RADICAL TEACHER

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Collective Visioning: Igniting the Radical Imagination

by Matt York



PHOTO BY SIDES IMAGER FROM PEXELS.COM

EIMASTE EIKONA ANO TO MEANON (We are an image from the future)

- Graffiti from the 2008 Greek riots

These are dark times. As we witness the ascent of a new global axis of authoritarian capitalism and a resurgence of xenophobic nationalisms, of racism, of anti-feminist movements, of the purposeful undermining of existing democratic systems, and of the ongoing destruction of the very ecosystems upon which we depend for life itself, we might be forgiven for feeling a sense of collective despair. This experience of overwhelm is further compounded by the disorienting effects of the media saturation in which we find ourselves increasingly immersed. And to make matters worse, the neoliberal subversion of universities worldwide has significantly decreased the spaces that once produced the liberatory political ideas we might have used to lead us out of these crises. In response, movements are increasingly reverting to methods of Collective Visioning - group processes of knowledge co-production that have been developed on the streets in order to co-imagine radical social change. From Tahrir Square in Cairo, to Zuccotti Park in New York, and from Rojova in northern Syria, to the Gilets Jaunes in France, such participatory methods have been used as tools for collaboration and collective action.

These kinds of horizontal participatory methods for colearning have played a central role in my own experience as an activist and more recently in my own research and teaching within the university. Such methodologies provide opportunities for us to reappraise our usual hierarchical teacher/student roles and relations, making the case that we can collectively learn much more from within our movements than anyone might hope to teach the movements from outside. I propose that the forms of knowledge co-production used by the movements that I discuss in this article, and the method of collective visioning in particular, offer real potential for unleashing a muchneeded radical imagination to meet the times we are living in– both inside and outside the university.

Movements in Movement

Over the past decade, the world has seen an almost perpetual wave of movements circulating the globe focused on challenging multiple forms of domination and oppression, and transforming the constantly evolving capitalist world system. On January 4th 2011, 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi died from self-immolation in response to ongoing police harassment, leading to massive protests across the country. By January 14th, Tunisian dictator Ben Ali had been forced from power and fled the Inspired by this spontaneous uprising (and similarly animated by the death of a young man, Khaled Said, who had been beaten to death by police just weeks previously), Tahrir Square in Cairo was occupied on January 25th by Egyptian protestors who once again ousted the dictator (this time Mubarak) just 18 days later. Over the course of the following months, the Arab Spring wave of leaderless, remarkably non-violent, and deeply democratic uprisings spread throughout the region to countries

including Libya, Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, Sudan, Omar, and Morocco. On May 15th 2011, on the other side of the Mediterranean in various cities and towns across Spain, protests inspired by the *Real Democracy Now* manifesto mobilised tens of thousands of people under the slogan "We are not products in the hands of bankers and politicians." Taking inspiration from the Arab Spring, these *Indignados* similarly occupied the Square in Puerta del Sol, protesting high unemployment rates, welfare cuts, capitalism, banks, and political corruption.

Across the Atlantic on September 17th 2011, thousands of demonstrators marched through the financial district of New York and set up a protest camp in Zuccotti Park in order to Occupy Wall Street. The occupiers coined the slogan "We are the 99%," and within one month the Global Occupy Movement had spread to over 951 cities across 82 countries (Adam 2011). On October 15th 2011, this new global movement participated in the Global Day of Action launched by the Spanish Indignados-closing the circle on the transnational wave of revolt and ensuring months (and in some cases years) of continued internationally coordinated protest. The influence and accumulated knowledge of this movement wave continues to be seen in contemporary struggles adopting similar organizing structures and tactics: the Rojova revolution in northern Syria attempting to build a Democratic Confederalism inspired by the Social Ecology of Murray Bookchin (Hunt 2019); the Second Spring of 2019 in Sudan and Algeria bringing down the long-term dictators Omar al Bashir and Bouteflika respectively (Savran 2019); the leaderless "assembly of assemblies" of the Gilets Jaunes in France (Goanec 2019); the popular uprising and occupying of squares in Beirut, Lebanon (Azhari 2019); the horizontally organised, highly adaptable protests we have seen in Hong Kong (McNicholas 2019) and in multiple other locations globally. The strength of these movements can be found in their "constellation of non-hierarchical alliances" animated via a post-ideological anarchism that rejects sectarianism and reshapes dissent in order to meet contemporary challenges (Curran 2006, 67). They adopt the praxes of horizontalism, direct action, anti-authoritarianism, decentralisation, anti-capitalism, and mutual aid-providing locally grounded, adaptable and effective opposition to the constantly evolving hierarchical institutional structures of contemporary global capitalism.

