Hope in a paranoid place? Critique, utopianism and prefigurative policy reform

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Abstract

We are living through cruel and frightening times. How should a progressive policy studies respond? Critique undoubtedly plays a role: the task of exposing the structural conditions, political interests and power asymmetries that lie beneath the 'prosaic surface' of policy is an urgent one. But are these primarily deconstructive efforts enough? Can they lead us out of this quagmire, alone? In this article, we argue that something additional – something more generative and hopeful – is also required. In response, we introduce 'critical utopian policy analysis' (CUPA) a methodological elaboration of critical policy analysis (CPA) designed to support its use in both deconstructive and reconstructive policy efforts. This approach builds on the theoretical offerings of critical policy analysis, utopianism and prefiguration, to posit a methodological embrace of critique, imagination, enactment and play. It seeks to mobilise a complex nexus of affect – including heartbreak and hope – to motivate and support a range of intellectual undertakings and emancipatory politics.

Keywords: critical social policy; utopianism; prefiguration; statecraft; play

Introduction

We are living though challenging times: times mired by right-wing populism and the 'polycrisis' of pandemic, war and climate change (EuroMemo Group, 2023). In the UK, the direction of domestic policymaking offers little fodder for optimism. Our first Labour Prime Minister in over a decade recently announced that things were 'worse than we ever imagined' and that the coming months – much like the months before them – would be 'painful' (Blanchflower, 2024). Materially, this appears to involve a resumption of austerity economics (Blanchflower, 2024), the continuation of racist border and immigration policy (Stacey & O'Carroll, 2024) and the persistence of social conservative approaches to vulnerable minorities (Quinn & Walker, 2024) – all pointing to a consolidation of past orthodoxies rather than the first seeds of renewal. Urgent evidence and expertise, developed by

communities, activists, academics and others, struggle to pierce the veneer of a destructive neoliberal hegemony. In the words of poet Kae Tempest (2019): '*It's coming to pass, my country's coming apart . . . here we are, dancing in the rumbling dark.*'

Of course, to experience crises as novel is a privilege. Economic, geographic and racialized positioning, founded in global histories of violence, determine familiarity with the catastrophic. Black radical scholars have long read right-wing populism in Europe as situated on a historical continuum with Western 'enlightenment' abroad (Kelley, 2003). From this perspective, the UK's current moment can be read as an extension of the violence it is responsible for elsewhere, in its states of exception, e.g. 'its colonies' (Mbembe, 2019). Perhaps, then, the vicious and extractive forces of (neo)-colonialism – forces integral rather than 'other' to modernity – are coming home to roost. In the face of this, how should a progressive policy studies proceed?

We strongly believe that critical policy analysis (CPA) should play a role: the task of exposing the structural conditions, political interests and power asymmetries that generate (and are generated by) policies is an urgent one. What is more, we believe that CPA's embrace of 'thinking other', of imaging alternatives – whilst sometimes neglected – holds significant untapped potential. Indeed, this article is founded on the position that there is immense value in practices of both policy *critique* and hopeful policy *construction*.

In this article, we propose 'critical utopian policy analysis' (CUPA), an analytical approach designed to contribute to a more generative kind of policy studies. CUPA elaborates on CPA, drawing out and more fully theorising its commitment to 'positive' critique. It does so by proposing a new theory-method framework, enacted via hopeful, playful and prefigurative processes of 'make-believe' policy-making. Broadly speaking, this approach echoes pedagogical traditions in law (e.g. 'moot courts') – as well as the discipline's more radical methodological tendencies, as showcased by the rise of 'feminist judgement projects' (Rackley, 2012) – but tackles challenges unique to the analysis and formation of policy.

To formulate CUPA, we drew CPA into dialogue with utopianism, prefigurative politics and play; traced convergences in epistemology and purpose; and identified moments of productive exchange. This article represents the fruits of this labour and comprises four parts: the first part briefly reintroduces CPA and its discontents; the second discusses utopianism as an approach to knowledge production; the third draws CPA and 'utopia as method' together; and the fourth discusses 'prefigurative play' and what it might look like in the context of a policy reform project.

Critical policy analysis

Whilst not homogeneous, CPA – an approach to policy analysis that draws on the epistemological, teleological and normative teachings of discourse theory and cultural political economy – is constituted by a set of established methodologies (Fairclough, 2013). It is a critical realist approach, interested in policies as politically contingent 'texts'. CPA rejects positivist modes of policy analysis, that treat policy texts as accurate representations of objective realities, and embraces an understanding of policy as a key site of hegemonic struggle (Howarth, 2010; Bacchi, 2012b; Fairclough, 2013; Sum & Jessop, 2014).

