Uncaptured desires

What affirms our political imaginaries?

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1.

As a younger activist I used to find it puzzling that some people who suffer the most from inequalities in capitalist society had little interest in radical egalitarian imaginaries, in the form of, for example, communal solidarity economies.[1] Certain individuals were attracted to groups defending those ideas only temporarily in crisis situations, when their access to jobs, land, housing, resources was at risk. Others found them unrealistic or unattractive. Given their frequency, I also found it odd that interpersonal rejections and break-ups in the mundane life of organising did not receive more attention. The risks of ascribing a romanticised homogenous agency to subaltern groups who might have different priorities and preferences were perhaps revealed[2], but reflections on these differences and their implications for activism and critical theory were limited. The poor reception of egalitarian ideas could be attributed to the hegemony of neoliberalism that prevents people from imagining a life beyond it or to the failure of social movements to make those ideas palpable to broader audiences. Therefore, one should work harder and wait for the right political and social conditions to make radical visions heard and seen. But this attitude put these visions in a privileged position, offering them exemption from critical scrutiny.

In this essay, I take seriously the moments of mismatch between political ideals and the people they appeal to for change. Rather than reading such moments as another notch on the long list of defeats feeding our left-wing melancholia or as missed opportunities to be seized again under correct circumstances, I propose to analyse them on their own terms, as a reality to acknowledge with humility, whose investigation can speak back to the very roots of radical imaginaries. I examine various groups' engagements and dis-engagements with particular visions and practices by using ethnographic, historical evidence from secondary literature as well as my past experience as an activist and engaged researcher. Experiments on collective property and cooperatives serve as ethnographic vignettes opening up to broader issues on the contradictions of political imaginaries, whose desirability is often taken for granted. I pay self-reflexive attention to my own failures in grasping the complexity of life forms, with the hope that the lessons I derive go beyond my immediate experience and become relatable for others. The overarching question which I attempt to answer is this: When people who are invited to defend and implement a political ideal have little interest in its promises, how should the ideal cope with refusal?[3]

2.

Two great ethnographers of urban and rural Brazil, Kathleen Millar and Wendy Wolford, took seriously the question of abandonment in the context of two cooperative projects. In one of the chapters of Millar's ethnography, we see a group of *catadores* (reclaimers) who build a cooperative called ACAMJG (Associação dos Catadores do Aterro Metropolitano de Jardim Gramacho / Association of Collectors of the Metropolitan Landfill of Jardim Gramacho) with its own recycling facility, trucks and customers. What starts as a therapeutic group conversation led by Tiao, one of the reclaimers working on the garbage dump in Jardim Gramacho, Rio de Janeiro, on how to improve reclaimers' conditions over a drink turns, by 2004, into an institutionalised system of waste manage-

ment. In order to make the cooperative viable within the broader recycling economy, the leading activists oblige all members to accept weekly payments due to lack of reserves, to wear the cooperative uniforms while collecting waste, to schedule in advance when the truck will pick up the collected material and to make a discount on materials deemed dirty. They prohibit advance payments, use of drugs at the recycling facility and side-selling of recyclables to scrap dealers. Many *catadores* who are used to selling their waste to any dealers in exchange for immediate cash, demand advance money when they need it and go to work only when they want to, find it hard to adhere to these disciplinary measures. Most of them had returned to the dump after they had worked in formal jobs to avoid the coercive discipline of wage work and have a more fluid life rhythm. The freedom to choose when to work, how to work and when to get paid has a higher worth than better prices offered by the cooperative. Those who prefer a more stable and regular life stay, others leave. As Tiao's sister, Gloria, the manager of the cooperative, says 'The ones who withdrew from ACAMJG withdrew because they were not able to live under the rules. They were not able to adapt'.[4]

Cautious of facile interpretations which could see in this fall-out a tension between a solidarity economy and individualistic attitudes, Millar explores different forms of solidarity hidden in the fabric of everyday life on the dump: *truta*, a work partnership to share earnings between two *catadores*, helps to encourage, motivate, help each other by making garbage work an uplifting experience. Made up of workers who live on the dump rather than travelling back and forth to their remote towns, *unions* accept members who share the daily work of bringing water, cooking and cleaning. They emerge, disappear, re-emerge and persist in some form on the dump to support people who need a place to live. Collective mobilisations are not rare, either to protest against dealers who reduce prices or about the unfair practices of the company which manages the dump. They emerge occasionally when people feel there is an injustice to resist. The dump is generative of different forms of living, sharing and resisting of which the ACAMJG is only one example. Leaving the cooperative indicates less an incapacity for collective organisation than a choice to mobilise other forms of self-organising.[5]

15 years before ACAMJG, an agricultural production cooperative named Copagro was being established on a Vento settlement in Santa Caterina, southern Brazil, by the members of the Landless Workers' Movement, MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra). The cooperative had a fate similar to ACAMJG, gradually losing many of its member families. MST leaders who are very successful in mobilising landless people for occupations, explained these failures as the incapacity of certain individualistic peasant groups to adapt to the 'New Society' the movement is building. Wolford disagrees: Farming families had a strong egalitarian ethic praising hard work. They embraced the cooperative at the beginning due to their long-standing experience of cooperation and mutual aid. They also liked the idea of making investment in machinery which would upgrade the value of their work and which they could never afford on their own. However, the rules brought about by the MST leadership contradicted the customs and rhythms of communities, similar to what happened in Jardin Gramacho as depicted by Millar: families were forced to buy subsistence food from the cooperative market rather than producing for themselves, children were not allowed to work and be remunerated, cooperative leaders were appointed by MST leadership rather than from the community ranks and they did little physical work. Specialisation of tasks was incompatible with diversification and rotation, generating feelings of boredom, unfairness and the comparison of those who worked more with those who worked less.[6]

