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CHAPTER 1

'WE DON'T GO THE WAY OF REVOLUTION. WE DON'T GO THE WAY OF REFORM.' SOCIAL IMAGINARIES AS UTOPIAN METHOD IN THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

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Chapter 1

'We Don't Go the Way of Revolution. We Don't Go the Way of Reform.' Social Imaginaries as Utopian Method in the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)

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Abstract

Building on recent work that makes a conceptual connection between utopia and social innovation for social change (Langergaard & Eschweiler, 2022), this chapter draws on two interviews with founders of German SSE organisations that can be understood as platforms or intermediaries for social innovation for social change. They can be associated with the social and solidarity economy in the sense that they pursue community values and transformative change in collaborative and participatory manners, using different strategies and working on different societal challenges. In a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, the analysis focusses on the function and form of social imaginaries, inspired by Levitas' distinction of content, function and form of utopia as utopian method (2011). It examines how two SSE founders form, share and enact social imaginaries in their various transformative pursuits. The paper concludes with a short reflection on the main insights and what they indicate about the relevance of utopia in SSE research.

Keywords: social imaginaries, open-ended utopia, transformation, SSE founders

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Introduction

This chapter uses two case examples to examine the role of social imaginaries in SSE organisations that can be understood as platforms or intermediaries for social change. In a hermeneutical approach, the analysis focusses on the function and form of the imaginary, inspired by Levitas' (2011) distinction of content, function and form of utopia. It examines how SSE actors construct, share, enact and adapt social imaginaries as they follow their various transformative pursuits towards 'what is not yet' (Jacobsen & Tester, 2012).

Presented in the form of founders' stories, the analysis weaves between data and conceptual approaches to utopia that distinguish utopia as idea or as ideal (Vieira, 2017) and conceptualise utopia as an open-ended destination (Wright, 2010; Friedman, 2012). It is strongly interwoven with actors' personal values that inform their imaginaries for the future concerning collective outcomes and shows how they affect the narrative of possible alternative futures, frightening or wishful, as they interact with society (Taylor, 2004; Bazzani, 2022). The focus on social imaginaries and utopia is relevant as it sheds light on the actors behind SSE organisations, their initial intent and hopes for the futures as well as the role of societal dreaming throughout, giving utopia a role in theories of social change. In Langergaard and Eschweiler (2022) we argue 'that the utopian dimension opens a pandora's box of human desire in this time of multiple crises, a view on imagined possibilities that guide human action, adding visions of hope to the critical assessments of the present that keep actors going in their efforts to imagine a better world' (p. 7). The utopian dimension hints at the core values actors want to preserve, deepen, or create, giving us glimpses of what might matter in a different (socio-economic, human-nature relations) paradigm than the current one. Engaging with social imaginaries can thus help research to 'develop more relevant research questions, critically reflect on methodologies of choice, and, ultimately, produce more rigorous and socially meaningful theory' (Laine & Kibler, 2022, 22).

Set into motion, social imaginaries become narratives or stories we can study by presenting their content and analysing their function and form over time as motivation, action and projections of alternatives align (Bazzani, 2022, 389). 'Following a story is a very complex operation, guided by our expectations concerning the outcome of the story, expectations that we readjust as the story moves along, until it coincides with the conclusion' (Ricœur, 1991, 22). In the following the chapter introduces social imaginaries and utopia in relation to SSE research and method, analyses two founder stories, and concludes with a short reflection on both cases and the relevance for SSE research.

The concept of utopia and social imaginary in the context of SSE

Utopia reflects a desired state of future affairs that can be represented as an idea or a more fully formed ideal of society, influenced by context, subjective desire and the question 'would this be a good society, if it existed' (Levitas, 2011, 5). The literature on utopia is vast, with a history of thought in disciplines such as philosophy (e.g. Bloch, 1954; Ricoeur, 1986; de Carvalho, 2005), political philosophy (e.g. Jameson, 2004; Wright, 2010; Friedman, 2012), sociology (e.g. Mannheim, 1929; Levitas, 2007; 2011; 2013), and in literature (e.g. Morris, 1891; H.G Wells, 1905; Huxley, 1932). The term utopia thus suggests that it can never be implemented, but serve as orientation and as potentiality, conjured in relation to crises or societal problems (Jacobsen & Tester, 2012).

The philosophical ideal of utopia serves as food for thought, as *education for desire* and for solidarity that enables to constantly strive forward (Vieira about Carvalho, 2017, 68), as the possibility of images of a good future and a good society (Bloch), as driving force, 'giving expression to an imagination that, grounded in a good knowledge of human reality, provides the reader with positive images of the future that are meant to inspire the creation of a better society' (ibid., 65-6). Important aspect is the possibility of plural futures that can be explored and redefined in thought. Vieira describes contemporary philosophical utopianism as 'a device to promote critical thinking and a strategy for the search of transitory truths' (ibid., 72). Social imaginaries can sustain the societies we inhabit, providing the 'cultural toolkit' that enables us to make sense of our social worlds (Mason and Dey, 2018, 87), but they also deal with questions how we should live our lives or provide images of a different life or society (Taylor, 2007).

Utopia as political ideal can contain concrete steps for social change, a promise seen by many writers and thinkers in the late 19th until the mid-20th century in Marxism – although Marx himself rejected utopia (Levitas, 2011). Political utopia became somewhat paralysed in the Western world as a consequence of the terror regimes of fascism, Nazism and Socialism (Czygányik, 2017, 9). However, critique of liberal democracy as blueprint for the world, with little scope for social change (Friedman, 2012, 4), prompted a re-evaluation of political utopia. 'If we are not given concrete examples of horizons, the energy of potentially transformative utopian thinking will be lost in an endless search' (Vieira, 2017, 73). Here, social imaginaries can have subversive capacity, thanks to their otherness (Castoriadis, 2005) that can serve as source of inspiration and action.

