by digital platforms during the pandemic. For those with a professional, semi-professional or amateur’s interest in politics, there have been any number of webinars on Building Back Better, organised by think tanks such as the New Economics Foundation and campaigns such as Green New Deal UK. For those with the inclination, time and energy to get involved with these discussions, the past months may have been the most politically imaginative of their lives. The consequences of the ongoing digital revolution for political imagination is a huge issue. This was true before, only exacerbated by lockdown. In his book *Palaces for the People*, Eric Klinenberg (2018) argues for the significance of social infrastructure, ‘the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact’ (p. 5), including libraries, schools, parks, sports clubs, shops, barbershops, cafes and religious institutions. He shows that social infrastructure deeply affects whether people can live flourishing lives in communities they enjoy, and when disasters hit – heatwaves, floods, fires – it can mean the difference between life and death. During the COVID pandemic, many people have been separated from the shared spaces that matter to them. That won’t last forever, or at least not to the same extent. But a big question remains: what forms of digital social infrastructure do we want? Our answers may diverge from what we are currently provided by digi-tech monopolies and the neoliberal governments that struggle to know how to regulate them. For this reason, among others, in the age of COVID – and in expectation of future pandemics and other ecological crises – recent calls to socialise big tech (Hanna and Brennan, 2020) are likely to become only more urgent and consequential.

It has been part of neoliberalism’s hegemonic formation to condition everyday life, including both leisure and work, in ways that compress the space of political possibility. David Graeber (2013) describes how neoliberalism has been a project waging ‘a relentless campaign against the human imagination. [. . .] We are talking about the murdering of dreams, the imposition of an apparatus of hopelessness, designed to squelch any sense of an alternative’ (p. 281). In *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, Nick Srniceck and Alex Williams (2016) offer a similar diagnosis. Under conditions of precarity and perpetual competition, ‘political mobilisation becomes a dream that is perpetually postponed, driven away by the anxieties and pressures of everyday
life’ (p. 64). This hostility of neoliberalism to political imagination and action is a starting point for Lynne Segal’s (2017) *Radical Happiness*, in which she argues that it is in the recovery of the pleasures of collective experience – in defiance of systemic individualism – that we can reclaim the space for new politics.

Segal has further developed these ideas as one of the five members of The Care Collective. *The Care Manifesto* was largely written before the outbreak of COVID but published soon after. Challenging the prevailing ‘carelessness’ of our times, it calls for care to be made the central organising principle of politics. The manifesto proposes action across multiple scales, from the intimate to the global: from the renewal of a caring system of social security and public services, to a Green New Deal and care for the environment (The Care Collective, 2020). Among the many consequences of these interventions, one would surely be to expand and multiply spaces of imagination. It is often when we experience care – within conditions of trust – that we are able to creatively narrate ourselves individually and collectively, and to know that our actions matter (Gross, 2019). Care makes space for political imagination. But the relationship is reciprocal: because it is by fighting for the expansion of political imagination, as The Care Collective is doing, that we can extend possibilities for a politics of care.

Seeing public examples of new ways to do politics can be part of how political imagination expands. This is David Graeber’s argument regarding the significance of Occupy Wall Street. For decades the space of political possibility in America has been extraordinarily constrained by the dominance of specific political interests and ideas. Occupy provided a lived alternative. Examples of non-hierarchical process, Graeber (2013) suggests, ‘can change one’s most fundamental assumptions about what politics, or for that matter, human life, could actually be like’ (p. 89). While they share Graeber’s analysis of how neoliberalism has radically narrowed the space for political thought and action, Srniceck and Williams are sceptical about the political efficacy of occupations and other forms of what they see as un-strategic ‘folk politics’. They are frustrated by failures of progressives to recognise that ‘the reality of complex, globalised capitalism is that small interventions consisting of relatively non-scalable actions are highly unlikely to ever be able to reorganise our socio-economic system’ (Srniceck and Williams, 2016: 29). Instead, the left needs to reclaim its capacity to tell big political stories. The narrative they propose is a ‘post-work’ future in which technological disturbances to employment, such as automation, are embraced and harnessed to emancipatory ends. Regardless of the attractiveness or plausibility of this particular political vision, they are surely right to insist on the need for the left to boldly reimagine the future. One version of this, at both national and global scales, could be the project of the Green New Deal. Part of its power lies in its narrative boldness, invoking the historical precedent of FDR’s New Deal² to tell a ‘grand story’ of the duty ‘to repair our relationship with the earth and with one another’ (Klein, 2019: 269).