Despite the failure of this initial cooperative, most families in the South who used to migrate wherever land was available still represented MST's ethos of small family farmers as the backbone of a more egalitarian society. Successful MST occupations appealed to these families in a period of land shortage caused by powerful landlords and environmental degradation. The reality in the Pernambuco state of the North-East, however, was strikingly different. Communities lacked strong ties, children left home to seek work at a young age, most individuals worked in sugar plantations and changed employer when conditions worsened. They joined the MST mostly for pragmatic reasons, due to the crisis in the sugarcane industry. Once these rural workers accustomed to working independently were turned into settlers, their reservations about collective work persisted. In one case, settlers resisted the plans to work for a large fish pond that would be managed by the whole settlement, funded by the gov-

ernment. Traditional understandings of community and compensation contradicted their perception of the need to remunerate individual work with wages. These groups were reluctant to plant alternative crops dictated by the MST and left the movement once the sugar cane industry revitalised.[7]

Neither Wolford nor Millar impose a moral judgement on decisions to join or leave a collective project. Instead, they pay close attention to differences in meanings attached to individual, family and community rhythms of work, as well as to perceptions about what constitutes a good and desirable life. They reflect on how these differences lend support to or challenge the validity of a particular imaginary in a particular time and place. Theirs is a rare call to relativise political mobilisations which are sometimes frozen in their moments of glory rather than examined through everyday fractures.

3.

Some of the waste pickers I met in Ankara for the first time in 2007 had little interest in the idea of a recycling cooperative that some activists and workers from the waste pickers' movement were testing the waters for. The movement had gained momentum as a response to rising violence towards waste pickers. The municipal police were forcing waste pickers, who worked over the public bins in thousands of urban streets, to sell their waste at a lower price to a multinational investor who had bought the management rights of the largest dump and confiscated the metal carriers used to gather and manually transport waste. By the time I met them, they were selling the second issue of their magazine, consisting of the poems, stories and short articles written by waste pickers themselves. With its unique focus on the emotions and aspirations of waste pickers, the magazine became a big hit in a short period of time, mobilising large public support for the protection of waste pickers.

Having followed one of the organisers to warehouses to satisfy my curiosity about this story, I quickly found myself doing more activism than research. While spending my days in recycling warehouses, public bins and squatter settlements, I joined the discussions around the possibility of building a recycling cooperative. At the time waste pickers' movements were growing in the Global South, with the shared demand to be recognised as recycling workers rather than informal scavengers. They were building associations, unions and cooperatives, increasing their bargaining power in the market and entering public bids for waste collection in municipal districts. Like some organisers, waste pickers and informal warehouse owners, I was dreaming of seeing similar collective enterprises in Turkey. Recycling traders were reaping the fruit of waste pickers' hard work. It only made sense to join forces to alter power relations and have a more formal representation at the municipal level.

I would soon realise that the desires, interests and ambitions around a simple warehouse were stronger than I could imagine. It was still two years before the price of recyclable materials would plummet with the world financial crisis and the informal recycling economy was growing to satisfy local and foreign investors. A warehouse was very easy to build in a shanty town, to rent at a cheap price in an abandoned industrial zone and to replace in case of evacuation. Some of those who ran a warehouse wanted to expand it by hiring new workers or buying from smaller warehouses lacking transport means. The ones who worked for a warehouse wanted to open one. Some received advance money from large warehouse owners to open their own place in exchange for regular waste supply. There were also those who simply wanted to continue working with family members for a regular income. Owning one's own small business mattered to people. The city was enclosed by a web of warehouses, some of which were barely surviving in conditions of poverty, while others pursued fantasies to grow. Despite the love and respect I had for waste pickers who were becoming my friends, I was coming to the conclusion that in economic matters, some of them were too cautious and individualistic to act together.

At the beginning, I was unable to grasp forms of solidarity within waste picking communities properly, since they were not framed within grander narratives of egalitarianism. Millar would have known how to appreciate them: one of the largest migrant communities who had come to Ankara and started collecting wastepaper, had divided the city centre according to a type of customary rights, which were not equally distributed, yet allowed every family to have a particular spot to collect waste. When new communities arrived, they found new routes and neighbourhoods to work over public bins and this process of sharing the urban space evolved without

centralised planning and conflict. In the summer period young seasonal migrant workers came to the capital city to earn some money for school expenditures or family. Settled waste pickers would open various spots for these young migrants and share their own workspace. More dangerous, risky and physically demanding, scrap metal collection pushed some waste pickers to work in pairs or groups who would carry heavy materials together, protect each other against possible risks in the late evenings and share earnings.

Solidarity was not confined to spatial organisation. Financial contributions were also common within settled waste picking communities connected via kinship bonds. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch show how the relationship between short term individual gain and long-term social order is one of the fundamental questions that societies seek to answer.[8] Communities in very different geo-political spaces perform special rituals to transform polluted individual money gained in the market into a morally acceptable form without a social purpose. In the case of waste pickers, money was desirable and legitimate as an end in itself. Moral justification lay in the obligation to give some part of this individual money to the community during wedding and funeral rituals. The long-term survival of the community and their family components relied on these monetary contributions.

Waste pickers did not have to speak my language of solidarity and egalitarianism in order to practice those values. Some warehouses in the inner city hosted the unemployed, migrant individuals with past convictions, young kids who escaped violence at home or school, workers who sought freedom from atrocities of sweatshops and factories. Similar to them, I enjoyed stories told around the fire in the yard, pouring tea into dozens of cups on a big tray and sharing them, observing care and compassion for newcomers; a home without kinship and blood ties, everyone being the elder brother of another, no one being judged. Experiments led by certain organisers to turn some warehouses into a collective sharing income, food, books and debates on alternative futures refused to be captivated by the economic logic of recycling units.

