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A future worth imagining

Collaging capitalism, expanding political imagination

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In International Politics and International Political Economy, images and creative forms of data are often valued solely for their representational function, rather than being appreciated as creative processes in their own right. Consequently, they are rarely engaged with on their own terms. However, by incorporating emotional and embodied experiences and representing them through material dimensions, creative methods can effectively convey issues that cannot be fully understood through text or words alone (Ristovska, 2018). The use of creative methods can also encourage researchers to pursue multisensory and multimodal forms of reasoning (Andrä, 2022). This contribution extends these perceptions to examine and retheorise capitalism through the use of visual images and creative methods.

This chapter on collaging capitalism is structured around collages, a zine, and a pottery experiment. The themes revolve around the future, the individual body and social reproduction, violence, and the strength of failure. Through each of these themes, the chapter engages with academic debates on the character of capitalism. The conclusions attempt to bring all these seemingly separate themes together, and can also be understood as a collage in itself.

Collaging as an arena for retheorising

As an act that involves composing various materials in new and imaginative ways through gluing, drawing, cutting, ripping, and more, collaging arguably offers a fruitful arena for retheorising capitalism. Kangas et al. (2019) propose that collaging involves breaking established structures, becoming aware of boundaries and rules, and reaching beyond them. They point out that creating surprising connections and challenging power relations is central to collaging. They suggest that this form of rule-breaking through theorising and collaging can expand our thinking in "queer ways". The potential of collaging to expand boundaries is not limited to visuality, as collages can also incorporate other senses such as hearing and touching (Kangas et al., 2019).

Creative methods also relate to the corporeal and tactile as they are brought to existence through manual doing and embodied sensations that intertwine with abstract and reflective thought (Andrä, 2022). The corporeal nature of art is further exemplified by the fact that creating art inevitably involves leaving traces of oneself in it (Rippin & Vachhani 2018). The collages that this chapter discusses were made in a workshop discussing capitalism. They contain traces of me, as well as my peers with whom I spent time discussing and exchanging cutouts during the collaging process. These collages would not have been as they are now without the collaborative effort and ideas coming together on a single piece of paper. As Gauntlett (2011, p.2) argues, "making is connecting", and these collages also connect the corporeal to the social realms of art. While this aspect of collaging cannot be fully translated into the two-dimensional pages of a book, the collages I created also embrace the sensory and playful nature of collaging.

In addition, collages can serve as a space for retheorising due to their utopian characteristics, which relate to the ability to expand our political imagination. The concept of 'utopia' carries dual meanings: no-place and good-place (Eskelinen et al. 2020a, p.7). However, the concept has been increasingly critiqued in recent years. Eskelinen et al. (2020a) argue that in much of the criticism utopias are seen as a static blueprint for a society. Central to these criticisms is the fear that such a society is only achievable through absolutist, totalitarian and authoritarian means, and consequently the anti-utopian sentiments have grown especially in the era of liberal capitalist democracies.

Contrary to this belief, Eskelinen et al. (2020a) demonstrate that utopias should be seen as vital for the expansion of our political imagination. This is where they resonate with the idea of collaging. Instead of approaching utopias through a static model, they should be seen as relational and heuristic tools that can serve social and political imagination. Consequently, they help in critically examining our current reality. Thus, utopias and collages should be approached as counter-images that reflect current societal problems, or as a compass that shows there are alternatives, and we can navigate towards them. Utopias should also be approached as reflexive rather than static, as the relationship between utopia and reality is dynamic and constantly changing. Furthermore, even though imagination and dreaming might

seem like solitary activities, the transformative power of utopian thinking can only be understood if it is fostered and practiced collectively—treated as a skill (Eskelinen et al., 2020a, pp.7, 11–12, 14).

According to Eskelinen et al. (2020a), the loss of the critical function of utopias and political imagination is an alarming symptom, as it inhibits our ability to conceive of different worlds. They argue that the inability to dream is the antithesis of both utopias and dystopias. Moreover, they suggest that by fostering political imagination, we can recognise ever-expanding opportunities beyond capitalist realism and challenge the current status quo. Therefore, utopian thought is vital for challenging and retheorising capitalism, and collaging, as I propose in this chapter, offers a specific arena for this.

