

# Imagination and social movements

---

Hana Hawlina, Oliver Clifford Pedersen, Tania Zittoun  
University of Neuchâtel

## Highlights

- Imagination is a central component of social movements. Looking at social movements through the prism of imagination allows us to study how they develop in time – why they emerge, how they spread, transform and dissolve.
- Imagination entails dialogical movements across temporalities; social movements are incentivised and guided by remembering the past and imagining the future.
- Representations of the collective Us and different Others are constructed and sustained through the imagination; diverse imaginings of collective identities can be mobilised to change existing social structures.
- The products of imagining can be objectified in artefacts, which enable the dissemination of transformative visions.

## Abstract

Whether explicitly mentioned or not, imagination plays a key role in social movements. People's dissatisfaction with what is, their imagining of how things once were better, or of how things may become, often supports social movements. Social movements can, in turn, bring about new imagination for people. After defining the notion of imagination and social movements, drawing on recent research, we review the literature along three main axes: the role of temporality in the relation between social movements and imagination; the relation between collective identities, social movement and imagination; and the resources that support imagination and social movements. We conclude by highlighting further dimensions to analyse the dynamics of imagination, which may open new ways to analyse the trajectories of social movements.

Keywords: Imagination; social movement; artefact; symbolic resource; collective imagination; collective memory; social change; sociocultural psychology

## 1. Introduction

Whether explicitly mentioned or not, imagination play a key role in social movements. People's dissatisfaction with what is, their imagining of how things once were better, or of how things may become, often supports social movements. Social movements can, in turn, bring about new imagination for people. Thus, social movements are usually accompanied by the imagination of a collective, and what they may achieve [1].

Social movements can be roughly defined as “a collective, organised, sustained, and non-institutional challenge to authorities, powerholders, or cultural beliefs and practices” [2]. They can operate on different scales, from local (e.g., community gardening initiatives) to national (e.g. the Yellow vests; [3]) and transnational (e.g. Extinction Rebellion; [4]); they use different tactics (demonstrations, strikes, pickets, rallies, petitions, crowdfunding campaigns, manifestos, policy proposals, activism, social media, etc.; [2,5,6]); and operate with different levels of centralisation, from diffuse [7] to centralised [8,9].

Imagination is understood as the process by which people temporarily disengage from the here-and-now to explore the past, alternative worlds or the future [10,11]. It is a looping dynamic that is nourished and constrained by culture and various resources people draw from it [11–13].

Theories of social movements confer different statuses to the imagination, and imagination is rarely reflected upon explicitly in relation to social movements. We review the literature along three main axes: the role of temporality in the relation between social movements and imagination; the relation between collective identities, social movement and imagination; and the resources that support imagination and social movements. We invite future researchers to closely examine the dynamics by which imagination participates to the trajectories of social movements.

## 2.1 Social movements and imagination, in relation to pasts and futures

Imagination is a process that enables distancing from present circumstances to explore the past, the future and alternative possibilities [11,14,15]. As such, imagination allows people and collectives to escape the immutable arrow of time, to rally around goals created in processes of imagining what-was and what-should-be or should-not-be [7,16].

Changes in the present circumstances – as the burst of the subprime bubble in 2007-2008 leading people to default on their mortgages – can act as a trigger for apocalyptic imagination of the future [17]. However, even when social movements are triggered or catalysed by specific present events [18,19], they do not emerge *ex nihilo*; they have a past, a present, and a future [20].

Placing imagination at the heart of social movements does away with sequential and fatalistic models of historical time in favour of more processual notions. Not only does the past frame people’s imagination of the future, be it utopian or dystopian, as when national nostalgia gives rise to alt-right movements [21,22]; the past itself is read through the present and future, as when cooperatives become a way of moving towards an utopian future that invites a new reading of the past in post-revolution Egypt [23]. The concept of ‘prolepsis’ designates the process by which imagined futures can reshape the historical past [24–26]. In effect, collective remembering, central to many social movements, is an act of reconstruction, oriented toward imagined futures [27–29]. Thus, in analysing French Parliamentary debates, de Saint-Laurent [20,30] demonstrates that imagined collective futures ground political action and originate from selected narratives of the past. In the context of austerity protests in Ireland, Power [31,32] shows how past experiences of privatization and violence are used to construct a dystopian neo-liberal future to be averted. The Infinity Theory of Social Movements [33] aims to capture the continuous looping between remembering and imagining that informs feelings of unfairness and relative deprivation in the present, which can spur social movements and civic unrest.