That individualism and solidarity do not have to be mutually exclusive is further qualified by Harry Walker's ethnography of Urarina community in the Peruvian Amazon. Walker suggests that Urarina are obsessed with individual autonomy and ownership. Each person in the community aspires to own at least one item as a material possession, which embodies self-sufficiency. The rules, institutions and corporate custodianship required by collective ownership are entirely antithetical to their way of thinking.[9] However sharing remains the paramount moral virtue as can be seen in eating rituals. Although hunting is a solitary act, people expect the hunter to share the food widely. How the meat will be allocated depends on the hunter's distribution rights.[10]

The prerequisite of this collective act is the separation of the giver from the receiver. This was antithetical to my thinking, which considered collective ownership as a precondition for common good, solidarity in egalitarian terms. To complicate things further, there were communities which did not feel that they had to stick to one particular organisation. Depending on their needs, they could shift between social orders, moving, for instance, from egalitarian forms of decision-making in the winter months to disciplining hierarchical forms during the summer hunting season.[11]

The more my own thinking was pushed by encountering other life forms, the more I was able to catch the

nuances pertaining to the meanings of ownership and property in waste pickers' everyday lives. The search for individual gain and property ownership was gradually losing its pejorative connotation in my mind. I was able to make new connections between my previous observations. For example, I was deeply sensitive about the forced migration of Kurdish waste pickers in the 1990s. They had been forced to leave behind all their land, cattle, houses, a whole history. But it would take time for me to comprehend that one reason behind the attachment to their individual economic property in the city was this memory of violence and dispossession. In fact, in 2004, when the local authorities wanted to demolish informal recycling warehouses they had built, these waste pickers refused to live the same traumatic history twice and burnt their own warehouses in a moment of collective rage. As with a piece of land to cultivate or cattle to graze, a warehouse or a truck were not regarded simply as material property: they were the anchor by which those communities were building new roots and histories.

Replacing the narrow lens of individualism with a wide angle one, I began to think that the association of individual desire for growth and prosperity solely with the capitalist motive for accumulation or profit-making might also be inaccurate. In her long-term ethnography of Indonesian Highlanders, Tania Murray Li argues that the initial impulse of the community to enclose land for cocoa production was a mundane desire to have a better life for future generations, since years of hard work had not substantially changed their conditions.[12] In a similar spirit, warehouse owners who wanted to expand recycling business did not explain this only in individualistic terms; they believed that to generate wealth for others, one needed to be better off in the first place. A small individual property was a first step to gain autonomy from the obligation to sell labour power and build an independent life. Evan Killick's critical engagement with the recent discourses around *Buen Vivir* (Living Well) in South America, calling for alternative non-capitalist sustainable communal life forms based on indigenous cultures makes a similar point: the Amazonian Ashaninka with whom Evan Killick worked in Peru for over two decades engaged with the timber industry to offer a better life for their families and children, even if extraction contradicts an idealised notion of indigeneity. Rather than trying to make people fit those ideals, 'Buen Vivir needs to move from associating indigenous lives with a specific idea of communality and sociality to a more general one of self-determination.'[13]

There was another reason why the complexities of the informal economy in and around warehouses could be easily ignored while targeting the waste picker as a labourer to organise, as the precursor of an egalitarian cooperative. The waste picker who wants to expand their business seemed to be incompatible with the disheartening and beautiful photographs of young waste pickers represented in the media that depict solitary faces of hard work and dignity, reflecting the pride to make a life out of waste in poverty. Where capitalism saw the disposable, the abject, the bare lives, we saw the subject of an emerging and enticing social movement. We were moved by their stories of exclusion, their desire to be visible. We were touched by their poems deploying metaphors of waste to describe their love for young women who they could not to speak to. Researchers, journalists and activists wrote stories of those lives at the margins. The broader economy of emotions around warehouses did not fit the romantic story we had invested in.

Wolford discusses a similar romanticisation of the reality of landless peasants in Brazil, depicted by the wonderful, disheartening, yet ultimately misleading photographs by Sebastiao Salgado. She discusses how the so-called scandalous stories about those MST members who rarely live on encampments, do additional wage work, use several land plots to initiate capital-intensive technological farming are only scandalous because we would like to see them as depicted in those pictures: desperate, half-naked, attached fully to the land they occupy and share. Why can't we accept, she rightly asks, that there may be all sorts of people with different preferences within a movement? Why shouldn't dignity and livelihoods rather than the sharing of land be a movement's unifying principle?[14] I could engage in a similar questioning in my case: neither the concepts of disposable/bare lives nor of angry/conscious subjects were able to fully explain the agency of waste pickers, although they corresponded to different modes of their existence. Many might have preferred independent autonomous work over a collective enterprise, decent secure work over a constant fight for dignity in the garbage. A common metaphor they used in their poems, 'stolen dreams', suggests that they probably had many desires and aspirations which would remain

unknown to us. Our efforts to explain their subjectivities would inevitably leave something out.

This is not to deny the intrinsic and intricate relationship between the informal waste economy and the broader circuits of accumulation. Waste pickers did not need to be told how little they got by working so much. Their desire for a better life did not preclude their critical sensibilities regarding systemic economic inequalities which they experienced first hand. Tens of thousands of simple acts of collecting, sorting and storing waste nourished the appetite of global recycling capital. Some warehouse owners were growing by hiring wage labour via kinship networks, investing in transport and even, in certain limited cases, a press machine to upgrade the value of waste in the supply chain. But even in those cases, there was more value than capital could fully capture. An economy of care was enmeshed within the circuit of accumulation and it was not always possible to reduce the former to the needs of the latter. Large warehouse owners were expected to provide for their community to handle multiple challenges of urban life. Some of them were supporting the waste pickers' movement, letting organisers visit their warehouses.

The life and work rhythm of waste picking communities was not homogenous. Some collected and sold scrap metal on a daily basis, worked as temporary labourers for recycling factories. Others had much more rigid work discipline, sought to increase their waste supply and preferred saving money for the future. Those migrants who were settled in the squatter settlements in the city and those who worked as seasonal workers staying in warehouses had a different relationship to the waste economy. For seasonal migrants, waste picking was one of the many jobs they did in a range of on-farm and off-farm activities. They could easily leave for another city if municipal authorities evacuated warehouses in a specific area. For the settled groups, it was their essential job to look after their families. What kind of rules and principles of common ownership would appeal to different individuals and groups if they were to work under the same roof? Also, did they really want to be under the same roof?