Indeed, visual methods are important not only because they expand our understanding of what can be studied and discussed, but also because they expand our imagination. Ristovska (2018) argues that the distinction between imagination and reasoning needs to be questioned, as cultivating imagination—new perspectives and imaginative practices—are needed to address the sociopolitical crises that are unfolding globally. Visual arts have the capacity to challenge linearity, fixed identities, and conventional interpretations, while also accommodating different, relational modes of engagement with sociopolitical issues (Kangas et al., 2019; Ristovska, 2018). Since visual arts involve creation, they can also be described as world-making projects (Kangas et al., 2019). Moreover, visual arts and utopian thought can be engaged with cooperatively to expand political imagination. The following sections propose one way to achieve this.

Thoughts about the future

Figure 1. Ajatuksia tulevaisuudesta [Thoughts about the future], photo by Visa Keskinen.

Questioning our biases of what kind of a future is achievable and worth working towards is vital for utopias—for reconstructing and retheorising the current status quo. The collage "Thoughts about the future" (Figure 1) was inspired by the way in which utopias are taken up in certain post-structural, feminist and decolonial approaches that question what is seen as natural or taken for granted. It experiments with the idea of an ideal future. The text at the bottom-left of the collage reads "ajatuksia tulevaisuudesta" in Finnish, which translates to "thoughts about the future" and also serves as the title of the piece. The collage is a representation of one utopia and attempts to show a world beyond capitalist economic systems: a world where there is no need for constant growth and people and nature coexist as equals.

The collage has been glued to a dark green canvas, parts of which are visible beneath the ripped images. The left side of the collage consists of a three-dimensional weaving pattern where a starry and a blue sky alternate. The woven pattern represents the interconnected nature of efforts to achieve a better future. The starry pattern serves as a reminder to reach for the stars, while the blue pattern ties the piece together. Weaving symbolises the importance of creating things by hand and fostering a connection to the items we own through repairing and upcycling. It is also associated with contemporary forms of craft-based activism, described as a "gentle revolution" that occurs quietly and rarely disturbs others, yet critiques mass production and capitalist structures (Rippin & Vachhani, 2018, p. 236).

Additionally, the yellow flowers growing in between rocks serve as a reminder of the resilience of nature: how dandelions and tree roots have the power to grow through concrete roads and thrive despite human attempts at removing them. For this motif, I also took inspiration from Zen Buddhist art in which there is little differentiation between natural accidents and human control and which contrasts with the Western need for symmetry and orderliness (Watts, 1957/1973, pp. 205, 211). Rather than focusing on controlling nature and creating neat grid-like landscapes and concrete cities, what if we worked with nature and built cities that grew alongside it? The idea of coexistence between humans and nature is further emphasised by the images of a forest with only a small human-made church peeking from behind the trees.

On the right side, there is a text about the nature of Vietnam. The text is interesting in the way it describes living beings as valuable, even if they do not contribute to economic growth. It mentions "the trees, water buffalo and wild dogs—ancient lands of Ba Be National Park—endless rice paddies." Originally from a late 20th-century travel booklet, I encountered it accidentally but wanted to add it to my collage to create a contrast with mainstream economic thinking, which often views nature as a resource for humans. Here, however, all mentions of human intervention have been removed from the text, emphasising the need to see nature as valuable in its own right. Similarly, reciprocity between humans, the land, and the spirit world are key principles in indigenous economies, as Rauna Kuokkanen (2011) points out. In literature about indigenisation and postcolonial studies, Western hegemony and its exploitative relationship with nature are heavily questioned (Gray & Coates, 2010). Indigenous economic ideas can be valuable in our quest to rethink capitalism and

expand our understanding of the relationship between humans, the economy, and nature.

On top of that text, I added the word "Degrow" and a chart with a descending line to remind of the contemporary degrowth scholars' ideas about the necessity of redesigning the economy and society to reduce production and energy use, and a (re) politicisation of the economy (Kallis et al., 2018; Akbulut, 2021). The word degrow refers to the possibility of organising the economy in a way that is not reliant on constant growth to function: staying still and being content is enough. Akbulut (2021) points out that degrowth scholarship also needs to account for principles such as solidarity, justice, and democracy, since the basic needs of many people are not yet met.