Social movements expand, develop, and concretise, while others fragment, fade, and peter out [34,35]; they imply dialogical movement across temporalities [9].

## 2.2 Social movements, imagination, and Us and the Other

Imagination is central in the formation and operation of social movements because it enables people to sustain an image of the collective Us [16,36,37] and to construct representations of different Others [38,39].

Social and collective identities are constructed through the imagination of what unites people in the same

social movement. This imagination can emerge at the scale of a nation, as an “imagined community” [40], especially when encountering an Other imagined as harming the common project, as when Serbia experienced joining the EU as a future threatening their national identity [41]; or when the difficulty of imagining shared futures constrains the possible recognition of the other – as in case of long-standing conflict (e.g., Israel-Palestine [42]; Greek and Turkish Cypriots [22,43]). At times, despite a history of conflict, citizens can bond together in times of crisis, such as in the case of the Irish recession [44], where people felt united through narratives of shared guilt and suffering.

Beyond the nation, in both transnational and intranational conflicts, people engage in “political imagination” [36,39] to construct an image of “Us” and “the Other(s)” that can be mobilised to achieve political aims. It may be a group of people that emerges as a “we” from some shared imagination leading to a social movement, as in the case of the food activism [45]. The Other can also be conceived as a socioeconomic system that is endangering Us, such as in the case of communism in Romania [46], where the construction of the national identity and future depends on distancing from a system that is envisaged as a repressive “enemy of the human race” (p. 161). In former Czechoslovakia, a disconnection between the rigid demands of communism and people’s personal imaginings catalysed the social movement leading to the Velvet Revolution [47]. More recently, protests against neoliberalism in Ireland have been shown to follow the construction of an Us against a systemic Other that is eroding the nation and dividing the citizens between those who benefit from it and the rest [31,32].

Together, these studies show how collective life is symbolically experienced through imagination, and how diverse imaginings of Us, Others and the collective futures can be mobilised to change the existing social structures.

### 2.3 Social movements, imagination, and artefacts

Cultural artefacts present a very potent tool through which imagination can be communicated, shared, and channelled [11]; they can also be used to control people’s imagination and social action, as in propaganda [48].

Individuals’ or collective imaginings can be objectified in cultural artefacts such as art, novels, films, video games, virtual realities, etc., and thus become a part of the material world, which in turn can nourish new imaginings [7,12,49]. This enables dissemination of more or less uniform visions, through which people can share imaginative experiences that mobilise collective action [50]; or when accessing the same media around the world, develop a “geographical imagination” triggering massive human mobility [51,52].

Utopian and dystopian fiction has been notoriously influential in inspiring social movements throughout history [7,16]. While science fiction has an established role in inspiring technological innovations [53], climate fiction recently emerged as a prominent genre that hopes to galvanise readers to take action through utopian visions of a greener future or dystopias portraying a climate apocalypse [54–57].

Given the role of artefacts in how we imagine the world, controlling the access to cultural artefacts can systematically channel the imagination in a desired direction; the manipulation of images (propagation of regime-approved art and censorship of subversive works) in Nazism and Stalinism was used to reinforce oppressive ideological systems [58], while protesters in Cairo used street art to resist an unjust regime during the Arab Spring [59]. Fictional works can eventually bring people to more awareness of such dynamics – Orwell’s novel *1984* can thus act as a resource for history education by showing how censorship limits the imagination of the future [60].

Hence, cultural artefacts play a key role in the circulation of imagination produced by, and supporting social movements.

### 3. Conclusion: Trajectories of social movements through the dynamics of imagination

Collective imagination and social movements can thus best be understood as underpinned by dialogical dynamics between past and futures, self and other, concrete and shared crystallisation of imagination through artefact and more personal imagining [9]. On this basis we propose to push the analysis further.

First, imagination may participate in social movements in more centralised or distributed ways. Spontaneous social movements, in which people unite around a shared sense of injustice, as in the cases of the Yellow vests or Occupy movements, often consist of a fragmented or multi-voiced imagination in contrast to social movements supported by a collectively shared and sometimes centrally-regulated imagination of the future, as in the Soviet revolution [61]. Even when a social movement has a clear central goal, such as Scottish independence, groups and individuals can have vastly different imaginings of what the post-independence future should be [62]. Second, imagination can fuel social movements in different ways: it can offer a clearly defined and concrete goal (e.g. decrease meat consumption) or a more abstract and less directly actionable one (e.g. fighting for a fairer world). Third, the imagination galvanising or produced in social movements can have a positive valence – such as when a better future is aimed at – or a negative valence – as when the social movement is mainly driven by a rejection of a current state of affairs or a fear of a dystopian future (as in the Arab spring or the Irish protests) [37].