Waste pickers achieved a lot during and after my time with them. A retrospective look might see the actualisation of another kind of political imaginary: a heterogeneous, fragmented, powerful mobilisation, which obtained the legitimacy to negotiate solutions to their problems with local governments and altered significantly the dominant representation of waste pickers. The informal waste picker was now a recycling worker whose contribution to environmental sustainability and dignity was recognised, whose complex forms of personhood reflected in their writings on everyday emotions and metaphysical questions about life were appreciated. The vision that organisers articulated was a world where no one would be obliged to pick waste. While fighting for the immediate improvement of their conditions and recognition of their rights as labourers, they never gave up this vision which bonded them to all other dominated classes in diverse geographies: 'We want to eliminate the conditions which reproduce us as waste pickers.'[15]

This reflection gives a partial explanation about why people may choose not to engage with particular visions. It shows how other imaginaries, such as the dignity restored to waste pickers, emerge gradually from the dialogical spaces of organising. It reminds us that a desire for a better life does not preclude a critique of capitalism, that movements include multiple voices converging and diverging over time, whose irreducibility to a singular voice should be welcomed rather than feared. However, this understanding still maintains my own vision as pure, intact, flawless, while endowing the communities that I am observing, in a subtly arrogant way, with the right to refuse it. It fails to consider the very possibility that my initial puzzle might have been ill-defined. This is what Saba Mahmood asks in her ethnography of the women's mosque movement in Egypt: In the process of translating other life worlds (in her case an illiberal movement) can one's own certainty about how the world should proceed (in her case progressive secular feminism) remain stable? She proposes proceeding with humility, with 'a

sense that one does not always know what one opposes and that a political vision at times has to admit its own finitude in order to even comprehend what it has sought to oppose.'[16]

What if I were to re-phrase my puzzle, then, by problematising the nature, rather than the target of my ideal: why should my political imaginary be superior or more desirable than other life forms? To address this question, I will turn to debates on the roots of collective ownership.

4.

In *Communal Luxury, Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, Kristin Ross mines the rich residues and afterlives of the Commune,[17] following the paths of Communards in exile in Europe, engaging with philosophers, revolutionaries and scientists who found in the Commune a prolific source of ideas. Pyotr Kropotkin collaborates with the former Communard Elisée Reclus to write a volume of *Géographie Universelle* and uses his observations and findings in Scandinavia and Siberia as a state geographer to write *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, demonstrating the natural and social basis of cooperation informing anarchist visions. Kropotkin rethinks the possibilities of the Paris Commune for agricultural self-sufficiency as part of a revolutionary strategy. In his imagination Paris solves its supply problems by using intensive horticultural methods and experimental gardening. The Commune's ideas also penetrate Marx's mind, first through his conversations with a Communard in exile, Elisabeth Dimitrieff. In these debates, historical examples of communal forms are re-discovered as potential alternatives to alienated forms of capitalist production.

Why does the Paris Commune continue to excite activists today? Following William Morris' interpretation of pre-capitalist forms of solidarity and using his expression that the 'tale of the past [i]s a parable of the days to come', Ross argues that a parable is not about reversing time but opening up a web of possibilities, a way of 'recruiting past hopes to serve present needs.'[18] If the Communards recruited the hopes of pre-capitalist forms for the nineteenth century, contemporary activists recruit the hopes of the Commune for today. J.K. Gibson-Graham engages in a similar enterprise, but they seek potentials also at the heart of contemporary capitalism. They cite numerous alternative activities within past and existing economic structures, presented as marginal or peripheral: workers' cooperatives, complementary currencies, local trading systems, peer-to-peer lending regimes, mutual aid societies, housing cooperatives. The performative ontology they defend is to make visible, credible and more real all these collaborative practices.[19] Since nothing is built in a vacuum, it is to this catalogue of tools that activists turn when they experiment with alternatives. They pick up materials, depending on their political socialisation and organisation, from the garbage dump of history and present, recycle and re-assemble them for new purposes, similar to the rag picker as described by Walter Benjamin.[20] And because capitalism is usually understood in terms of private ownership, self-interest and impersonal market exchange, we tend to select materials which represent the opposite of these features: collective ownership, mutual aid, reciprocity, amongst others, as the basis of an alternative economy.

The 'parable', the 'performative', the 'recyclable' may not shine at first glance. They may be rusty broken keys that we need to polish and repair with the hope of unlocking doors to a different future. Not everyone passes through these doors with a clear post-capitalist vision. Many people are thrown into them, into barter exchange when financial crisis evaporates monetary transactions, into occupied factories when employers abandon factories, into housing cooperatives when financial speculation eliminates the security of citizens. From these unintended origins, new experiments flourish, evolve or evaporate.

In June 2013, when an attempt at protecting a park in the centre of Istanbul by a small group of activists turned into a nation-wide protest, a unique opportunity to test the political currency of collective imaginaries came into being. The Gezi protests were an abrupt fissure in people's long-standing feelings of impotence. The communal space in Taksim Square was governed by spontaneous cooperation, with all needs met immediately by self-organising local groups. People were curious, eager to learn, participate, improvise. Former antagonisms ceded their place to a new safe space of collaboration. The desire for reciprocity and mutual aid, thought to have been eroded from the public sphere, was realised. It was truly the most memorable and beautiful June of a lifetime. Although it lasted only two weeks, this almost effortless, horizontal exchange of goods, services,

relationships and ideas became a source of inspiration. Perhaps that is why the interest in cooperatives and communal forms increased in its aftermath.[21]

It was in those years, long after my first encounter with waste pickers, that I had a chance to engage with cooperatives in different roles, as a trainer, activist and researcher. This experience altered my earlier ungrounded perception about cooperatives by qualifying it in diverse, contradictory ways. Similar to a warehouse, the meaning and impact of a cooperative was much richer and more complex than I had imagined, depending on the broader social relations in which it was embedded. A women's cooperative in a patriarchal culture is a chance for women to go out of their house, gain independence and new skills, attach a new purpose to their life. When tied to grassroots community organising, its transformative power for gender relations goes beyond its economic function. People see different benefits in the same cooperative: A farmers' cooperative means simple price security and protection against middlemen for some members, affordable innovative production techniques for others. A worker's cooperative liberates workers from despotic labour regimes, blurs the boundaries between work and leisure time, yields new forms of social bonds and ethical subjectivities. Discussions on how to spend the surplus/common value – in individual remuneration, social care, new investment, solidarity funds – help members to reflect on what is valuable to them as individuals and members of the broader society. Engagement with other cooperatives, activists and local governments generate new sources of skills, mutual learning and collaboration.