In the years following the 2011 revolutionary wave, however, we have also witnessed an active backlash of authoritarian politics in which there has been a resurgence xenophobic nationalisms, racism, anti-feminist movements, and the purposeful undermining of existing democratic systems. The Arab Spring was quickly followed by a counter-movement towards authoritarian regimes. Many of the radical left governments of Latin America have either failed or been overthrown one by one, replaced by right wing authoritarian strong men such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. A similar wave of reactionary right wing actors can be seen across Asia such as Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and the military dictatorship in Thailand. We can also clearly see a similar rebound towards authoritarianism in countries across Africa south of the equator. The election of Donald Trump in the US, Boris Johnson in the UK, and the electoral successes of right wing

parties across Europe complete this picture of a globalised network of authoritarian capitalism that is no longer concerned with adhering to the image of a progressive neoliberalism and openly aligning to far right politics. But perhaps most worrying of all, these developments are increasingly accepted and tolerated as a legitimate form of governance by many of those who are oppressed.

It is hard not to become disoriented, overwhelmed, and ultimately despondent when confronting the sheer scale of the political, social, and ecological devastation we are witnessing at this crucial point in human history. And as Tom, a Canadian activist and collective visioning participant, points out:

There are a lot of people who say that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism and I think that means that their world-view has been so thoroughly dominated by capitalism that this really is the case. For some reason, idealism and utopianism are framed as a bad thing. The declaration that we cannot think an end to capitalism is not just defeatist – it shows that a lot of the leftist tradition has failed and it's done.

What is clear, however, is that these most recent manifestations of the ongoing, continuously morphing "movement of movements" offer an opportunity for imagining and actualizing an alternative trajectory to that of global capitalism by working to deliver environmental sustainability, equality of access to resources and opportunities, restorative and redistributive justice, and genuine participatory democracy.

Challenging Hegemony

There is a pressing need for a framework of plurality within the current movement wave because it is populated by interconnected organisations with a diverse array of ideologies, methodologies, identities, and cultural norms. This movement wave must act to avoid the dominations and hierarchies of previous structures, resist co-option and subversion by capitalist forces, maintain its constituent diversity, and yet allow for the construction of a cohesive collective identity. But how can we achieve this? This article argues that in order for such a framework to be imagined, nurtured, and sustained, any efforts towards it must be augmented by the voices of activists on the ground – a process of knowledge co-production requiring both theory informing practice and practice informing theory.

Of course, adopting such an approach does not come without challenges. The effects of neoliberal capitalism over previous decades have reached such pandemic proportions that it is often not consciously recognised as an ideology, but accepted on faith as a natural and self-evident universal. In a similar process to that through which social movements themselves are in danger of co-option and subversion by hegemonic capitalism, the rapid expansion of what Slaughter and Rhoades (2009) call "academic capitalism" has resulted in an increased focus on resource and finance generating activities within universities—resulting in the narrowing of academic practices in order to align with institutional market-like behaviour. The ascendency of the

new working class following World War II and subsequent increased access to a university education for working-class people led to the eruption of anti-imperialist student movements throughout the world in the late 1960s (Katsiaficas 1987). These revolutionary student movements were met with intense violent repression. And yet, a far more efficient and thorough counter-revolutionary tactic has proved to be that of the neoliberal subversion of university education. Still, among a significant number of academics and scholar-activists, many whose ideas have appeared on the pages of this magazine, there remains a persistent and ongoing process of resistance to the contemporary neoliberal university. Through disorienting and uprooting "epistemic certainties" (Holmes 2007, 41), they work to subvert the current hegemony and affect the unconscious dynamics of the new order. An increasing number of experiments in solidarity, participation, and opening of academic spaces aims to reconstitute free collective inquiry as a primary function of our centers for learning. Ultimately, the question of whether educators are able to contribute to social transformation and/or resistance to oppression will depend on the degree of "experiential connection" (Glick Schiller 2011, 163) we can develop and the embeddedness we can cultivate, attuning to the daily experience of people struggling against oppression. It will therefore be essential for us to cultivate practices that reflect and support this entangled relationality—that we are all in this together.