Furthermore, above the words signalling toward degrowth thinking, there is an image of a pristine lake and some islands with a rainbow at the centre. To the right bottom side, I added some red background and write the word "burn" on it. This reflects my personal worries over our planet, but it is also intended to act as a warning of inaction. It represents my frustrations over current climate policies and the increasing pessimism and passivity towards defending nature. These worries and frustrations find an echo in academic literature. For example, Ekberg et al. (2022) explore the multiple ways in which (meaningful) climate change policy has been and still is obstructed. For example, climate change denial that has been forcefully promoted by the fossil fuel industry and additionally, many actors call to stall climate action with claims of alleged costs. Therefore, even the most well-meaning individuals are unable to contribute to curbing emissions both at the individual and societal level. Similarly, Hornsey and Fielding (2020) remind that progress on climate change mitigation is hampered by both climate scepticism and failure of nonsceptics to engage in meaningful climate action despite concern about climate change.

Throughout the collage, I drew red flowers with spiral centres (Japanese *hanamaru*) as well as some insects such as butterflies and bumblebees. Humans, whether we like it or not, are dependent on nature. We cannot live without plants that provide us with oxygen and food, but nature can live and go on without humans. Similarly, Anna Tsing (2013) points out how capitalism is also dependent on nature both by producing resources that capitalism alone cannot create and by giving value to capitalist commodities trough non-capitalist social relations.

Additionally, the bugs scattered throughout the collage represent this dependence. I chose pollinators specifically to show that even the smallest of creatures can have huge impacts on our entire society. Humans have been reliant on bees throughout history, even prior to agriculture (Ellis, 2022). Many studies have also highlighted the global importance of bees in combatting climate change and have expressed worry over their declining populations (see e.g. Brown & Paxton, 2009; Hung et al., 2018; Madras-Majewska & Majewski, 2016). Furthermore Ellis (2022) argues that capitalist agriculture is the biggest threat to bees despite it being heavily reliant on the indispensable little pollinators. The *hanamaru* is a Japanese symbol, which is often used similarly to a golden star, or to signal a "job well done". In the collage, it represents hope for the future and the belief that a better future can still be achieved.

The collaging exercise described above resonates with Eskelinen et al.'s (2020a, p.7) approach where utopias are a heuristic tool for improving social and political imagination. I believe that my way of working with the collage material shows that collages—as a form of or method for utopian thought—can serve a critical function in relation to our present reality. However, the fact that this collage allowed me to juxtapose themes resonates with the idea that utopias are societal counter-images: utopian thought not only highlights problems of its own time but also investigates, analyses and reconstructs existing historical conditions to inspire new possibilities (p. 22). For example, the discussion around human reliance on nature and bees both highlights the current issues but also allows us to imagine different futures where these issues are faced. The images of future do not necessarily need to be the most realistic or absolute, but they need to show us that there are more options than to continue as-is and hope for the best.

Body in capitalism

Figure 2a. A detail from the zine entitled "Body, body, body", photo by Visa Keskinen.

The zine entitled "Body Body Body" (Figures 2a–e) explores the relationship of capitalism to the body trough images revolving around the themes of reproduction, labour, gender-roles, racism, beauty, and liberation. Bodies are an interesting entry point to retheorisations of capitalism as they are at the centre of both human life and societal control. The zine consists of multiple yellow pages. There is an image of a naked baby with the word "body" written all around it in red, green and black crayon (Figure 2a). Around the baby, a red halo is drawn in a child-like manner. The image

of the baby can serve as a motif for the beginning of the life cycle and the first steps of humanity. On the other hand, it can represent innocence prior to being 'tainted', objectified, and exploited by the capitalist systems.

Observed as a whole, the zine deals with the theme of capitalist reproduction. It develops into a commentary on the centrality of labouring bodies and labour power in capitalism. On one of its pages, I placed newspaper cut outs that discuss the declining fertility rate with text written over them that says: "Not enough white babies" (Figure 2b). This references the ways in which many industrialised Western countries seem to be ever-so-focused on declining birth rates and its effects on the working populations— on the availability of the kind of labour that capitalism needs to reproduce itself (Ross, 2023; Jones, 2022; Weiss, 2021)

Indeed, the motif of a body is in a key role in capitalism and its analyses: David McNally (2017, p.1) links the working body under capitalism to sub-Saharan African and Haitian mythos of zombies as "unthinking, body-machines, lacking identity, memory and consciousness – possessing only the physical capacity to labour". He further argues, through Marxist theory, that capitalism is dependent on the exploitation of the human labourer, but also that liberation of the body struggles against the abstract nature of capitalism and cannot be done without radically transforming the relationship between persons and things.