Problems and conflicts can be equally complex. The everyday life of a collective offers as much tension as joy and hope. Organising a fair division of labour, making decisions on day-to-day activities at long meetings, fixing problems can consume productive energies. There can be disagreements between incumbent members who share a collective identity and new members. Conflicts may be caused by people's sentiment of unfairness regarding the allocation of work, responsibility, power and remuneration. If open conflict resolution mechanisms are not in place, these feelings evolve into frustration and resentment. Economic instabilities can exert further pressures on the ethical economic enterprise which has to handle rising costs and market competition while also cultivating its own values.

My certitude about the superiority of my imaginary was already unsettled, I knew the particular type of economic and social organisation I was defending did not represent an inherent good, that there were various positive and negative energies it could unleash. Instruments available to cooperatives could be used to democratise and empower as well as to create new hierarchies.[22] But I also knew that no form was immune to conflict. Although I cannot do full justice to the merits of the cooperative movement in this essay, their historical trajectory suggests how cooperatives worked hard to design methods for the fair allocation of work, remuneration of labour and distribution of surplus. They learned, by trial and error, how to create dispute resolution systems, enhance participation, collaborate with other cooperatives, develop their own finance system, reduce working hours and increase leisure time. They moved from fading to flourishing, reproducing to overcoming crises, being a simple economic enterprise for income to implementing a radical vision. The tensions I found difficult to come to terms with were the grim realities of collective life that one has to face honestly in order to turn experiments into a rewarding experience.

Communal life forms are likely to haunt passionate minds seeking to build alternative futures. But I now would like to turn my eyes to another less appreciated possibility. I will ask whether there is a potential in individual property that we might be missing, which its portrayal as either a petty bourgeois attitude or understandable cultural desire is unable to capture, something powerful and emancipatory, worth integrating into the very design of our visions. To see this potential will require changing our road map and breaking the intrinsic relationship between capitalist relations and individual private property.

5.

There is a very strong reason why the common, communal, collective have been the unifying principles of many social struggles in the last few decades. Commodification of natural resources, massive expropriations and privatisations deprived thousands of communities of their right to water, energy, land and multiple livelihoods. Resistance to these processes was framed by a defense of the common against the private, collective against the

individual, because the latter spheres have consolidated the power of oligarchs, giant contractors, mining and energy companies, political elites. In the fight against neoliberal capitalism, the reclaiming of the commons and people's power represents a truly radical critique of the profit-driven hierarchical opaque markets.

Studies on the value of self-organising, rule-based common governance structures as theorised by Elinor Ostrom[23] offer geographically and historically rich evidence to sustain movements' claims. One side effect of this approach is to formulate intrinsically positive principles for common property regimes, as if they are insulated from relations of power and oppression, as Duncan Law and Nicole Pepperell point out.[24] Ostrom, say Law and Pepperell, was well aware of the perils of domination by leaders who might alter the rules to their advantage, but her assumptions on the need for consensus on rules by community members defining an institution (as a corollary of her rational choice apparatus) fell short of accommodating these reflections. Pauline Peters expresses a similar concern with regard to the increasing emphasis on the community as a means for land redistribution in Africa. Her anthropological studies underline historical forms of inequities and exclusion within the communities, which turned into deeper conflict and class formations in contemporary capitalism.[25] Daniel Curtis adds to this cautionary tale in his survey of Medieval and early modern Europe, which interrupts romanticised narratives on pre-capitalist forms of property. Commons were not fully inclusive and free for all; their benefit depended on social contexts, negotiations of power, as well as demographic and commercial pressures. Subsistence offered to the poor – the right to hunt, fish, take wood – did not compensate for deeper inequalities and for better rights (such as access to grazing) enjoyed by the more powerful.[26] Similarly, Jose Lana Berasain shows how the use and benefits from the commons were very unequal in the case of Navarro, Spain. It was only against the background of great transformations changing property relations that those practices were retrospectively tied to a discourse of equity.[27]

How to re-think, then, the relationship between various property forms, without demonising or overrating their features, without disregarding their complex, context-specific meanings and effects? In an intervention on post-capitalist property, Paddy Ireland and Gaofeng Meng offer useful insights to address this question by a close reading of Marx and Hegel. According to Hegel, private individual property was progressive, because it enabled self-development, pushing individuals to behave rationally and responsibly.[28] As Andrew Chitty points out, Marx also agreed that private property had a positive essence, because it liberated individual energies and creativity from communal constraints.[29] He also believed that one of the features of communism would be to restore property to individual workers. Nevertheless, while supporting human capacities, private property in capitalist society generated estranged forms.[30] The right to enjoy property came at the expense of others. A whole history of enclosures and dispossessions made this process unequal and brutally violent. That is why truly socialised forms of property were needed, according to Marx, so that human need for autonomy and connectedness could be reconciled.

Indonesian Highlanders whom I discussed earlier in this article, with their mundane desire to have a better life, seemed to fully agree with Hegel on the value of individual property for self-growth. Families allocated to their children, as early as the age of ten, pieces of land to cultivate. This led them to take their own responsibility for it. Highlanders considered individuals to be the owners of their capacity to work and the property they created through their sweat. They thought attempts by men to control the labour of their wives and children were unnatural and unfair. Yet this went hand in hand with cooperation: exchange of labour within families and work parties for the community members to support each other. As long as land was abundant this system continued. It was only after the enclosure of land for cocoa production and its subjugation to the market imperative that private property took an estranged form, leading to differentiation and entrapping many individuals in wage-labour. [31]

To resolve the tension between the liberating and alienating aspects of private property and unleash its further possibilities, Ireland and Meng deploy the 'bundles of rights' approach to property ownership, according to which ownership consists of various categories such as right to possess, right to use, right to manage, right to transmit, right to alienate, right to income, right to capital and so on. In a given context these individual rights can be grouped and configured differently, yielding dif-

ferent results. The question is no longer whether we should totally abolish private property or enforce collective property by ascribing an intrinsically positive value to the latter, but to ask instead how to re-configure new permutations and combinations of property rights which will not reproduce discriminatory, alienated forms of ownership and inequalities. It is then possible to divide and sub-divide those rights and allocate them to different actors and institutions. Perhaps there are some housing cooperatives which acknowledge the individual right to use and inherit, restrict the individual right to transfer and alienate in order to prevent concentration of property and profit in that way.