Reflecting this position, critical policy analysts seek to expose how, and explain why, policies are represented and justified as they are. This often involves a genealogical approach to inquiry, one that works to identify 'objects of policy thought', the socio-historic conditions of their emergence and the role that they play in governance (Fairclough, 2010; Bacchi, 2012b). The focus is not, therefore, on policy 'problems' per se, but on 'problematisation': the fragile, situated and contingent process that produces 'problems' through (extra-)semiotic means. This brand of analysis is common to Foucauldian (Bacchi, 2012b) and neo-Marxist policy analysis (Sum & Jessop, 2014; Wiggan, 2015). Practically speaking, CPA has been used to analyse individual policies, generate broader critiques of power in policy work (Howarth, 2010) and undertake meso-level explorations of institutions, interest coalitions and professional groups (Goodman et al., 2017).

CPA is, however, a contested framework. Many CPA researchers focus nearly exclusively on the textual aspects of policies, ignoring broader conditions of production and dissemination, and framing policy as the stabilisation of a victor's perspective in a battle of hegemonic discourses (Hajer, 2005). Policymaking is, however, shaped by process, context and compromise: contextually specific practices and structures work alongside and with discourse to generate contingent outcomes (Franchino & Wratil, 2019). A consideration of *how* policies are made is, therefore, vital to broader critical readings of policies as texts. Such considerations provide more nuanced and detailed understandings, illuminating how contestation and structural (dis)continuities provide sites of movement and fixity for policy reform (Buchan, 2020).

Beyond this, Chappell and Mackay (2021) problematise a prevailing tendency within critical policy studies to criticise the efforts of political insiders without offering meaningful alternatives for change. Indeed, critique generally has been disparaged for limiting more generative and generous approaches to knowledge production. Hayes, Sameshima and Watson (2015, p.359) suggest that both positivist and critical social science tend to '[enclose] consciousness and possibility within the frame of [contemporary] problems', whilst Sedgwick and Frank (2003) famously contend that critique nurtures paranoia. Much critique, the latter authors argue, is motivated by the belief that we can avoid pain and suffering if we pre-emptively expose deep and abiding injustice. What results, they suggest, is a sense of irreparability, a 'dogged, defensive narrative stiffness of a paranoid temporality' (2003, p.147). In response, they advocate for a 'reparatively positioned reader': one not driven by fear of pain, but by hopefulness. In their hands, hope, 'a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience' (2003, p.146), provides a generative space for knowledge production.

Whilst critique may well limit imagination and induce paranoia, we do not believe these risks to be absolute. Per Barnwell (2022), paranoia *can be* a creative force, provoking speculation and resistance. Suffering, too, can be generative. 'Heartbreak', Bhattacharrya (2020) remarks, 'is at the heart of all revolutionary consciousness . . . Who can imagine another world unless they already have been broken apart by the world we are in?'. What's more, negative emotions need not be all-encompassing, but might sit aside hopefulness. The idea that social justice requires a diverse emotional register is well established: the left motto 'bread and roses' evokes the significance of both dreaming for and struggles against. As the song goes, '*Our lives shall not be sweated, from birth until life closes; hearts starve as well as bodies, give us bread but give us roses*'.

Critiques of critique also tend to ignore the epistemological promise of e.g. CPA. By demonstrating the contingency of policy problematisations, CPA reveals the relative *fragilities, tensions and contradictions* of contemporary realities, and the ever-present possibility of a potential otherwise (Bacchi, 2012b). Contingent structures, institutions and objects of thought can be changed; 'natural' problems are often intransigent. If CPA creates a sense of immovability, it is likely due to the relative stability of power relations, rather than their inevitability. Relatedly, many proponents of CPA explicitly encourage a commitment to normative positions and explicit articulations of a possible otherwise. For instance, Fairclough (2013, p.188) encourages 'positive critique', which involves '"imagining" a possible and desirable new state of affairs . . . on the basis of . . . the values and concerns that inform and motivate the [negative] critique'. Similarly, Howarth and Griggs (2012, p.338) suggest that identifying the political logics underpinning policy facilitates a 'move beyond "negative critique" to the generation of positive alternatives'. Far from 'enclosing' consciousness, critique can nurture its expansion.

A more potent observation, then, is that, within contemporary (policy) scholarship, the generative dimensions of critique are increasingly deprioritised. Per Weeks (2011, p.184) 'a model of academic critique that disavow[s] the element of proposition' is increasingly common. This, Williams (2021) suggests, has led to a scaling down in radical demand-making within critical policy studies. In this article, we propose a methodology to address this 'scaling down' via an embrace of the 'utopian'. Historically, utopic propositions have featured prominently in political theory (Weeks, 2011), sociology (Wright, 2010; Levitas, 2013) and radical Black, feminist and socialist movements (Bammer, 1991; Kelley, 2003). More recently, a growing number of theorists have rekindled scholarly utopianism, exploring the epistemic and affective demands of a more positive kind of knowledge production (Wright, 2010; Weeks, 2011; Cooper, 2013, 2016; Levitas, 2013; Hayes et al., 2015; Zamalin, 2019; Sobande & Emejulu, 2021). CUPA adopts and extends this commitment. In the next section, we explore how *utopian* practices engage metaphorical frames beyond the purely textual and deconstructive – extending the verbs available to critical policy researchers to designing, building, writing and reimagining alongside critical reading.