The trajectories of social movements develop in tandem with the imagination; they are formed through the imagination of Us fighting against an unjust Other, united in dissatisfaction with the present that is guided by the past and open to alternative futures, and the imaginings are nourished and disseminated through cultural artefacts. Taking all of these dimensions into account invites us to examine unfolding trajectories of social movements. For instance, the Yellow vests movement in France was triggered by the introduction of a tax on petrol in 2019, a concrete initiative with negative imagined consequences; people gathered, united by a multitude of dissatisfactions and demands to battle growing inequalities, with very little centralisation. The artefact of a yellow vest came to represent the movement, chosen because it is highly visible, associated with working-class industries, and widely understood as a distress signal [63]. In time, the government organised public discussions to clarify dispersed and abstract imaginings and turn them into concrete goals. However, with socio-political constraints on the imagination of alternatives (along with strong repression), the movement lost some of its momentum. Despite a lack of tangible results, the yellow vest became a powerful symbol of resistance that is used around the world [64] and was rapidly re-mobilised to protest Macron's pension reforms in January 2020 [65].

In this review, we aimed to demonstrate that analysing social movements through the prism of imagination allows us to understand their progression, from their emergence, through transformations, to eventual triumph or dissolution; we thus invite researchers to continue investigating the dynamics of imagination in driving social change.

### 4. References

1. Haiven M, Khasnabish A: **What is the radical imagination? A Special Issue.** *Affin J Radic Theory Cult Action* 2010, **4**:i–xxxvii.
2. Goodwin J, Jasper JM: *The social movements reader: Cases and concepts.* John Wiley & Sons; 2015.
3. Grossman E: **Frence's Yellow Vests – Symptom of a Chronic Disease.** *Polit Insights* 2018, **10**:30–34.

4. Shah D: **Extinction Rebellion: radical or rational?** *Br J Gen Pract* 2019, **69**:345–345.
5. Opp K-D: *Theories of political protest and social movements: A multidisciplinary introduction, critique, and synthesis*. Routledge; 2009.
6. Snow DA, Soule SA, Kriesi H: **Mapping the Terrain**. In *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. . John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2007:3–16.
7. \*Zittoun T, Gillespie A: **Imagining the collective future: a sociocultural perspective**. In *Imagining collective futures : Perspectives from social, cultural and political psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradovic S, Carrière K. Palgrave; 2018:15–37.

Beyond the three dimensions of imagination (past/future; degree of generalization; plausibility), collective imagination can be analysed along two additional dimensions: collective imagination may be more or less centralised, and its valence can be positive or negative.

8. Glăveanu VP: **Perspectival Collective Futures: Creativity and Imagination in Society**. In *Imagining Collective Futures*. . Springer International Publishing; 2018:83–105.
9. \*Marková I: **Conclusion: changing imaginings of collective futures**. In *Imagining collective futures. Perspectives from social, cultural and political psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradovic S, Carriere KR. Palgrave Macmillan; 2018:273–294.

Marková shows the dialogical nature of collective imagination, from past to future, from self to other, and its role in constructing the future.

10. Zittoun T, Cerchia F: **Imagination as expansion of experience**. *Integr Psychol Behav Sci* 2013, **47**:305–324.
11. Zittoun T, Gillespie A: *Imagination in human and cultural development*. Routledge; 2016.
12. Vygotsky LS: **Imagination and creativity in childhood**. *J Russ East Eur Psychol* 2004, **42**:7–97.
13. Zittoun T, Hawlina H, Gillespie A: **Imagination**. In *Encyclopedia of the possible*. Edited by Glăveanu VP. Palgrave; In press.
14. Bogdan RJ: *Mindvaults: sociocultural grounds for pretending and imagining*. MIT Press; 2013.
15. Taylor M: **Transcending Time, Place, and/or Circumstance: An Introduction**. *Oxf Handb Dev Imagin* 2013, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195395761.013.0001.
16. \*Jovchelovitch S, Hawlina H: **Utopias and world-making: Time, transformation and the collective imagination**. In *Imagining collective futures. Perspectives from social, cultural and political psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradovic S, Carriere KR. Palgrave Macmillan; 2018:129–151.

The chapter presents an overview of the recursive relationship between utopian imagination and social change. By looking at the changing representations of utopia through history, it presents an exploration of the potentials and perils of idealised collective imaginings.