It is possible to pursue the traces of these questions in the minds and experiments of policy makers, intellectuals and communities who lived in socialist countries. In China, Ireland and Meng explore the opportunities offered by the Household Responsibility System (HRS), which can be thought as a hybrid property regime. The right to use, possess, manage and receive income are allocated to individual households but for specified time periods and under restrictions. This gives autonomy to households which increase productivity and economic gains, while enabling the state to maintain control.[32] Initiated by a group of households seeking to resolve their economic problems in the late 1970s and then implemented by state officials in the 1980s, HRS could be seen at first glance as a proof of individual preference against collectives. Huaiyin Li disagrees: HRS emerged in a region where collectivisation had detrimental effects due to context-specific reasons such as low access to technology, enforcement of supra village communes inhibiting group solidarity, remunerations based on household size rather than rewarding individual contributions, heavy extractive policies by the state. In those regions and periods where collectives worked in small teams, individuals were rewarded for hard work, state taxation was less restrictive and there was higher technology and productivity, collectivisation was welcome.[33] Thus, the success or failure of collectives depended on broader economic and social conditions.

The long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Chris Hann in Tázlár, Hungary offers further evidence on the potentials of hybrid property regimes and the multiple conditions to make them beneficial. During the 1960s and 70s, as part of broader plans to reform state socialism, cooperative farms established extra units in addition to farming activities and introduced an institution called household plot to 'harness the labour of their members'. [34] Households were allowed to move from self-sufficiency to market-oriented production for hogs, milk, grapes and wine. These could be sold either independently in nearby towns, or to the specialist cooperative which offered specific purchase prices and had themselves contracts with state enterprises. The state has also gradually expanded entitlements and social benefits to the countryside. Consumption goods were sold in the countryside where residents built and furnished their own houses. Those were the things enjoyed by Tázlár farmers until the synergies between various sectors disappeared quickly with neoliberalism and farmers lost against large corporations.

Hann's thoughts are in conversation with the socialist Minister of Agriculture, Ferenc Erdei, who did not live long enough to see all the positive effects of these reforms and their eventual decline. Erdei believed that the patriotic attachment of farmers to the soil did not need to be registered to a conservative ideology, it could be compatible with socialist emancipatory goals. That is why what he called 'embourgeoisement' of the village, which the Hungarian reforms achieved, could be thought as a positive step for socialism.[35] I wonder whether his ideas could be read as a critical response to some of the negative consequences of forced collectivisation in Soviet Russia after a brief period of New Economic Policy allowing individual property and market oriented production.

While Tázlár villagers were engaging with new economic experiments, a socialist intellectual in former Yugoslavia, Tibor Liska, was also thinking about alternative forms of socialist property.[36] According to Liska, once the motive of private profit and exploitation of wage-labour were abolished, everyone could be an entrepreneur in a society without having to own means of production. Individuals could be offered a 'socialist inheritance' to bid on the market for leasing or starting new business. The people who would work with these entrepreneurs would not be wage labourers but work teams who were themselves entrepreneurs.[37] On the death of their possessors, social inheritance would return to society. This idea of return is not new; it resonates with anthropological rituals to avoid the excesses of individual gain and

to reconcile them with the social order. For the Merina of Madagascar, for instance, all goods acquired in trade and war called *harena* have to be disposed of before death, because they belong to a transient world which stands in contrast to collective ancestors in the tomb.[38]

The way Gibson-Graham read Mondragon Cooperative, the world's largest and most known cooperative, underlines how successful alternatives are the ones which took seriously some of the themes recurring in these debates: the relationship between individual autonomy and collective responsibility, the synergies between various actors and institutions within the broader ecology of economic relations. Founded in 1956 by the priest José Maria Arizmendiarrieta and his students in the Basque region of Spain, Mondragon owes its remarkable expansion to a focus on social connection and interdependence between workers and citizens, according to Gibson-Graham.

Apart from specific policies on wages and zero unemployment, the cooperative made a crucial decision for individual members to delegate the power to determine the redistribution of surplus to the Working People's Bank (*Caja Laboral Popular*). The bank which acts also as a development agency took responsibility for allocating investments to advance cooperativist ideas by offering business and financial support to start-up cooperatives. The surpluses deposited were used to establish second degree cooperatives serving primary producer cooperatives: social insurance, training and education, research and development.[39] Thus, Mondragon supported new entrepreneurial ideas in society if compatible with cooperative principles; it redistributed surplus to provide care, education, health for its members and expected them to reconcile individual interest with the broader social order. Even though the cooperative went through several challenges after its international expansion including the bankruptcy of one of its subsidiaries and clashes between new acquisitions and its own structure, it remains a significant case of what it means to not only imagine, but also perform, succeed and fail in alternatives. My search for blueprints was now over. Instead I was able to fully appreciate 'practical engagements with existing institutions' and 'experiments with alternatives'[40] as the basis of post-capitalist visions. In problem solving and learning, I was coming to realise, that radical imaginaries would be nourished and thrive.

6.

It is time for my own political imaginary to take a new shape in the light of multiple institutional configurations linking autonomy and connectedness, individual and collective property, difference and alliance.

At the beginning, perhaps, the small group of activists and waste pickers committed to egalitarianism could start a cooperative by getting some funding to support their enterprise. They could start thinking about the rules on decision-making, membership and about how to express and handle conflicts. They could explore the conditions of a fair division of labour for the spheres of production and social reproduction, how to use 'common' value for the future. They could continue the publication of their magazine and bring some of the ideas in their writings to the core of the discussions at the cooperative. Then, aware of the complexity of social relations in the informal recycling economy, they could start opening the cooperative to multiple levels of engagements for different waste picking communities. Individuals and families could maintain their warehouses and sell waste to the cooperative at an agreed price, whereas regular members could have additional advantages of benefiting from investments such as a new press machine to upgrade the value of waste or education benefits offered by sister cooperatives.