Utopia as method

Traditionally, utopianism has been derided as implausible, trivial and distracting: a questionable epistemic tendency that denies the hard truths of 'real life', and offers a politics of 'nowhere' (Kelley, 2003). As Weeks (2011) observes, to call a policy proposal 'utopian' is to dismiss it as outrageously optimistic. 'Utopias' are understood as otherworldly and statically perfect places, divorced from the here and now; unreachable, unattainable and, insofar as they do not invite change, potentially reactionary (Paden, 2002; Cooper, 2013). However, a notable group of critical scholars are working to rehabilitate utopianism (Bammer, 1991; Wright, 2010; Weeks, 2011; Cooper, 2013; Levitas, 2013). In the main, these writers reject readings of 'utopia' as a once-and-for-all dream-like place and focus instead on the provocative power of utopianism as an approach to knowledge production and transformative organising, that is, the utopic as 'an orientation or form of attunement,

a way of engaging with spaces, objects and practices that is oriented to the hope, desire, and belief in the possibility of other better worlds' (Cooper, 2013, p.13).

There have been a number of attempts to elaborate this orientation, particularly as it relates to statecraft, and to present it as a 'method'. For Williams (2016), these efforts constitute a 'utopian turn' in policy studies, broadly construed. In what follows, we discuss the work of two theorists cited by Williams as examples of this turn, Ruth Levitas and Davina Cooper, alongside a broader utopian literature. Thereafter, we explore how we might bring this utopian turn to CPA specifically.

Archaeology and architecture

Levitas' (2013) 'utopia as method' resonates with existing approaches to CPA and therefore demands particular attention. She recommends a three-stage process to utopian theorising, consisting of an 'ontological stage', an 'archaeological stage' and an 'architectural stage.' The first, ontological stage promotes an embrace of human nature as inorganic and social, and encourages *both* archaeological scrutiny of its constitution *and* architectural attention to its potential. Put differently, Levitas encourages theorists to focus on the making and remaking of human nature. Belief in human mutability is a common feature of utopianism. Zamalin (2019, p.1) identifies a similar tendency within Black utopianism to 'explode [the] extant meanings' of human desire.

Levitas' second, 'archaeological' stage most directly mirrors CPA, recommending the excavation of 'social imaginaries' from 'artefacts and cultures', and the representation of something 'as whole . . . [when] only shards and fragments remain' (2013, p.154). This largely critical stage of Levitas' approach echoes CPA. For instance, her proposal that we use 'artefacts' to understand broader 'imaginaries' is similar to Bacchi's (2012a) invitation to view 'problem representations' as contingent manifestations of power relations. Moreover, both Levitas and CPA frame critique as a necessary step in evidencing the contingency and injustice of social arrangements, as well as the possibility of, and need for, change.

Finally, Levitas' 'architectural stage' invites the generation of 'knowledge rendered imaginatively' (Levitas, 2013, p.198). She encourages theorists to imagine a future in which altered social and institutional configurations enable ecological and social sustainability, as well as 'wider human happiness' (Levitas, 2013, p.198). Of course, using one's imagination to speculate about the future is an orthodox, even relatively routinized approach, to academic knowledge production (Cooper, 2013): policy recommendations, forecasting and cautioning against all require a creative perspective on what is not yet, but might nonetheless come to be. Moreover, numerous theorists point to how 'imaginaries' and productive 'fictions' shape the way political actors and publics understand prevailing social arrangements (Taylor, 2002; Fairclough, 2010; Levitas, 2013) and institutional polities (see Stubbs & Lendvai, 2016). But Levitas' turn to the imaginary offers something more radical, as she mandates a deeply optimistic and wholescale approach to imagining society *otherwise*. Indeed, for Levitas, a defining characteristic of the utopian imagination is its commitment to 'systemic holism', to the imaginary reconstruction of societies *as a whole*.