17. McIntosh A: **Foreword**. In *Future ethics: Climate change and apocalyptic imagination*. Edited by Skrimshire S. Bloomsbury Publishing; 2010:vii–xi.
18. Hawlina H: **Imagination and Sociogenesis: The Case of the Poster Scandal**. in preparation,

19. Kadianaki I, Zittoun T: **Catalysts and Regulators of Psychological Change in the Context of Immigration Ruptures**. In *The Catalyzing Mind*. Edited by Cabell KR, Valsiner J. Springer; 2014:191–207.
20. de Saint-Laurent C: **Thinking Through Time: From Collective Memories to Collective Futures**. In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:59–81.
21. Muro D: **Nationalism and nostalgia: The case of radical Basque nationalism**. *Nations Natl* 2005, **11**:571–587.
22. Smeekees A, McKeown S, Psaltis C: **Endorsing Narratives Under Threat: Maintaining Perceived Collective Continuity Through the Protective Power of Ingroup Narratives in Northern Ireland and Cyprus**. *J Soc Polit Psychol* 2017, **5**:282–300.
23. Maarek EA, Awad SH: **Creating Alternative Futures: Cooperative Initiatives in Egypt**. In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:199–219.
24. Brescó de Luna I: **The end into the beginning: Prolepsis and the reconstruction of the collective past**. *Cult Psychol* 2017, **23**:280–294.
25. Brescó de Luna I: **Imagining collective futures in time: Prolepsis and the regimes of historicity**. In *Imagining collective futures. Perspectives from social, cultural and political psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradovic S, Carriere KR. Palgrave Macmillan; 2018:109–128.
26. Cole M: **Remembering the Future**. In *Time: Sense, Space, Structure*. Edited by van Deusen N, Koff LM. Brill; 2016:375–387.
27. de Saint-Laurent C, Brescó de Luna I, Awad SH, Wagoner B: **Collective memory and social sciences in the post-truth era**. *Cult Psychol* 2017, **23**:147–155.
28. Wagoner B: **Collective remembering as a process of social representation**. In *Handbook of Social Representations*. Edited by Sammut G, Andreouli E, Gaskell G, Valsiner J. Cambridge University Press; 2015:143–162.
29. Wertsch JV: **National memory and where to find it**. In *Oxford Handbook of Culture and Memory*. Edited by Wagoner B. Oxford University Press; 2018:259–281.
30. de Saint-Laurent C: **“I would rather be hanged than agree with you!”: Collective Memory and the Definition of the Nation in Parliamentary Debates on Immigration**. *Outl Crit Pract Stud* 2014, **15**:22–53.
31. \*Power SA: **Remembering and Imagining in Human Development: Fairness and Social Movements in Ireland**. In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:221–235.

Drawing on the case of social movements in Ireland, Power elaborates the interweaving temporalities in social change as a looping model in the shape of an infinity symbol, where the past to the future converge on the focal point in the center – the present.

32. Power SA: **The Deprivation-Protest Paradox: How the Perception of Unfair Economic Inequality Leads to Civic Unrest.** *Curr Anthropol* 2018, **59**:765–789.
33. Power SA: **Why a richer world will have more civic discontent: The Infinity Theory of Social Movements.** *Rev Gen Psychol* in press,
34. Conover MD, Ferrara E, Menczer F, Flammini A: **The Digital Evolution of Occupy Wall Street.** *PLOS ONE* 2013, **8**:e64679.
35. Tilly C: *Social Movements, 1768-2004.* Routledge; 2019.
36. \*Glăveanu VP, de Saint-Laurent C: **Political Imagination, Otherness and the European Crisis.** *Eur J Psychol* 2015, **11**:557–564.

Glăveanu and de Saint-Laurent introduce the concept of political imagination as the process by which collective life is symbolically experienced and this experience mobilised in view of achieving political aims. The ramifications of political imagination and its construction of Otherness are illustrated on the case of the European Crisis.

37. Zittoun T, Gillespie A: **Imagining the collective future: A sociocultural perspective.** In *Imagining Collective Futures.* Edited by de Saint Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:15–37.
38. Petersen MB, Aarøe L: **Politics in the Mind's Eye: Imagination as a Link between Social and Political Cognition.** *Am Polit Sci Rev* 2013, **107**:275–293.
39. Glăveanu VP, de Saint Laurent C: **Taking the perspective of others: A conceptual model and its application to the refugee crisis.** *Peace Confl J Peace Psychol* 2018, **24**:416–423.
40. Anderson B: *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* Verso Books; 2006.
41. Obradović S: **Creating Integration: A Case Study from Serbia and the EU.** In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology.* Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:237–254.
42. Nicholson C, Howarth C: **Imagining Collective Identities Beyond Intergroup Conflict.** In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology.* Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:173–196.
43. Avraamidou M, Psaltis C: **Blocking the solution: Social representations of threats and (non)dialogue with alternative representations in Greek-Cypriot newspapers during peace negotiations.** *J Theory Soc Behav* 2019, **49**:460–479.