The cooperative could tap the skills and networks of some small middlemen in order to reach out to small warehouses in and outside of the region by offering incentives. Some waste pickers could perceive this space solely as an income-generating activity; more ambitious ones could use it to incubate new ideas. Grassroots innovators were no exceptions in the informal economy as I had witnessed on various occasions. Some of these could be invited to use existing space and resources to develop new recycling technologies connecting the cooperative to broader global projects of environmental sustainability. Some entrepreneurial minded people who are more interested in new revenue streams could take the lead for the production of waste picker carriers in house on the condition that this would benefit the collective and those who cannot afford them.

Such forms of moral economy could be further expanded by the introduction of an innovative physical

scrap auction to trade scrap metals. This could attract, for instance, those waste pickers who might not want to formally join the cooperative yet wish to use its trading platforms. The auction could regulate prices for collectors against global market fluctuations and enhance interaction between communities and traders who are isolated from each other. As a result of these interactions, the cooperative could consider starting up or supporting a new logistics cooperative to expand its operations to other cities. Whereas the initial core group would maintain its egalitarian vision in basic operations, this evolution would make fairness rather than pure egalitarianism the regulating principle of the institution, because many people I worked with believed that every individual differed in motivation, resilience and rhythm and should thus be rewarded according to their specific contributions. They also believed that those who are less capable of looking after themselves or contributing to the collective should be supported when needed. For such forms of support, the cooperative could refer to the catalogue of communities' own practices of reciprocity and solidarity.

This jigsaw includes pieces of my imagination and examples I collected over the years. I can see how much more alluring this particular configuration might look to some people who were indifferent to my original ideas. I also see how it could be a failure, although a better one. Aren't the mundane banalities and lessons of a comprehensible failure preferable to an enigmatic romantic defeat or a missed opportunity with no chance to be tested?

Accommodating the desire for individual property, recognised with its anthropological roots and emancipatory potentials, balancing it with collective management and ownership of resources may provide the solid legitimate ground that my political imaginary seeks. This new enriched form refutes the dichotomy between individual and collective, relativises the virtues and vices of each side, speaks to people's real concerns, accommodates different interests and aspirations. Without compelling people to have an egalitarian vision, it invites them to contribute to its making, albeit in a different form.

What is still disturbing, what still does not feel right in this exercise is my relentless attempt to accommodate everything I had not anticipated in the first place. I might be right in making my vision the target of criticism and learning from its own weaknesses and others' strengths. However, while avoiding the Charybdis of purity, I am now caught by the Scylla of vanity, the illusion that a political imaginary should be able to contain all differences and desires.

I think once again of the lives and aspirations of different waste pickers, like those who lost their jobs and families and found a refuge in a warehouse welcoming them. Would they really find comfort in a cooperative with new rules? Are they obliged to renounce their loyalty to their crew, to sometimes difficult but understanding family ready to accept them as they are, in exchange for more regular work in a cooperative? Or those children whose families work so hard to give them a chance for higher education so that they do not become waste pickers. Don't their eyes tell the desire to leave the garbage forever to build new imaginaries on their own rather than being the subject of others, who reconstruct them as cooperative members?

In whatever form we attempt to organise economic and social life, something will look amorphous because its shape is not familiar to us; something will remain unsatisfied because the object of its desire is not within our sight; something will remain irrational because the immanent grounds of its rationality have not touched our feet. It is from their incompleteness that radical visions take their strength. And as I would learn, despite the stubbornness of my faith in our ability to change everything towards the greater good as I define it, the best thing an activist can do sometimes is to respect other life forms, rather than seeking to encroach on them.

Acknowledging the impossibility of capturing all desires, can help create the conditions for the humility by which our political projects have to be subdued. Admitting that one can be unwanted and rejected gives maturity to the ardent activists. It replaces the self-referential criteria of the ideal with a recognition of multiple meanings of what makes a good desirable life. More painfully, it helps them to confront the mortality of their own projects. New needs and aspirations are yet to be borne in the womb of their experiments, which may be advanced, transformed or destroyed. To take seriously decay and oblivion means taking life more seriously, here and now, in its messy, contradictory forms, rather than waiting for the sudden awakening of the ember in people, which will finally lead to an understanding of where their 'real interest' lies and affirm our political imaginaries.

After explaining to Millar how some *catadores'* life style was not adaptable to the rules of the recycling co-operative, the manager Gloria added one final sentence: '… and I'm telling you there are some who will *never* be able to adapt'.[41] She was right. Some people will never be able to adapt to the rules. We should be glad they won't.

7.

Given the amount of words spent to prove the contrary, it might seem rather odd to defend, in the final part of this essay, the initial audacity of my political imaginary. Hoping that the risk of incoherence will be superseded by the value of a dialectical twist, I state that it is not only understandable but necessary for a radical imaginary to be considered as incompatible or unacceptable by those who encounter it for the first time. If a radical proposal were to be subdued by the exigencies of its new context, if it were to understand and accept all the reasons behind the reproduction of a particular life form, its raison d'etre would be nullified. There *must* be a presupposed misfit in this original encounter; why would anyone embrace something which promises nothing but the same? It is the novel, different, wild voice of unusual ideas which attracts individuals who seek change. This voice can belong to an outsider or someone from within the community, who struggles with the contradictions of their own life form. As Steven Lukes reminds us, communities are porous and heterogeneous, hosting identifiers, quasi-identifiers, non-identifiers, anti-identifiers, multi-identifiers who interpret and relate to local norms differently. Some of these individuals may be open to the infiltration of new ideas which may expose internal discontent or dare to utter unnamed desires. If each answer were to be true in its own place for everyone in strong cultural relativist terms, there would be no conflict, no clash, no change.[42]

The ideas introduced by Tiao in Rio emerged out of his conversations with other *catadores* at the meetings of Brazilian National Movement of Catadores (MNCR). Landless settlements owe their origin to MST leaders in Brazil, Mondragon to a priest and his students in Spain. The Chinese Household Responsibility System started as a conversation between a small group of farmers who wanted to resolve a problem. The movement of waste pickers was initiated by a group of activists and waste pickers who wanted to organise informal precarious workers. Exposure to new interactions generates cross-pollinations. Thus, the weakness of a new vision lies less in its initial awkwardness than the arrogance to blame reality when its glamour is not praised by others, reluctance to develop self-reflexivity, to learn and transform.