Conceiving utopia as praxis

Architectural approaches to utopianism are apparent across most contemporary utopian scholarship. Theorists diverge, however, in how they believe this stage should be operationalised. Whilst Levitas recommends that researchers *explain* the utopian tomorrows of their imagination, many radical theorists recommend creative forms of *enactment* via e.g. literary fiction (Bammer, 1991; Zamalin, 2019), subversive praxis (Cooper, 2013; Thorpe, 2023) and play (Cowan et al., 2019; Cooper, 2020). Black radicalism has long expressed its utopian speculations via dramatisation: works of art, particularly music and science fiction, that vividly depict desirable spaces for Black existence (see Kelley, 2003; Zamalin, 2019). Similarly, radical feminists have long used creative writing to express their utopic impulses (Bammer, 1991).

Beyond this, much 'utopia as method' literature moves beyond textual practices. Indeed, utopianism is often conceived of as an *affective* practice – one that rejects the dispassion of positivism, challenges the hegemony of the 'rational' academic actor and celebrates enchantment and grace as epistemic resources (Cooper, 2013; Levitas, 2013). Relatedly, utopianism is understood to educate desire, heightening its critical capacities and expanding the fantastical future it wants (Nadir, 2010; Paris, 2022). Beyond this, 'utopia as method' has been operationalised as a *bodily or interactive praxis* – a performance that provides insight into the generative possibilities of throwing off codified or normative constraints (Cooper, 2013). For instance, the 'San Francisco Transformation Department' – a collective of activists described in Thorpe's (2023) analysis of do-it-yourself (DIY) statecraft – uses guerrilla painting and the unsanctioned installation of infrastructure to transform urban spaces in a way that *enacts* sustainable futures.

The performance of desirable 'tomorrows' in the context of 'today' often constitutes a 'prefigurative politics': actors stop agitating for new rights and act, instead, as if those rights are already theirs. They collapse the ends and means of radical political action, demonstrating their utopic hopes for the future in the here and now. The work of preeminent prefiguration theorist Davina Cooper provides countless examples of this: from the radical municipalism of the 1980s, through which socialist local governments exceeded their competencies to act in fields of e.g. foreign policy (Cooper, 2020); to a trans-inclusive bath-house that offers a space for women to learn about and experience transgressive sexuality (Cooper, 2013); to behaving as if Palestinian statehood were already recognised in global cultural spaces (Cooper, 2016). Prefigurative activism, Cooper (2020) explains, brings an everyday kind of utopia into being, rehearsing futures we might one day realise and generating a wealth of knowledge about the present.

Interestingly, Levitas (2013) is critical of the way prefigurative activism conceptualises utopia – as something localised, bounded and wedded to contemporary material conditions. She argues that the embedded narrowness of Cooper's (2013) 'everyday utopias' fails to achieve systemic holism, and thus offers less in terms of radical thought. This critique appears to at least partially reflect a more general distaste for what Levitas reads as an anti-utopian impulse within self-avowedly utopian writing. Referencing the work of Wright (2010), specifically his loyalty to scientifically demonstrated possibility, Levitas complains about utopic theorists who maintain

epistemic or normative commitments to 'realism'. To see value in everyday utopias is not, however, to consider more immediately embedded visions of the future as epistemically or normatively *superior* to radical ones. Rather, we read Levitas and Cooper as contributing to a shared, if multifaceted, methodological perspective.

Historicity and reflexivity

Importantly, in rejecting appeals to realism, Levitas does not suggest that 'systemically holistic' utopias are ahistorical: she is clear that knowledge produced via utopian conceptualisation is always already historical. Our utopian visions are historically specific, an understanding of *what could be* fundamentally tethered to a situated understanding of *what is*. Zamalin (2019, p.10) makes a similar point, arguing against the idea of radical Black utopias as 'transhistorical', framing them as particularised products of specific social conditions. This historicity is both resource and risk. Partially elaborated notions of justice, liberation and human flourishing, latent in contemporary imaginaries, can be instrumental in imagining desirable futures. However, our embeddedness also makes us vulnerable to the reproduction of undesirable features of contemporary society. Bammer (1991, p.46) warns against treating utopias as 'comprehensive antitheses of hegemonic rule', noting that much feminist utopic fiction boasts liberation for some while ignoring the unjust suffering of others.

In response to historicity, Levitas stresses the provisionality of utopian knowledge, whilst Bammer highlights its partiality and complex entanglement with prevailing relations of power. From this perspective, utopias are illuminating, provocative, but *flawed*, fatally so (Cooper, 2013). They are not, therefore, treated as prescriptive, but rather as new and challenging forms of knowledge with which to engage (Nadir, 2010). This, then, demands epistemological humility and dynamism: a dialogic, reflexive and open-ended approach. Indeed, Levitas recommends methodological circularity: 'from archaeology to architecture and back, exposing contradictions, silences, inadequacies, and interrogating both overt and hidden assumptions . . .' (2013, p.217).