Moreover, scholars of racial capitalism have also reminded that the concern over the declining birth rate mostly applies to white people and is a concern because it is a threat to white supremacy. As Riley et al. (2022) note, abortion and control over reproductive health can be rooted in racism and white supremacy. Since access to safe abortion is a vital part of healthcare, attempts to control them can show us critical information about the fragile nature and developments in societal power structures. For example, Sudenkaarne and Blell (2022) argue that healthcare and healthcare politics needs bioethical consideration of power-structures such as racism and sexism.

Figure 2b. A detail from the zine entitled "Body, body, body", photo by Visa Keskinen.

The text "murdered and missing indigenous babies" (Figure 2b) provides a reference to the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in Canada and the United States, which further highlights the racist structures behind justice systems (Joseph, 2021). As Rauna Kuokkanen (2008) has argued, global capitalism represents a multifaceted attack to indigenous women's existence as it furthers their marginalisation and undermines indigenous peoples' right of self-determination. I placed a reference to MMIW here to illustrate that despite the capitalist focus and interest toward labouring bodies, not all bodies are treated equally. This text highlights the ways in which racialised bodies are seen as "less" important than white bodies. This point is also made by racial capitalism scholars who argue that capitalist accumulation requires disposability and unequal differentiation of human value, most often through racism and white supremacy (Melamed, 2015).

In the zine, there is a page discussing reproductive rights as well as women's role as homemakers (Figure 2c). It contains text cut from a *Time* magazine from around the 1970s criticising women's liberation, which encouraged rejection of "traditional roles as mother and homemaker". On top of the text cut out I wrote the words "Labor for labor" and "Nurture love care". "Labor for labor" is a wordplay on homophones of labour as an act of giving birth and labour as in working (using the American variant of the word labour). By placing it there, I wanted to draw attention to how reproduction can be tied to the need for a steady supply of workers as social reproduction feminists have highlighted (Weiss, 2021). For example, Weiss (2021) shows how social reproduction exposes tension between the reproduction of capitalist society and the wellbeing of people in it but also rests on structures of inequality both domestically and globally.

Figure 2c. A detail from the zine entitled "Body, body, body", photo by Visa Keskinen.

The text "Nurture love care" as well as the drawn vaginas and the bleeding flower all tie into gender roles—especially the traditional notions of women as homemakers.

It resonates with Schult's (2006) idea of how reproductive labour, while necessary, is often overlooked and unpaid, but also manifests in different ways across the categories of race, class, and gender. Additionally, Tronto (1993) and Kuokkanen (2011) point out how care-work, such as work done by stay-at-home parents, is often undervalued in comparison to wage labour and production.

In the zine, there is also a pull-tab with an image of a man with x's for eyes and a text: "in the end we die". In the composition of the zine, this closes the circle of reproduction and serves as a reminder that death will come to everyone equally. However, in capitalist societies, even death is not truly equal. For example, Mezzadri (2022) demonstrates, how marginalised bodies were over-exposed to health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also how the role of these 'surplus lives' is to be disposable under racial capitalism and neoliberal regime. As Mezzadri (2022, p. 390) notes, "the dehumanising narrative of given people as less worthy of being saved in a context of limited resources was presented as rational choice."

While political economists and social reproduction feminists have highlighted that the body is a way to produce and reproduce labour, it is also tied to capitalist dynamics as a vital support for consumerist and capitalist cycles. With this zine, I also wanted to explore the role of the body in capitalism by prompting questions such as: How are the ways in which we are displeased with ourselves artificially reproduced by capitalist structures and how do they support capitalist functions? The zine also features an image of a naked woman with red markings around her and covering her eyes as well as highlighting different parts of her body (Figure 2d). It brings attention to the ways in which the sexualised and objectified person is often also dehumanised (Bernard & Wollast, 2019; Wollast et al. 2018). This is not to say that sexuality and sex are inherently harmful, but we need to carefully examine the power structures that are reproduced through capitalist sexualisation and the commodification of marginalised bodies.