Co-Research: Empowering Constituent Imagination

Social movements provide a rich source of knowledge about forms of oppression and injustice, revealing uneven social relations while offering possibilities for agency. Often, the knowledge produced via social movements challenges those holding power, and society itself. It is, however, a relatively recent development for social movements to be explicitly recognised by the academy as producers of knowledge, despite their lead role in shaping a number of academic disciplines including women's studies, black and post-colonial studies, peace studies, queer studies, and others (Chesters 2012, 153).

The idea of knowledge co-production with social movement activists can be traced back at least to Karl Marx. In 1880, Marx designed a questionnaire in order to ignite an inquiry into the conditions of the French proletariat. Rather than merely attempting to extract useful information, the questionnaire, entitled "A Workers' Inquiry" (La Revue Socialiste 1880), aimed at analysing the characteristics of exploitation itself and encouraged workers to think about oppositional modes against their own exploitation—a process oriented towards encouraging the critical reflection of workers themselves in a process of knowledge co-production (Malo de Molina 2004a, 8). The agency of such a process could then be evidenced in the early twentieth century with the working-class appropriation of both anarchist and Marxist theory informing new models of direct democracy.

In the 1960s, Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology grew out of the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial revolutionary movements. While closely associated

with Latin America and Freirian popular education, experimentation with PAR in support of social organising was also prevalent in South Asia and a number of African countries, empowering social struggles in rural areas and supporting the emergence of strong campesino movements. A lineage of leading militant figures involved in this proliferation of PAR in the Global South includes Fals Borda in Colombia, Mohammed Anisar Rahman in Bangladesh, and Sithembiso Nyoni in Zimbabwe. By the late 1960s, PAR had reached Europe and North America where experiments with it aimed at the empowerment of marginalised urban communities (Malo de Molina 2004b). On the cusp between this movement and a reimagining of the workers enquiries first used by Marx was the *Operaismo* or Autonomist Marxist Workerism in Italy. The Operaismo developed new analytical tools in order to search for resistance against the new forms of capitalist organisation at the time. Grounded in workers' autonomy, the co-enquiries focused on the form and content of workers self-activity (Woodcock 2014, 499). This Italian Autonomism became a major influence on the work of Hardt and Negri (2001; 2005; 2011; 2017) and in turn upon militant research collectives arising through the "revolt of Argentina" or Argentinazo from 2001 onwards. Another example of such PAR inspired processes were the Wages for Housework campaigns which began in the early 1970s, also in Italy. The emerging struggles and debates within this feminist movement informed the pamphlet The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community (Dalla Costa and James 1971), which in turn served as a catalyst for the Wages for Housework campaign to extend into a global feminist social movement.

Through the final decades of the twentieth century to the present day, a new wave of social movement mobilisation offering resistance to neoliberal globalisation and a critique of its inherent limitations and inequalities has continued this tradition. The subsequent development of group-inquiry practices in social movement activism during this period, from the Zapatista inspired encuentros to the dialogical spaces of the World Social Forum, have represented a "qualitative shift" in the methodologies of global social movements (Chesters 2012, 154)operationalising their "epistemic diversity" in the pursuit of an emancipatory "cosmopolitan ecology of knowledges" (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2008, xlv-xlvii). Ultimately, for radical social change to be realised not through taking power, but through making/transforming power, the activation of what Negri (2007) calls "constituent imagination"-a collective vision that prefigures the new society in the here-and-now-is necessary at both local and global levels.

An example of this process can be found in *Colectivo Situaciones*–an Argentinian research militancy collective that assembled at the heights of the Argentinian crisis of neoliberalism in the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium. The methodological approach developed by *Colectivo Situaciones* grew from the need to create links between the academic community and the new forms of political involvement emerging in response to the country's political, social, and economic challenges. The collective utilised their approach with a number of these activist groups, including: HIJOS–a group formed by the children of

the disappeared; MoCaSE-a campesino (peasant farmer) group; MTD of Solano-an unemployed workers movement; Grupo de Arte Callejero-a street art activist group; former political prisoners of Néstor Kirchner's government; and a number of other activist groups in Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Mexico (Touza and Holdren 2007, 77). The colearning interventions/collaborations undertaken between these groups and Colectivo Situaciones became known as experiencias, translated as experience/experiment.