But even if we subscribe to the political necessity for strategic thinking at a macro-scale, this does not remove the need to develop the material conditions in which these new futures – and the actions to bring them about – can be imagined and planned. Indeed, if the Green New Deal is to succeed, it will require the mobilisation of many spaces conducive to local imaginative action, sustaining the social energy required to meet the
political opposition that will stand in the way of a transformative project of this scale and ambition (Gross and Wilson, 2020). At moments of conjunctural crisis, there will be plenty of people seeking to invent the future. To the extent that we are committed to a democratic future – and to radically expanding democracy – we need both strategic vision and many spaces of local, democratic imagination. What material conditions might be conducive to this?

Rob Hopkins considers this question in *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want*. It sounds like a self-help book, and in a sense it is: a guide to ‘the great rekindling of the collective imagination’ in the age of climate crisis (Hopkins, 2019: 182). Hopkins (2019) suggests,

in order for the imagination to flourish, a person needs to feel safe, relaxed, connected to other people, be nourished with good food, surrounded by hopeful narratives of the future, invited into what-if spaces, exposed to art in all its forms, not feel under surveillance or time pressured, in as equal a society as possible, able to make meaningful contributions and exposed to nature as often as possible in their daily lives. (p. 161)

Spaces conducive to political imagination and action can potentially spring up anywhere, inside and outside of institutional walls. As has been widely observed, part of the strength of Black Lives Matter has been its distributed, non-institutionalised formation. But while recognising that spaces for political imagination will form where and how they will, often unseen and unheralded, are there particular institutional locations that have important roles to play? What might be the role of town halls and borough councils, schools and universities, arts and cultural organisations? In some parts of the world political parties and trade unions may have the potential to offer creative spaces in which to imagine the future, and here we should also consider the democratisation of public services and their potential to become sites of creative cooperation, deliberation and decision-making (Gilbert, 2020). Vibrantly democratic housing associations, hospitals and libraries could become spaces designed to support ongoing, collaborative processes of imagining the future. Public bodies of this kind would be one way to meet the demand that ‘we have to imagine while we build, always both’ (Mariame Kaba, quoted in Hopkins, 2019: 140). Indeed, in taking on this task – seeking to identify, invent and multiply social infrastructures conducive to the democratic development of new futures – lessons should be drawn from recent and historical experiments in municipal socialism. This includes the ‘Preston Model’ of community wealth building in the United Kingdom (Hanna et al., 2018); participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Wainwright, 2003); and many other innovative examples from the 19th century to the present day. There is much to learn from both the successes and the failures of these attempts to create distinctive local conditions for imagining-while-building.

**Cultural studies and the space for political imagination**

And what contributions might cultural studies make to this: not only to the articulation of specific strategic visions, but also to conditions conducive to democratising the
process of imagining many futures? John Mowitt (2003) suggests that the practice of cultural studies research and teaching, in itself – by virtue of the questions it asks, and the skills it cultivates – constitutes a refusal to accept that a more radically democratic future is impossible. Lawrence Grossberg provides a fuller account of this, elaborating cultural studies’ foundational orientation towards progressive change. ‘Cultural studies matters because it is about the future’, he writes.

It is about understanding the present in the service of the future. By looking at how the contemporary world has been made to be what it is, it attempts to make visible ways in which it can become something else. (Grossberg, 2010: 1)

The intellectual and political necessity of this kind of work, conjunctural analysis, has been central to the collective ‘project’ of cultural studies, as Grossberg sees it. But academics energised by this project and its commitments could go much further in connecting analysis of the present – and of contemporary crises, in particular – with fields in which visions of the future are directly investigated and developed. As Devon Powers (2020) has recently noted, cultural studies has made little engagement with futures studies, a field also referred to as foresight, futurology and futuring (Sardar, 2010). Futures studies developed via competing traditions, ranging from quasi-scientific sociopolitical forecasting during the Cold War, to more recent methodologies committed to creatively pluralising possible futures. This latter work is motivated, in part, by the desire to resist future oppressions and to expand democratic agency. As Ziauddin Sardar (2013) puts it, ‘when we become aware of different alternative futures, we gain access to new choices in the present’ (p. 52).