Figure 2d. A detail from the zine entitled "Body, body, body", photo by Visa Keskinen.

Feminist scholars have also pointed out how subjects are enmeshed in cycles of desires in patriarchal capitalism (Lewis & Hames, 2011). Halberstram (2011, p.95) argues that the commodification (of feminine bodies) depends on hetero-normative visual and erotic desires, which are deployed for example in advertisements. Furthermore, in the current digital age, sexualised labour, self-commodification, and pornographisation affect cultural consumption practices, for example, in social media (Drenten et al. 2020). The image of the naked woman then, on the pages of the zine, suggests that these changing dynamics should be further examined in relation to capitalism and its entanglement with the sexualised body.

Beside the woman there is a text "The Self-Centered Generation" and "I am not (white, thin, pure, smart...) enough" (Figure 2d). Written in different colours of crayon with the words overlapping each other, the text is intentionally difficult to read. With these words, I wanted to highlight the conflicting ways in which capitalism affects self-image: on one hand, bodies are sexualised and made the object of desire, but, on the other hand, consumerism thrives on the idea that a person is not "enough". For example, under patriarchal capitalism, women are often driven to transform their bodies and themselves to be perfect and desirable (Lewis & Hames, 2011).

Expanding the notion of beauty to include marginalised bodies might seem like a worthy goal, but Snider (2018) reminds us that 'beauty' is a socially constructed exclusionary category that upholds power hierarchies. They further argue that expanding the notion of 'beauty' to include different types of bodies such as fat, old, and disabled is often just a way for corporations to increase their consumer-base and profits. This understanding of beauty is represented by the image of an old man peeking with the text "show me your body" above it (Figure 2d). I chose to include this motif in the zine to represent the hidden forces that drive the sexualisation and dissatisfaction of bodies that are marginalised in the sense of not being considered beautiful in conventional thinking. The text "Making more love" as well as the three-dimensional lips that pop out of the page almost attacking the viewer represent how sexualisation is often non-consensual and forced onto people (Figure 2d). It also highlights the different ways in which different bodies are sexualised and others even fetishised (see Benard, 2016).

Furthermore, the zine features a page with an image of three women dressed in white reaching for the sky with their upper bodies rising from the paper (Figure 2e). They are decorated with red crayons and green glitter with the text "Rise" written above them. This final page of the zine represents the possibility of emancipation. It suggests rising beyond and not accepting the capitalist control over one's body. The last image originally represented women doing an "anti-fertility dance", representing their denial of societal norms and expectations placed on women. Within the zine, it can also be understood to represent other ways people can deny capitalist and neoliberal expectations aimed towards bodies. One such way could also be rejection of beauty and embracing ugliness as a political tool.

Figure 2e. A detail from the zine entitled "Body, body, body", photo by Visa Keskinen.

Because beauty is a neoliberal concept that is culturally created, the concept of ugliness is also tied to different structures of power and systemic oppressions that include issues of race, weight, dis/ability and wealth (Snider, 2018). Utilising ugliness can be both a way to mobilise transgressive politics, but also to showcase the dissatisfaction towards social standards that encourage self-hatred (Fanghanel, 2020; Eileraas, 1997). As Snider (2018, p. 343) remarks, "ugliness doesn't sell like beauty". Hence, actively becoming ugly, grotesque, and unmarketable can be a form of liberating oneself from the objectification and demands of capitalism.

Capitalism and violence

Are humans naturally selfish and violent as Hobbesian and neoliberal economic interpretations might lead us to conclude? The idea that human action is motivated by self-interest is also known as "psychological egoism" and has been widely accepted by political economists, psychologists, and philosophers alike (Feinberg, 2012). For example, Hobbes proposes in his classic work *Leviathan*: the natural condition of mankind is that beyond states the law of nature compels that men are enemies to one another (Hobbes, 1996).

The collage (Figure 3) entitled "The big headache" explores the different ways in which capitalism is reliant on the various forms and structures of violence and how they reinforce one another. Max Weber famously argued that: "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber 1991, p. 1). If this defines states, then our baseline understanding of states as international actors shows how fundamentally reliant the international status quo is on violence.

Figure 3. The big headache, photo by Visa Keskinen.