This paper identifies the different representations of realistic and symbolic threats Greek-Cypriot newspapers mobilise to construct an alternative representation, giving way for semantic barriers blocking (non)transformative dialogue, both internally and externally.

44. Power SA: **A violent past but a peaceful present: The cultural psychology of an Irish recession.** *Peace Confl J Peace Psychol* 2016, **22**:60–66.
45. Kennedy EH, Parkins JR, Johnston J: **Food activists, consumer strategies, and the democratic imagination: Insights from eat-local movements:** *J Consum Cult* 2016, doi:10.1177/1469540516659125.

46. Tileagă C: **Troubled Pasts, Collective Memory, and Collective Futures.** In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:153–172.
47. Zittoun T: **The Velvet Revolution of Land and Minds.** In *The Psychology of Radical Social Change*. Edited by Wagoner B, Moghaddam FM, Valsiner J. Cambridge University Press; 2018:140–158.
48. \*Marková I: **From imagination to well-controlled images: challenge for the dialogical mind.** In *Oxford Handbook of Culture and Imagination*. Edited by Zittoun T, Glăveanu VP. Oxford University Press; 2018:319–344.

Marková shows how totalitarian regimes and bureaucratic systems use manipulation of images to steer and limit imagination.

49. Gillespie A, Corti K, Evans S, Heasman B: **Imagining the Self Through Cultural Technologies.** In *Handbook of Imagination and Culture*. Edited by Zittoun T, Glăveanu VP. Oxford University Press; 2017:301–318.
50. Carriere KR: **Framing the Issue: Literature, Collective Imagination, and Fan Activism.** In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:39–58.
51. Appadurai A: *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota press; 1996.
52. Cresswell T: *On the Move: Mobility in the Western World*. Routledge; 2006.
53. Michaud T: *Innovation, between science and science fiction*. ISTE Ltd/John Wiley and Sons Inc; 2017.
54. Skrimshire S (Ed): *Future ethics: Climate change and apocalyptic imagination*. Bloomsbury Publishing; 2010.
55. Milkoreit M: **Imaginary politics: Climate change and making the future.** *Elem Sci Anth* 2017, **5**:62.
56. Milkoreit M: **Pop-cultural Mobilization: Deploying Game of Thrones to Shift US Climate Change Politics.** *Int J Polit Cult Soc* 2019, **32**:61–82.
57. Milkoreit M: **The promise of climate fiction.** In *Reimagining Climate Change*. Edited by Wapner P, Elver H. Routledge; 2016:171–191.
58. Marková I: **Handbook of Imagination and Culture.** In *From Imagination to Well-Controlled Images*. . Oxford University Press; 2017:319–344.
59. Awad SH: **Documenting a contested memory: Symbols in the changing city space of Cairo.** *Cult Psychol* 2017, **23**:234–254.
60. Carretero M: **History Education and the (Im)possibility of Imagining the Future.** In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*. Edited by de Saint-Laurent C, Obradović S, Carriere KR. Springer International Publishing; 2018:255–271.

61. \*Campbell S, Moghaddam FM: **Social Engineering and Its Discontents: The Case of the Russian Revolution**. In *The Psychology of Radical Social Change: From Rage to Revolution*. Edited by Wagoner B, Moghaddam FM, Valsiner J. Cambridge University Press; 2019:102–121.

This chapter demonstrates how Bolshevik revolutionaries relied on ideas from psychological science, particularly behaviourism, in their post-revolution restructuring of society and its institutions. It was intended as a large-scale re-conditioning of citizen behaviour to attain a shared communist utopia.

62. Manley G: **Scotland’s post-referenda futures**. *Anthropol Today* 2019, **35**:13–17.
63. Friedman V: **The Power of the Yellow Vest**. *NY Times* 2018,
64. Brancati D, Lucardi A: **Yellow vest protests are erupting around the world – but are they a passing fad?** *World Econ Forum* 2019,
65. Posteraro L: **France’s pension protests will not end until Macron shows some humility**. *The Independent* 2020,