What this recommendation of circularity appears to imply is a linear relationship between critique and utopia: the former opening space for the latter, which follows after. However, this reading underplays the critical value of utopia, per se. Provisional and partial utopias enable productive alienation, facilitating indirect critique. In articulating a better, more desirable world, knowledge produced through the utopian impulse tacitly highlights the contingency and insufficiency of current arrangements (Cooper, 2013). This alienation is, arguably, all the more powerful when utopias are 'enacted' rather than merely discussed: enactment throws off rhetorical tethers to the now, intensifying desired contrast. Beyond this, utopias provide different vantage points from which to produce different knowledge. They are highly generative: acting as laboratories through which we can experiment with our deepest yearnings (Cooper, 2013; Zamalin, 2019); expand and finesse what we are able and inclined to desire (Nadir, 2010); and flesh out vague hope with suggestions of something more tangible and specific (Levitas, 1990).

Between CPA and utopia as method

There is significant epistemological and methodological overlap between CPA and 'utopia as method'. Both literatures embrace critical historicity, situating all thought, including speculative thought, in the conditions of its production; both reject essentialist representations of humanity and human societies; both understand semiotic and extra-semiotic processes as contributing to conceptualisation. Indeed, given that CPA recommends (but does not always fully attend to) 'positive critique', we read 'utopia as method' as its logical development. This epistemological coherence and shared sense of purpose lay the groundwork for CUPA, an approach that combines policy critique and utopian thinking, to promote the generation of deconstructive, reconstructive and creative policy analysis.

Importantly, Levitas has alluded to the integration of utopianism and policy analysis in previous work. In one article, she encourages policy analysts to read regressive policies through a 'hermeneutics of faith' and explore how key themes could be radically reimagined (Levitas, 2012). In another, she rearticulates her commitment to systemic holism and encourages theorists to move beyond policy as a technology of change. In this approach, we are urged to view policy change as 'piecemeal' and 'ameliorative' and to explore more radical approaches to social transformation (Levitas, 2001). To do otherwise, Levitas argues, is to commit oneself to an extrapolative imagination that fails to address the core wrongs of society. Whilst we can see the value of systemic holism, we believe that Levitas too hastily dismisses the intellectual and political potential of an approach that does *not* move beyond policy as a technology of the state. In contrast, we frame the policy process as a space within which to express utopian impulses, explore latent possibilities for change and identify barriers to desirable futures. Indeed, we argue that an approach which 'stays with the trouble' of policy increases the potential of a utopian methodology, not by producing 'superior' knowledge via its relative realism but by using realism as a tool to expand its scope of inquiry.

Towards a 'critical utopian policy analysis'

The CUPA framework extends CPA by adopting utopian-architectural practices, combining critique of existing policies with the creation of novel 'make-believe' policies in simulated policy systems. CUPA is designed to generate (and critically evaluate) historically grounded, creatively enacted, policy re-writes. It is a three-step process, which begins with a critical analysis of existing policy. This step is preliminary and designed to provide the context and justification for subsequent steps. The second step involves playful prefiguration and enactment: the analyst plays at being a policymaker with power and influence bounded by the imagined constraints of a policy system, and (re)-writes utopic policy. The third and final step recognises the necessary provisionality and partiality of our utopic visions, and mandates reflexive auto-critique. Where possible, this auto-critical pose should be enhanced by a dialogic approach, a *collective* deconstructive of the imagined policy. As the form of function of critique has been thoroughly explored in preceding paragraphs, in what follows we focus on the process of policy construction.

The policy 're-write' stage – as we imagine it – will trouble epistemic commitments to realism by requiring theorists to engage in practices of 'play' and 'pretend'. Specifically, we prescribe an imaginative and prefigurative kind of play that a) establishes a make-believe context and b) adopts a 'mimetic, role-playing, "as if" guise' (Cooper, 2016, p.454) with the objective of enabling meaningful policy inquiry. To facilitate this inquiry, the 'make-believe context' should 'imitate' the 'real' conditions within which the 'original' (critiqued) policy text was produced. Concrete examples of such conditions might include relevant constitutional and administrative law, other legislation, the results of referenda, and mandates to consult with key 'stakeholders', cite so-called 'objective evidence', and consider budgetary constraints. Researchers should take up an imaginary position of bounded power within these conditions and play at being influential policymakers (e.g. government ministers). In sum, the 'mimetic' demands of CUPA require theorists to *simulate* policymaking conditions, and then play 'as if' those conditions are real and 'as if' they have the power to articulate new policy within them.