The collage consists of multiple different elements. It has been built from ripped pieces of paper glued onto a red background. In the right corner, there is a large text "the big headache", which serves as the title of this collage. It also references the way in which violence is often thought to be annoying, but inevitable—like a headache, some approach it as a natural function of human body. But headache should not be the natural state or the norm of how a human body functions.

On the left side there is an image of the world's atomic resources with a red text "Doom is acceptable for the economy" written over it. This brings attention to the ways in which capitalism, militarism and power-structures are intertwined. Previously, Rosa Luxemburg (1951 p.454) argued that capitalism in reliant and inseparable from colonialism and militarism. Similarly, Mrozowski (2019) links capitalism and colonialism throughout historical processes, making Luxemburg's abstract arguments more concrete. In addition, Antal (2018) argues that the new forms of militarist capitalism incorporate aspects of warfare to our everyday life through hybrid-forms of warfare created especially by right-wing populist regimes. Furthermore, Onbaşı (2016) analyses the ways in which capitalism, nationalism, militarism, and patriarchal structures are merged, and how its hegemony is felt in daily routines. The collage visualises the links between capitalism and oppressive structures of power while also prompting reflection on whether peace is compatible with the capitalist economy.

Below, there is a text that says "more bombs than ever" as well as an image of a war airplane and a tank behind it. Over this, there is a text "war is a child's play", which I wrote in crayon. On one hand, this is a way to challenge the assumption of war as something inevitable by pointing out the immaturity of aggressive responses. Even children can resolve their issues by violence, but it takes time to learn to handle conflicts constructively. On the other hand, it shows that war affects children's development and, for example, what kind of games they play (Bankova, 2017).

With these motifs in the collage, I wanted to bring attention to the concept of violence beyond direct physical harm. My idea was that this allows us to better understand the functions of our global society that cause harm to different populations. For example, through Johan Galtung's (1969; 1990) concepts of direct, structural, and cultural violence or Rob Nixon's (2011) notion of 'slow violence' (covert violence that occurs out of sight), the mechanisms of violence can be understood. By scrutinising multiple concepts of violence, we can recognise the different structures that capitalism can use to ensure access to cheap labour and natural resources as well as combat resistance and encourage consumerism.

The point that I wanted to make in this collage is that retheorising capitalism also requires us to rethink our approach and stance on violence. The collage attempts to simultaneously make visible and denaturalise the role of violence in capitalism. Taking a suggestion from Rob Nixon's (2011, 13) idea of a "representational bias against slow violence", it says that we need to critically engage with the notion that violence is a "necessary evil" or something natural. Finally, in addition to retheorising our dependence on violence, we need to actively engage with initiatives that challenge these norms and values. When the structures of society are intertwined with violence, it is no surprise that advocating for peace and ending violence is seen as controversial. Nixon (2011, p.15) further proposes that we need imaginative measures that helps us make the insidious and imperceptible tangible. While Nixon refers to imaginative writing, another way to do this could be by collaging or using other creative methods.

There is also a ripped piece of paper depicting a graph of the stock market in the collage. This piece extends beyond the boundaries of the paper. The ripped pieces remind of the way paper cutting machines cut paper into thin strips. Behind the ripped paper, some images of coins can be seen. They indicate how the neoliberal economic order itself can be seen as a form of violence (Nixon, 2011, p.10). At the centre of the piece, there are cigarettes that represent the way capitalism's "addiction" to violence, and the harm it causes, tends to remain hidden. As Nixon (2011) suggests with the notion of slow violence: it is something more insidious and deceptive than direct forms of violence such as wars.

To the upper corner of the page, I placed an image of a monstrous-looking bug. It creates a contrast to the Nixonian idea of the 'slowness' and 'hiddenness' of violence and, through its spectacularity, reminds us of the horrible nature of violence and war. Below the bug, there is a green image of Uncle Sam balancing on top of stilts and creating a shape similar to a dollar symbol ($). This is an attempt to show how fragile capitalism is. Rather than being a mere "bug" in the system, uncertainty and economic collapses are a feature of capitalism. As political economists remind us, capitalism is built on contradictions that incite a broad range of complex societal struggles (Fraser, 2017)