I am currently involved in two COVID-related projects in which we are using a research method called Letters from the Future (Sools, 2020), inviting participants to respond to the pandemic by writing back to themselves from an imagined future. This is just one futuring practice among many, and comparable methods can be found outside futures studies. For example, research, teaching and activist practices associated with the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1996 [1970]) and theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 2008 [1974]) create conditions in which people can narrate their situations in order to transform them. The role of theatre here is particularly illuminating. In one of his famous Friday Lectures at the Architectural Association, Mark Cousins once said, ‘what makes theatre theatre is that it can represent any time and any place except now and here’. A theatre-based research project led by Kathleen Gallagher resonates with this insight. Working with young people in Canada, Greece, India, Taiwan and the United Kingdom, ‘Youth, Theatre, Radical Hope and the Ethical Imaginary’ employed verbatim theatre, oral history performance and devised theatre:

And here is where neoliberalism can be challenged by a research methodology that privileges what can be known by a group, through a process of creating in that group, which draws both on what is given and what can be imagined. Neoliberalism, though deeply embedded in social life, cannot wholly colonize the imagination, and especially the imagination of a young person who has, increasingly, every reason to question the social order as given. (Gallagher et al., 2020: 4)
The futures studies literature distinguishes between possible, plausible, probable and preferable futures (Sardar, 2013). Research practices such as Gallagher’s can create conditions in which people move between the possible, the plausible, the probable and the preferable – developing new relationships with their futures. This has the potential to inform novel approaches to cultural studies teaching, as well as research. Beyond narrow visions of ‘employability’, there is scope to develop future-oriented pedagogies committed to pluralising the future, and students being active authors of those futures.

In both cultural studies teaching and research, there is much to be gained from developing new ways of creatively extending temporal horizons: imagining possible, plausible, probable and preferred futures, and reactivating multiple pasts. Political memory, including the memorialisation of progressive achievements, can be crucial to developing new futures (Solnit, 2016). This may involve recognising forgotten or suppressed practices of alterity, including via the kinds of historical recovery so brilliantly developed by Saidiya Hartman (2019) in Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval. Drawing on piecemeal information about the lives of queer people of colour in New York and Philadelphia in the early 20th century, the book is itself a beautiful experiment in historical imagination – as Hartman reads photographs, police reports and other evidential fragments as half-sounded testimonies to other ways of living and loving, precious heterotopic spaces barely registering on the blurred edges of the historical record. Political imagination draws on the past to create the scripts for the future. ‘The ideas that are lying around when the crisis happens’ may be lying quite deeply buried. Catastrophes, over-turnings, reveal much: but it is up to us to reveal what they reveal.

Conclusion

If amid the enormous suffering and injustice of the pandemic there is new hope for more caring, equitable and democratic futures, many competing visions are being developed apace. In January 2020 Boris Johnson’s chief advisor, Dominic Cummings, posted a notorious call for ‘weirdos and misfits’ to apply for jobs at Downing Street in support of Cummings’ techno-futurist grand designs (Syal, 2020). We need to be the weirdos and misfits we wish to see in the world. It’s all our futures to shape. Strategic thinking is essential – big political goals and plans for how to achieve them. But within the Green New Deal and other progressive projects on a macro-scale, there is the need to multiply and democratise the spaces in which the future is concertedly imagined. Not the occasional consideration of what the future could and should hold: the sustained posing of the question – What should the future be like? – and the development of new answers. With its capacities to analyse the competing futures contained within the present, cultural studies has a specific role to play here. But it’s a contribution that would take on greater urgency and efficacy by forming new connections with the anticipatory methods employed in futures studies, and with practices in critical education and theatre research in which transformative processes of individual and collective self-narration are the modus operandi. In the months and years to come, as we hope against hope, we’ll need conjunctural analysis and the sustained cultivation of caring, creative spaces for political imagination.
Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes
1. 10 Downing Street is the official residence and the office of the British Prime Minister.
2. FDR, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945), was president of the United States from 1933 to 1945. In response to the worst economic crisis in US history, The Great Depression, between 1933 and 1939 he enacted the series of relief, recovery and reform policies known as the New Deal.
3. Conjunctural analysis is particularly concerned with understanding current and emerging crises. Hall et al. (2013 [1978]), building on the work of Gramsci and Althusser, explain that conjunctural analysis “deploy a type of [historical] periodisation based on a distinction between moments of relative stability and those of intensifying struggles and unrest”. It analyses the “contradictions” in a contemporary hegemonic social formation, “their fusion into a crisis” and how the crisis is resolved. Crucially, “resolutions to the crisis can take different forms: there is no preordained result. They may allow the historical project to continue or be renewed, or they may provoke a process of transformation.” (p. xv).
4. ‘Will the Future Never Be the Same? Letters from a Post-Corona Future’, based at the University of Twente, The Netherlands; and ‘Future Festivals South Africa: New Possibilities for the Age of COVID-19’, a collaboration between researchers at King’s College London, UK, and Rhodes University, South Africa.
5. Mark Cousins (1947–2020) was an architectural theorist, and for many years Director of General Studies and Head of the Graduate Program in Histories and Theories at the Architectural Association in London (see Dillon et al., 2020).
6. In the months following the outbreak of COVID-19, this famous idea from neoliberal economist Milton Friedman (2002 [1982]) was widely quoted and paraphrased: ‘Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable’ (p. xiv).

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