Colectivo Situaciones (2007, 74) describe their methodology as a "double movement" of (1) creating ways of being activists that escape the political certainties constructed a priori, through approaching politics as learning, while (2) simultaneously inventing new forms of theorising outside of conventional academic proceduresdisplacing the usual researcher/object and student/teacher bi-polarity in favour of a more subjective/inter-subjective methodological approach. Rather than a process in which an academic does research on (or even with) subjects, this methodology aims at an encounter that produces new subjects and new inter-subjectivities. Such an approach aims at the construction of a "new perception" with the educator/researcher facilitating, nurturing, and empowering a new sociability within the group. The primary work of the facilitator then is not to configure a center that "thinks radical practices" but to find ways of relating to the multiplicity - "elaborating a common plane" or a new common. And it was one such process, facilitated in part by Colectivo Situaciones, which prefigured the Argentinazo the period of radical social change that took place in Argentina during December 2001. Rallying behind the motto: Que se vayan todos! (All of them must go!) the scale and power of the movement eventually led to the resignation of then president Fernando de la Rúa. And so we can see that the academy, and particularly the social sciences, have experienced their greatest creative moments during such periods of engagement with the knowledge produced by social movements (Cox 2014, 966-967). And in processes reflecting the movement waves experienced at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and in the 1960s, our latest wave of social movement mobilisation is already engaging in dialogues that are generating new knowledges, new theories, and new pedagogies.

The Collective Visioning Process: Imagining New Worlds

A recent study with activists across Europe found that although the utopian imagination was considered to be a central aspect of their struggles, processes which harnessed this collective imaginary were rarely used as a method for designing strategy and tactics (Pötz 2019). By way of response to this apparent deficit, I recently facilitated the (R)evolutionary Love Collective Visioning Project based on participatory methods used within the global Occupy movement as a tool for collaboration and collective action.¹ In line with the growing tendency in contemporary left thinking to critique the notion of us ever arriving at a point of revolutionary closure, the project questioned the perceived antinomy of revolutionary and evolutionary concepts of radical social change. We proposed (r)evolution

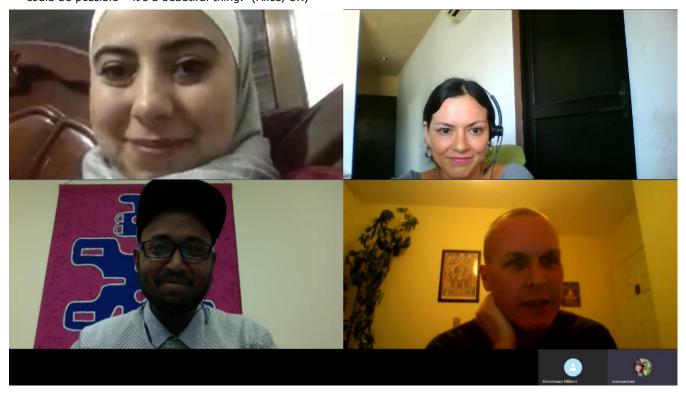
as an alternative model. Our process explored how social reproduction is firmly grounded in loving-caring relations, and how such relations therefore offer a stream of continuation from the old society to the new.

The approach involved a group process of intentionally generating a vision that was unapologetically utopian while remaining grounded in grassroots struggle, and that prepared strategy for then prefiguring the collective vision in the here-and-now. And in alignment with the new forms of knowledge co-production explored in the previous section, our collective visioning aimed to reveal glimpses of future world(s) – of the seeds of liberation already existing in the present. Or as one of the activists involved described it:

It's a valuable, and ancient, practice... When we're engaged in activism in our present culture of needing to do something to feel worthy and valued, it takes a lot to just sit and access a process of stilling our minds – allowing a collective consciousness to come through that isn't limited so much by our rational thinking. To be able to find solutions that we couldn't otherwise imagine. There is something to be said for people from around the world just coming together to share a vision of what could be possible – it's a beautiful thing. (Alice, UK)

projects. Sixty percent of us were women. And a specific and sustained effort was made to deliver a proportionate representation of activists from the global South and North in order to encourage what Santos, Nunes, and Meneses (2008, xiv) call a "cosmopolitan ecology of knowledges."