Much of neoclassical economic analysis also relies on the assumption that individuals rationally pursue their interests egotistically (Bowie, 1991). Some traditions adopt egoism itself as an ethical position, and assume that by pursuing their own happiness, general happiness can also be achieved (Spencer, 1881; Bowie,

1991). These understandings of humans are often used as an explanation for the ongoing violence in our lives. The traditions of economics and politics both rely on assumptions of selfishness in humans. But what if this was not the case? Bowie (1991) challenges egocentric paradigms and argues that these models are seriously flawed. This also ties into Eskelinen et al.'s (2020a) idea of utopias as counter images. If we limit our understanding of humans to violent egoistical creatures, we fail to seek out alternatives to our current systems.

To give alternatives to egoism-based economic models, we can listen to and learn from, for example, indigenous communities. Many indigenous communities rely on subsistence based economic systems that do not centre around exchange for profit, but rather the sustenance of the community and the surrounding environment through endless circulation of goods. However, these models are often dismissed as "primitive", and they have been actively restricted by colonial powers alongside the active eradication of indigenous people. (Kuokkanen, 2011). By beginning to question our perceptions of human nature as selfish or violent, we can both question the necessity of war and violence as pillars of economy and widen our perception of the possible utopian futures.

What do ugly plates teach us about capitalism?

When making clay plates as a Christmas present for my brother, I had no intention of them looking like I had smeared ketchup all over them. When I finally saw the final product and the terrifying massacre forever immortalised on three small plates, I wanted to close my eyes and forget ever making them. It was not an educational moment in which I could learn to make better plates in the future. To me, it just felt like a punch in the gut. After all my hard work, I produced pieces that I was ashamed to show anyone.

The Western idea where 'failure is not an option' (Smith & Henriksen, 2016) is not the only way to approach mistakes. For example, in Navajo communities, the spirit line or *ch'ihónít'i* can represent purposeful mistakes that create a symbolic path for the survival of the weaving tradition (Yohe, 2012, p.28). The Japanese idea of *wabi-sabi* refers to a feeling when we encounter unpretentious, imperfect, and essentially authentic beauty (Kempton, 2018). I do not think that my ketchup-plates evoke any feeling of *wabi-sabi* nor is it a cultural tradition to be kept alive, however, in some sense, their imperfection can teach us about how to approach societal transformation.

Capitalism and failure are connected through the idea that for one to win, someone else must fail, as Halberstam (2011) suggests. Halberstam also connects failure to queerness, as homosexuals embody a failure in production and reproduction. In contrast: "The queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness" (Halberstam, 2011, p.96). Similarly to collages, my way of making ceramics is undisciplined and, as such, queer (Kangas et al., 2019). The ugly plates I made truly fail to embody the neoliberal standards of consumer culture: they are an eyesore and are made without profit orientation.

Figure 4. Ugly plates, photo by Visa Keskinen.

The plates also call to mind the way Osborne (2018) writes about accepting failure and loss. They argue that feminists, anti-racists, and queer activists are constantly losing to the rising forces of the alt-right, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchal capitalism. Instead of taking this message as a sign to finally give up—and maybe do some mindfulness exercises to become happier—Osborne suggests embracing this loss and finding the transformative power of failure. They argue that loss, negative feelings, and trauma should be felt because they are political and rich with possibilities (and impossibilities): "I dig ashes, blood, bone, and shit into my garden bed. They help things grow" (Osborne, 2018, p. 5).

Tackling an issue as vast as retheorising capitalism can be a daunting task that leaves one feeling completely incompetent to take even one step forward. Even smaller tasks like taking a shower, getting out of bed, or beginning to write can feel so impossible that it is easier to do nothing and stare at the ceiling for hours. If I cannot do it perfectly, then what is the point? If I cannot change everything, then why even bother? We are so unaccustomed to the thought of failure that it is easier to do nothing than to do something imperfectly. That is where the political power of failure comes from. It mobilises us and helps us act even if the outcome is not what we had originally planned. To be comfortable with failure means having the ability to do things, to create, and to try. Smith and Henriksen (2016) argue that failure—more specifically, the ability to try again despite failure—is essential for creative thinking. While creativity can be a way to uphold neoliberal values such as risk-taking or individualisation (Smith & Henriksen, 2016), it also has value in disturbing neoliberal hegemony. When we understand utopian thought as a creative practice (Eskelinen et al., 2020a), using that imagination for concrete societal change requires us to also accept failing time and time again. In this sense, making ugly plates repeatedly can be a valuable tool in generating transformative politics.