Simultaneously, researchers should remain committed to articulating hopeful, creative, enchanting and pleasurable visions of utopia – pushing up against constraints, exploiting regulatory ambiguities, reimagining knowledge hierarchies wherever it is possible to do so. In turn, they should strive to articulate radical policy pronouncements in otherwise constraining conditions. Ideally, in doing this, researchers will use the values that underpinned their preliminary critique of a policy to 're-write' that policy in an unorthodox way. Per Williams (2021, p.189) 'resistance to domination and subordination prefigures a "reparative" and transformative view of the world' and can therefore carry across spaces of (de)construction. Ideally, utopic re-writes will take inspiration from, or be grounded in, a range of sources, such as specific feminist, decolonial and anti-racist scholarship, or the utopic ideas and prefigurations of social movements. Among other things, this citational practice will facilitate an evaluation of existing utopic 'resources', elaborating on and critically engaging with their potential.

As intimated, the re-write phase should be followed by a (preferably collective) process of reflection and (auto)-critique, which subjects utopic re-writes to the same critical interrogation as the original policy. Utopian policies should be treated as provisional, partial and complexly related to the hegemonic – as opportunities to explore and educate desire, rather than as straightforward prescriptions for future policy. Reflection can also enrich our critical focus on *how* simulated policy conditions shaped and constrained political possibility, and with what consequences. In totality, we intend CUPA to generate a library of 'everyday utopias' (Cooper, 2013): utopic policies mired in and inseparable from the normatively ambivalent conditions of their production. Used reflexively, such policies could be pregnant with potential, shedding light on what it is to employ 'utopia as method' when one is in and of the world.

In its totality, CUPA echoes a radical methodology in law, showcased by iterative *feminist judgements projects* (FJPs). These projects invite feminist legal academics and activists to rewrite judge-made law and to demonstrate how formative cases could be decided differently (Rackley, 2012; Cooper, 2016; Cowan et al., 2019). Would-be judges purposefully inhibit themselves by reference to contemporary judicial constraints, e.g. procedural law. Feminist academics and activists play at

being judges, behaving *as if* certain enabling conditions (i.e. feminists in positions of authority) are in place. In this respect, they 'enact' different judicial outcomes, performing rather than discussing possible alternatives. As Cooper (2016, 2020) explains, this approach is doubly generative. First, it allows feminists to fully rehearse, and demonstrate, what they might be able to achieve if given the power to do so. Second, it creates a laboratory for the exploration of existing legal frameworks – an opportunity to consider their influence from the 'inside' (Rackley, 2012; Cooper, 2020, 2020). In this sense, prefigurative law reform is as much about exploring and pushing against practices, processes and material limitations as it is about the outcomes of prefiguration per se.

The debt that CUPA owes to the FJP model is clear. However, there are significant political, structural and institutional differences between judge-made law and policy. For feminist judges, the conditions to which they must adhere are *relatively* clear from the outset: procedural law, evidence presented during the course of a trial and judicial methodologies are well recorded, and can be largely 'captured' for simulation. What is more, whilst judges may discuss their determinations with peers, they – to a large degree – maintain authorial control. In contrast, policy-making is highly embedded in local and national political culture (Brangan, 2023), fluid, flexible, networked, opaque (Hawkesworth, 1994), and subject to shifting, often unspecified, methodologies (Greenhalgh and Russell, 2009). It often takes place in multi-scalar institutions and is subject to multiple formal and informal veto points (i.e. legal and budgetary). Who authors policy is a complex question: while policies are often collaboratively generated, power dynamics shape how that collaboration is realised. Indeed, whether one conceives of the policy-making process as a cycle or a garbage can (Mucciaroni, 1992), its complexity is a matter of consensus. As such, what truly constrains potential radicalism (beyond political will) is not always clear. Thus, simulating policy-making conditions becomes a more fraught intellectual and political exercise than emulating the productive conditions of case law. In what follows, we attend to the challenges of that exercise in more depth.

Simulating policymaking conditions

As intimated, CUPA prescribes two types of prefigurative play. The first is a make-believe, 'as if' type: we ask researchers to act 'as if' something desirable, if implausible, has happened. Specifically, we ask them to imagine that they exercise significant, if not unbounded, power to define policy and then do so; to act 'as if' they have just been appointed as a government minister or senior policymaker and then pursue a utopic political agenda. This will, among other things, facilitate and encourage the embrace of a diverse affective register. Play, as Cooper explains (2016), can be fun, pleasurable and stimulating, whilst the utopian impulse should be grounded in radical hopefulness and desire. And of course, rage and heartbreak do, and should, inform the way we engage with existing policy, and visions of the way forward. That these emotions are produced through, and are productive of, dreams and their reflexive deployment is a key dimension in CUPA.

The second form of play demands mimesis: a re-presentation of policy structure and process. As discussed, identifying and replicating the precise parameters, variations and 'political pressure points' (Cooper, 2013, p.14) of a policy system is likely to be a (sometimes prohibitively) difficult task. The complex and layered assemblage of the state is not only vast but also frequently indeterminate, sometimes hidden, and often shifting. To speak of 'policy' as a defined and easily identifiable 'text' is always already to turn something dynamic, fluid, contested and ongoing into a static 'object'. The many dimensions of a policy system may be difficult to 'capture' and recreate, and will vary significantly given that different policy systems are constructed differently, formally or otherwise. This is, therefore, an aspect of CUPA requiring contextually specific development.