The convoluted route I have taken now leads to a partial answer to my preamble: what validates a political imaginary is not its promises (for practical implementation can deviate from anticipation), is not its particular form (for different contexts can generate unexpected shapes), is not its content (for people may have very different accounts of worth in life), but is the dialectical process by which the imaginary's complex moments of truth and negation unfold. It cannot thrive without experimenting, succeeding, failing, learning and aging. It gets stronger only by admitting that the norms of the life form it seeks to build should not escape critical gaze.[43] That is why validation claims are almost always pragmatic, immanent and retrospective. After all, no alternative is to be found at an Archimedean point: by recognising their debt to their multiple ancestors, wrestling with and occasionally superseding them, our radical visions offer a grounded hope.

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Notes

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2. Ilan Kapoor, 'Hyper Self-reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World 'Other', *Third World Quarterly* 25:4 (2006), 627–47.
3. One could ask a similar related question regarding the disappointment of communities when some organisers and activists give up their initial impulse and abandon collective projects. But this would be the subject of another essay.
4. Kathleen Millar, *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labour on*

Rio's Garbage Dump (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 164–67.

5. Ibid., 171–75.

6. Wendy Wolford, *This Land is Ours Now: Social Mobilisation and the Meanings of Land in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 109–11.

7. Ibid., 188–92.

8. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, eds., *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

9. Harry Walker, *Under a Watchful Eye: Self, Power and Intimacy in Amazonia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 120–21.

10. Ibid., 116–17.

11. Ilana Gershon, 'Porous Social Orders', *American Ethnologist* 46:4 (2019), 407–08.

12. Tania Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

13. Evan Killick, 'Extractive Relations: Natural Resource Use, Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Protection in Peru', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 39:3 (2020), 292.

14. Wolford, *This Land is Ours*, 13.

15. For a detailed analysis of the writings and subjectivities of waste pickers and organisers, see Demet S. Dinler, *İşçinin Varlık Problemi: Sınıf, Erkeklik ve Duygular Üzerine Denemeler (Ontological Problem of the Worker: Essays on Class, Masculinity and Emotions)* (Istanbul: Metis, 2014).

16. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 199.

17. Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2016).

18. Ibid., 75.

19. J.K. Gibson-Graham, 'Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for "Other Worlds"', *Progress in Human Geography* 32:5 (2008), 616.

20. Frederik Le Roy, 'Ragpickers and Leftover Performances', *Performance Research* 22:8 (2017), 128.

21. A rich variety of cooperative cases can be found in the thematic series 'Solidarity Economies' on the independent journalism website produced by 1+1 Express Collective in Turkey. Pieces in Turkish and English include interviews conducted with local and international activists, members and leaders of cooperatives as well as articles on this theme. https://www.birartibir.org/dayanisma-ekonomileri.

22. For an analysis of how accounting can be used as a bureaucratic tool to restrain social goals or to promote social responsibility and empowerment in the comparative study of two workers' cooperatives, see Alice Bryer, 'Beyond Bureaucracies, The Struggle for Social Responsibility in the Argentine Workers' Cooperatives', *Critique of Anthropology* 30:1 (2010), 41–61.

23. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

24. Duncan Law and Nicole Pepperell, 'Oppression in the Commons: Cautionary Notes on Elinor Ostrom's Concept of Self-governance', in *Proceedings of the Australian Sociological Association Conference*, ed. G. Zajdow, Deakin University, Melbourne, 19-22 November 2018.

25. Pauline Peters, 'Challenges in Land Tenure and Land Reform in Africa: Anthropological Contributions', *World Development* 37:1 (2009), 1319.

26. Daniel Curtis, 'Did the Commons Make Medieval and Early Modern Rural Societies more Equitable? A Survey of Evidence from Across Western Europe, 1300-1800', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 16:4 (2016), 658.

27. Jose Miguel Lana Berasain, 'From Equilibrium to Equity, The Survival of the Commons in the Ebro Basin. Navarra from 15th to the 20th Centuries', *International Journal of the Commons* 2:2 (2008), 186.

28. Paddy Ireland and Geafong Meng, 'Post-capitalist Property', *Economy and Society* 46:3-4 (2017), 374.

29. Andrew Chitty (2013) 'Recognition and Property in Hegel and Early Marx', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16:4 (2013), 685–97.

30. Sharon Hutchinson highlights a similar duality for Simmel's approach to money in her ethnography of forms of exchange among the Nuer of Sudan. Money emancipates individuals from their dependence on specific ties and possessions by offering the freedom to take up business relations and cooperation anywhere. Concomitantly, it leads to avarice, possessive individualism, alienation. See Sharon Hutchinson, 'The Cattle of Money and the Cattle of Girls among the Nuer, 1930-83', *American Ethnologist* 19:2 (1992), 294.

31. Murray Li, *Land's End*.

32. Ireland and Meng, 'Post-capitalist Property', 391.

33. Huaiyin Li, 'Institutions and Work Incentives in Collective Farming in Maoist China', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 18:1 (2018), 84–5.

34. Chris Hann, 'Marketisation and Development on a European Periphery: From Peasant Oikos to Socialism and Neoliberal Capitalism on the Danube-Tisza Interfluve', *EPA, Economy and Space* 52:1 (2020), 212.

35. Ibid., 206.

36. Johanna Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 162–63.

37. For further details, possibilities and problems of Liska's model, see J. Borsany, 'Tibor Liska's Concept of Socialist Entrepreneurship', *Acta Oeconomica* 28:4 (1982).

38. Parry and Bloch, *Money and Morality*, 24.

39. J. K. Gibson-Graham, 'Enabling Ethical Economies: Cooperativism and Class', *Critical Sociology* 29:2 (2003), 145, 156.

40. Ireland and Meng, 'Post-Capitalist Property', 390.

41. Millar, *Reclaiming the Discarded*, 167.

42. Steven Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals: The Implications of Diversity* (London: Verso, 2017), 8.

43. I refer to Rahel Jaeggi's call for an immanent critique of life forms, which would reveal the contradictions of the very norms constitutive of these life forms and transform them in the process of critique. See Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019).