The point of entry for the co-inquiry was a website that acted as an ever-evolving online hub that allowed for (1) the curation of relevant content/resources relating to our collective vision, (2) the sharing of publications emerging from the process, and (3) the facilitation of an open and interactive space for the process of co-imagination. Through a curation process of assembling relevant literature, videos, and other links, the website was able to ground and familiarise the visitor/participant in a specific frame of theory and praxis. Furthermore, a virtual discussion hub was designed to facilitate a safe and open space through which an online community of activists participated in the collective visioning process through a series of discussion threads aligned with its core themes: theory, praxis, and utopia. This allowed for a collaborative, participant-led co-inquiry grounded in and extending the project's theoretical framework. But in order to achieve a truly collective visioning process, we felt that further exploration and



SCREENSHOT OF AN ONLINE COLLECTIVE VISIONING SESSION. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP-LEFT, NESREEN (JORDAN), DENISE (MEXICO), MATT (IRELAND), AND MOHAMMED (NETHERLANDS) WERE ALSO JOINED BY ACTIVISTS FROM THE UK, SOUTH AFRICA, AND UGANDA.

Our collective visioning group included activists from South Africa, Mexico, Italy, Trouwunna (Tasmania, Australia), Ireland, UK, Syria, Uganda, Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, Turkey, USA, and Jordan. And our movement engagement included anti-capitalist/alter-globalisation activism, radical environmental activism, indigenous rights activism, anarchism, feminist activism, local organising and training, refugee solidarity work, food sovereignty projects, cooperatives, and permaculture

development of the themes arising through the online forum was required. An immediate puzzle was how to facilitate such a dialogue given the geographical spread of the activists involved. While such processes might usually have been organised in the form of a public meeting, this was not logistically possible for this specific group. So it was decided that due to the international composition and geographical spread of the activists involved, a collective visioning group dialogue would be facilitated online using the communication

software system Zoom. This approach allowed for a collective visioning process involving eight participants of the online dialogues in seven different countries across four continents.

At this point, it really did feel like we were breaking new ground. And the experimental nature of the process made for a collective sense of ownership and agency. There were initially valid concerns that face-to-face learning/inquiry might be more difficult when using videoconferencing because of the lack of physical presence, which tends to be more intimate (Sedgwick and Spiers 2009, 7). However, with advances in technology and familiarity with online interactions, most research now reports a satisfaction with the incorporation of videoconferencing into research methods – allowing interaction of a different kind in a setting that includes rich visual data such as body language and facial expressions (Glassmeyer and Dibbs 2012, 298). In our case, a number of participants of the collective visioning dialogue commented on how "intimate" and "natural" the dialogue felt given its online nature, with one commenting: "I was surprised actually because we were talking from abroad but I was feeling the energy in the same way as if the people were in front of me, so that was really effective." The group was limited to a modest number in order to potentiate group cohesion, the building of trust, and the time and space for individuals to participate fully and to be heard. Once the group had established a safe collective space we used visualisation methods to co-imagine the future world(s) we wished to see/build. The group then collectively formulated our vision and discussed strategy for its prefiguration. The process opened a space within which the activists involved were able to experiment with alternative lenses through which to view the world. One participant describes such a shift in perspective:

I am glad to have done this positive collective visioning - I have a friend and every night we do a collective visioning which is like the opposite of this. We ask each other things like in ten years' time how the world is going to change, with climate change - all of that, and both of us are hopeless, we're like 'this is the end.' We did this every night, talking about the big things that are going to come and hit us. I can say that this collective visioning has given me hope, rather than feeling stressed and depressed about what's going to happen. Usually, we feel hopeless - we're like 'we give up'! So this can work, people can come together and imagine the life they want to live and the world they want to live in. (Ekrem, Turkey)

Another participant described the collective visioning process as being grounded in the principles of "listening with your heart, sharing from your heart, and being spontaneous." She added that "when everyone is given an opportunity to speak, and the range of opinions and perspectives are shared, then there comes a natural conclusion that feels in harmony with the greater good." The collective visioning process served to rapidly cohere a group of activists with a diversity of ideological, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. All of us were surprised, if not moved, by the sense of solidarity formed within the group, and of the collective wisdom which was produced in common - as a sum far greater than its parts. The process resulted

in a rich body of theory grounded in a new post-capitalist, post-patriarchal, post-colonial and post-anthropocentric synergetic political practice on the ground:

- The participants described a radical solidarity which they framed as love - acting to construct a framework of plurality providing a cohesive, collective identity across the often divisive array of ideologies, methodologies, identities and cultural norms found within their movements and across society itself.
- A clear theme was the importance of re-positioning love (and the matrix of loving-caring relations which constitutes society on a daily basis - hidden and devalued in patriarchal society) as the central and primary social driver. Activists from both the global South and North discussed how in many cases indigenous knowledge has never forgotten this, and how this truth has been obscured in modern capitalist societies, and replaced by neoliberal values which reduce all things to profit reshaping the organisation of our social and psychological structures.
- And a number of activists involved in some of the more recent dramatic socio-political uprisings across the world described the revolutionary moment itself as being co-constituted by love - as a joyful and emotional experience in which previous divisions of class, gender, race, ideology, and religion fell away (at least temporarily) prefiguring the new society they wished to see. This prefiguration of a society (which is at once communalistic and pluralistic) grounded in love was a common theme throughout the collective visioning process, and the construction of practices to extend this (r)evolutionary love in order to coconstitute the new society as an ongoing process remains a key area for further exploration.

But perhaps more importantly, each participant reported a sense of renewed focus and clarity regarding their own activism, and a greater sense of collective agency moving forward. And in times such as these we will need as much of this as we can get.

Conclusion: Utopia as Process

We have seen how the current wave of ecological and anti-capitalist activism has been prefigured by a strong and vibrant lineage of knowledge co-production through multiple struggles over many years. And consequently, we can therefore see how this positions our current movement wave as responsible for prefiguring what comes next. The forms of knowledge co-production explored in this article reveal "glimpses of a future world" (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 37) from the seeds of liberation already existing in the present. For Ernst Bloch, such imagination is "productive of the revolution," and revolution is "the changing of the world" (Brown 2003)-positioning imagination not as mere fantasizing, but as a process inherently attuned to "objectively real possibility" (Bloch 1986, 145) and therefore to the "properties of reality which are themselves utopian"

(which already contain the future). Similarly, Katarzyna Balug positions imagination as the central driver of cognition and perception, concluding that society can therefore "only create that which its members can imagine" (Balug 2017, 4). Without engaging in such future-oriented discussion on values, goals, and visions, it will never be possible to "take over" that very future (Mannermaa 2006, 4). Utopian political imaginaries have largely been rejected since the end of the Second World War for understandable reasons. But such a negation of imagination has led many theorists to narrow their focus solely to the empirical now, and so constrain contemporary political imagination to a fixed (and thus capitalistic, patriarchal, colonial and anthropocentric) present. This is not to negate the importance of a political praxis that is responsive to the present and rooted in everyday experience - or as the Zapatistas put it: "preguntando caminamos" ("walking we ask questions") but simply to acknowledge that without such collective visioning our movements will lose the innovation, creativity, and sense of trajectory they need to succeed.

The forms of knowledge co-production and collective visioning discussed in this article offer significant potential for developing new activist practices for the current wave of ecological and anti-capitalist movements. With them, activists can simultaneously imagine futures that realign movement trajectory while grounding themselves in present moment realities. Such collaborations utilise utopia as process and reframe its function from noun to verboperationalising imagination as a productive power in the pursuit of new knowledge and praxis. This article therefore wishes to encourage educators, students, and activists alike to engage in an ongoing relationship/dance between the kinds of approaches to learning and knowledge production that contemporary activists might seek to advance their struggles and the theoretical objectives that the academy might orient the educator toward. And also for us to collectively pursue theoretical and conceptual questions in ways that are grounded in the here-and-now of contemporary grassroots struggle. As we stand witness to an increasingly globalised network of authoritarian capitalism, its xenophobic nationalisms, its racism, its ongoing ecocide, and its undermining of democratic systems, our ability to collectively envision radical social change has never been so essential both inside the university and out on the streets. I will meet you there!

Note

1. If you are interested to learn more about the collective visioning project please visit: https://www.love-and-alterglobalisation.net

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