The simulated conditions identified and deployed by projects using CUPA will necessarily be heuristic, partial and interpretivist: tools with which to produce innovative and provocative forms of knowledge, which do not and cannot straightforwardly reproduce 'outside reality'. Put differently, CUPA will produce policies that manifest via whichever simulated conditions have been selected, interpreted and 'tested'. In light of this, the practical task of researchers will be to ascertain what policymaking conditions are identifiable, reproducible and of interest to specific research projects. We imagine that most efforts to articulate these conditions will require engagement with specific policy literatures, institutions and institutional literatures. For instance, one might wish to explore what resources are available to 'real' policy-actors working within contemporary policy systems. By way of example, the UK's HM Treasury produces a routinely updated '*Green Book*', a document which provides 'approved . . . methods to support the provision of advice to clarify the social – or public – welfare costs, benefits and trade offs of alternative implementation options for the delivery of policy objectives' (2022, p.1). Moreover, we would recommend that simulated conditions relate both to a polity broadly *and* to the subsystems responsible for the particular policy or series of policies under scrutiny. The challenge of CUPA is not merely to produce utopic policies, but to produce utopic policies in response to extant policies. Treating negative critique as prefatory to utopic policy formulation captures this commitment in important ways, but the brief could be extended. For instance, we might provisionally suppose that the way a policy *topic area* is constructed is a reflection of e.g. contingent configurations of policy-actors and institutional structures. To emulate and limit oneself by reference to this topic area would therefore be to simulate policy-making conditions.

The utopian components of this practice encourage radical experimentation *within* the constraints of the policymaking system. For example, a project focussed on social security policy might attempt to unsettle how constellations of actors and 'evidence' are, or could be, classified and included in policy-making processes, within the established frameworks of institutional requirements. Kerr (2023) demonstrates that actors with radically different wealth privilege (welfare-reliant mothers and the super-rich) are awarded different levels of credibility and – subsequently – different roles in UK policymaking spaces. Whilst the poor are treated as sources of information, the wealthy become 'epistemic agents' whose knowledge is treated as equally credible to that of the state. CUPA invites theorists to not only explore how these dynamics *might be shifted* but to *shift them* by

e.g. actively interviewing welfare recipients as 'experts' in committee hearings rather than 'stakeholders' to be surveyed, selecting and citing their accounts as 'empirical evidence' rather than service user opinions, and co-creating policy in collaboration, rather than consultation with them. In a policy area that often implicates the very poorest, and the very richest, as well as businesses, economists, behavioural scientists and so on, CUPA forces us to question who is a subject 'expert' or a stakeholder with niche interest; whose knowledge should be considered 'objective', and how this objectivity can be credentialised in a way that aligns with positivist demands for 'evidence-based' policymaking; and what policy outcomes might result. Put differently, how – and to what extent – can existing requirements and norms of policymaking be appropriated and repurposed, and what vestige of state conservatism remains? Through this enactment and play, conditions are simulated, and everyday utopic policies can – potentially – be produced.

Alternatively, a researcher interested in budgetary constraint might wish to 'play' with the pervasive neoliberal commitment to reducing fiscal deficits, without leveraging taxation. They might, for instance, confine their utopic policy re-writes to the budget allocated to an original policy. What socially progressive, radical policies – if any – might be realisable under this profound constraint? Is radicalism available on the cheap, and what are the existential consequences of proposing as much? This kind of project of prefigurative policy reform would have to tackle the not insignificant challenge of expressing social justice in regressively economic terms, and its reflexive conclusions might ruminate on whether redistributive policies are even possible in the context of austerity.

In imagining these projects, it is easy to foresee resistance to the playful co-option of statecraft. Critical theorists have long identified contemporary states as 'bad objects': patriarchal, colonialist, white-supremacist and neoliberal (Dhawan, 2019; Newman, 2019) and cautioned against entanglement which, intentionally or otherwise, reproduces its forms. How you approach these critiques depends on how you understand the ontology of the state and the normativity of entanglement. Much contemporary scholarship resists unitary ontologies of statehood (e.g. the state as monolith) in favour of an understanding of the state as a multifaceted assemblage of domestic and global interactions, institutions and practices that produce plural state 'effects' (Jessop, 2014; Newman, 2019). This subsequently undermines readings of the state as ontologically bad, rendering contradictory readings intelligible and opening up the conceptual space for radical engagements with different elements of state power – in which critique can operate alongside construction.