Osborne (2018) also encourages us to turn and listen to people who have already experienced catastrophic losses but still live and nurture the world around them: indigenous people. They remind us that we should not appropriate or centre ourselves in the conversation of failure and should be aware of the ways others' worlds have been destroyed for our benefit. Instead of looking for a revolution in Western monorealism, we should take the time to cultivate a space to care for the multiple subaltern worlds that already exist in the cracks of urban spaces and where those excluded from society converge (Osborne, 2018). Capitalism is built on exclusionary power structures. Therefore, it is vital to care for and empower the spaces excluded from neoliberal society also in order to retheorise capitalism.

We need to breathe life into creating spaces that are gentle and offer us moments of counter-hegemonic warmth and kindness, care, nurturing, affection, and make the utopian alternative concrete (Osborne, 2018). We can learn to love and care for the imperfect by crafting failed pieces. When handing my clay plates as a gift to my brother, he was visibly happy and spent time carefully wrapping them so they would not be damaged when returning home. This interaction changed the plates from being only a representation of my incompetence to a gift capable of bringing joy and connecting people together.

Growing up as a perfectionist, allowing myself to accept failure was never an option. However, by giving myself the space and opportunity to enjoy failing, I find that I am also reclaiming my time and my body. By challenging the values of productivity and efficiency, failure itself can be a revolutionary act against capitalism. Therefore, as Halberstam (2011, p. 110) suggests,

> If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate.

The final collage

The collages and the bowl experiment demonstrate how utopian thought and the active rejection of neoliberal values can be useful in retheorising capitalism. In the first collage, I illustrated how utopian imagination can provide us with alternatives to current society. The second collage explored the ways in which capitalism controls bodies and how this can be challenged by rejecting beauty as an ideal. The third collage attempted to denaturalise the role of violence in capitalist societies and proposed that, to see alternatives to the violent status quo, we need to question what we perceive as natural human behaviour. Finally, the bowl experiment highlighted the importance

of failure and imperfection in beginning to build alternatives to capitalism in our contemporary society.

My experimentation with collages was based on the idea that seemingly in compatible themes can be connected in surprising ways. It also shows that, when looking for alternatives to the current status quo, we cannot focus on individualised issues. This resonates with Eskelinen et al. (2020b), who point out the rise in private forms of hope. This means that people aim to change their current situations for the better, for example, by turning to entrepreneurship or by escaping the daily grind by choosing a simpler life. However, this is a form of false emancipation lacking transformative power. It is no surprise that popular escapist fantasies rely on individualism. Like individualistic hope, the neoliberal and capitalist emphasis on mindfulness—also referred to as 'McMindfulness'—is an attempt to reach individual fulfilment without societal transformation (Hyland, 2017). As Wrenn (2022) argues, due to the neoliberal focus on individual accountability, society also becomes comprised of self-interested individuals who seek to forward their own agendas. These self-centred modes of transformation cannot change the societal dynamics that cause dissatisfaction in the first place.

Instead, the solutions for transformative utopias can be found in social and collective hope that presents alternatives to the current status quo. The question remains: Where and how the skills related to utopian imagination can be fostered? How to identify common aspirations for collective action among diverse groups of people (Eskelinen et al., 2020b)? David Gauntlett (2011) suggests that making and creating can connect people, ideas, and materials within social and physical environments. Craft is, indeed, often associated with women coming together, and can rarely be done completely alone, detached from any communal activity, because even the manufacturing of materials often requires multiple skills and forms of labour (Rippin & Vachhani, 2018). The ways in which making and crafting can bring communities together could also be a way to foster collective utopian imagination and transformative politics, as exemplified by collaging. After all, making and crafting is not only connecting and social, but also embodied. As Rippin and Vachhani (2018, p.213) write: "We seem to be surprised by our own delight in our ability to make things ourselves." In crafting, we leave traces of ourselves in the things we make, and therefore crafting becomes both personal and embodied (Rippin & Vachhani, 2018). Expanding this idea to collaging shows us how it can be used to make the collective utopia into something concrete.

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