Illustratively, Stubbs and Lendvai (2016) suggest that we require a 'double orientation' to policy and power, so that we might 'recognise hegemonic plans and projects, but . . . be attentive to their interruptions, disjunctures and challenges'. From this perspective, engagement with state assemblages is not only normatively ambivalent but sometimes politically necessary. If state spaces hold the potential for transgression, then a politics of refusal might forgo too much. Building on this, and as parsed by Roy (2022, p.167) with respect to feminism, the notion that progressive politics is mired by entanglement with hegemonic conditions traps its proponents 'into property logics' and 'defensive corrective labour' that ultimately limit 'world making capacities'. We are, Roy suggests, inexorably in and of the world, proximate

to and inscribed in relations of power, inhabiting a 'messy ground that cannot be cleaned up' (Roy, 2022, p.176). In turn, she recommends critique as *care* – a way to enable accountability without the paralysis of total refusal. This, then, brings us back to the circularity of Levitas' utopia as method, to the epistemological centrality of provisionality, and the necessary collective and reflexive work of deconstruction, reconstruction and so on.

Conclusion

CUPA realises the prefigurative, utopic promise latent in CPA. By elaborating on CPA's commitment to positive critique, it augments its potential. When applied, we anticipate that CUPA will establish a library of hopeful, enchanting and provisional utopic policies that demonstrate the possible possibilities of historical state assemblages. Through enactment, and productive estrangement, we anticipate that researchers will use CUPA to establish a new critical distance from, and vantage point on, existing policy. In turn, we hope it will aid in the articulation and clarification of utopian desires and contemporary social movement demands. Moreover, we expect that, by identifying and testing certain kinds of political pressure points, CUPA will illuminate, in more detail, how these points frustrate progressive projects and how such frustrations might be addressed. CUPA encourages an avowedly emotional epistemology, treating radical hopefulness and deep desire as integral to the generation of intellectually and politically powerful knowledge. Not unrelatedly, it requires a commitment to the alleviation of human suffering and the realisation of human potential, as well as an imaginative response to related challenges.

Speculation represents a routine form of knowledge production in the field of policy studies, and critical policy studies is very often involved in normative projections. What added value, then, is provided by an explicit turn to utopianism, as described here? What does it offer beyond a renewed commitment to forward-looking academic praxis and avowed, future-looking normativity? In brief, utopianism promotes particular epistemic habits, affective experiences and genres of expression with the potential to significantly extend and pluralise forms of policy knowledge. CUPA harnesses the power of our creative imagination and capacity to hope and play, and applies this power in unfamiliar and generative ways. It opens space to produce knowledge through enactment – enabling radical forms of expression and praxis.

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In the opening paragraphs of this article, we expressed distress about the violence of our current moment, invoking contemporary threats of polycrisis, hate and destruction to furnish our point. Whilst rhetorical, these lines also reflect a genuine and enduring sense of heartbreak. In recent years, we all lived through the worst public health crisis of a generation, and at times its aftermath feels like a bruise that will not heal. In the UK, thousands of people died and many more were left chronically ill. Elsewhere, in countries such as Brazil and India, the death toll was more catastrophic than we could have imagined. Globally, COVID-19 claimed over *6 million lives*. That we are not in a constant state of grief, of mourning – or

incapacitated by our rage – seems more testament to the relentless demands of the modern world than it is to any recognisable kind of recovery. Our hearts break for all the friends, family and time we lost. In Bhattacharyya's (2020) words, 'heartbreak is when we realise that there is no remedy, no repair, no way back and nothing to fix this. That whatever comes next these histories and presents of violence cannot be put right'.

In other words, we have earned our paranoia, our enduring sense that powerful forces are working to resist progress and dismantle all that we hold dear. And yes, there are times when hope has felt like a horrible fracturing thing – a childlike emotion, a road to disappointment and regret. But we – the authors – nonetheless find ourselves, against all odds, living as if tomorrow might be different, nurturing a reparative reading of the world. We wrote early drafts of this article in the gaps between strike days. A strike is a protest against what is – a rage-filled, grief-filled act of critique and dissent. But, it is also an expression of hope that things could be different. For a while, the words 'another University is possible' were chalked onto a concrete pillar outside the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science – the remnant of a picket line. We are wedded to that radical sentiment. We have to be. As Bhattacharyya (2020) continues, 'it is only we, the heartbroken, who can truly battle and long for a world where no-one ever feels like this again'.

From this perspective, a dynamic, critical, hopeful utopianism is our political obligation. We must soothe grief, push against this growing sense of its inevitability and tread a path to radical change. Utopianism is, as Bammer (1991) says, life necessary. Or, in the words of Ruth Levitas (2013, p. 220), "Mourn. Love. Hope. Imagine. Organise".

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