This chapter therefore starts from an understanding of utopia as both idea and ideal, understood as a spiral search for something better based on reality, which assumes willingness to act as much as the ability to critically reflect (Vieira, 2017). It also rests within the parameters of democracy. As Friedman pointed out, liberal democracy as blueprint for society is a closed utopia that does not leave much room for transformation and hence alternative social imaginary. He therefore focusses

on democracy as a form of open-ended utopia that works like a regulative ideal for change, which may never be fully realized (2012). Wright's 'real utopias' (2010) embrace the tension between dreams and practice, between what is desirable and what is pragmatically possible. They describe sometimes radically new approaches to social relations, institutions and the world that we can find in the SSE as 'utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change' (ibid., 6). Real utopias are open-ended because they are dynamic and change in accordance with social learning.

This understanding of utopia as both idea and desire to strive for it, combines willingness to act and to critically reflect, based on experiential and experimental action, which together allow for open-endedness, as actors strive for the not-yet. It provides rich soil for a study on the role of social imaginaries in the context of this book. SSE organisations are understood as rooted in civil society and third sector, as political actors that seek to alleviate the consequences of various crises by placing the service to members or the community ahead of profit, while keen to preserve or deepen the democratic structures or the promises of democracy and their values that they originate in (Laville & Salmon, 2015; Ould Ahmed, 2015). They combine the political with an entrepreneurial dimension, as they experiment with alternative ways of producing and organizing, trying to practice economic and democratic solidarity based on reciprocity and self-determination, by placing 'new actors into the workplace, in class strategies and citizenship struggles, in response to concerns over welfare, recognition and a meaningful life' (Gaiger et al., 2015, 5). By doing so SSE organisations engage in social innovation (SI), understood as a way of describing a broad range of ethically framed activities designed with the goal of improving society's capacity to attend to human needs. This also implies a recognition of the limitations of the existing paradigm to deliver well-being and justice for all, and which therefore looks to alternative kinds of social, economic and political arrangements, which may complement, defy, resist and/or reconfigure the societal order (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019, 3).

In the case work presented in this chapter these combined social, economic and sometimes ecological concerns are reflected in founders' values and organisational approaches. The focus on imaginaries and utopia is relevant as it sheds light on the actors behind SSE organisations and the role of social imaginaries for the future, giving utopia a role in theories of social change. It can be interpreted as experimental and prefigurative actions and practices with clear practical dimensions (Wright, 2010), the manifestation of social dreaming evident through participation in the public sphere, as a form of utopia as democracy (Friedman, 2012). Here social imaginary is rooted in past and present but is prefigurative and directed towards a better future. SSE organisations tend to start with local action, involving few people, but frequently driven by the hope of broader change in society. Utopian desires and imagination can thus relate to better individual or communal forms of living, to alternative social practices within local or regional ecosystems or to a different society altogether.

Here, the focus is on utopian method pursued by founders, based on their social imaginaries, which led to SSE organisations pursuing social change. The impact on collective imaginaries must be left for another study.

Method

Diving deeper into the empirical material reveals the initial intent, strongly linked to biographies and personal values, the learning of SSE actors about the importance of both local and broader context and history in attempts to create collective imaginaries of the future, and the adaptions they make to their imaginaries through engagement in collective action. Utopia in concrete contexts can be merely expressive, something to continuously strive for through constant improvement and reform, or instrumental – wilful, to be practically implemented, incremental or radical (Levitas, 2007).

The overall research questions this chapter addresses is how social imaginaries, or the utopian spark, affect founders in the context of two SSE organisations, and how they are woven into the ways those organisations pursue transformative goals. While studying imaginaries might be methodologically challenging, 'the *social* imaginary exacerbates this problem, because as individual fantasy, the imaginary can still be described as belonging to a person's experiential horizon' (Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019, 2).

Ruth Levitas' distinction of content, function and form of utopia offers a good framework to describe and analyse the role of the utopian spark that ignites and turns into concrete action with the intent to change practice, attitudes, orientations. *Content* is a descriptive category and refers to the actual utopian imaginary, which in the cases presented hinge around quality of life in relation to sustainable agriculture and living free from economic worries based on solidarity. It tends to be normative and evaluative and is more or less precise and detailed in representation. The *function* of utopia refers to the desire for something else, for a better life or a better way of being. Imaginary can take the function of compensation for harsh realities, indulging in fantasies without critical examination of the current reality or any prospect of its alteration (Levitas, 1990). Its function can also be to articulate critique of current conditions, or the capacity to actively pursue alternatives, based on critique and projections, hopes, dreams and aspirations for a better future (Jakobsen, 2017). *Form* refers to the way utopia is told. It can be descriptive (in literature, art, performance, mission statements), experimental or experiential, like collective organizing, events or practical rearrangements of the way we live together, relationally and physically. In the data analysis, the focus is on founder stories, how they describe the development from spark to action, the activities the SSE organisations pursue for their transformative goals.

Using hermeneutical phenomenologist method, the interpretative analysis zooms in on the functions SSE founders ascribe to social imaginary and utopia. It draws connections between the functions of imaginaries and aspects of culture, identity

and history, and how they shape values and capacities to act. The analysis is presented as their stories, as 'stories are central to human experience. We create stories of ourselves to connect our actions, mark our identities, distinguish ourselves from others, and link past, present, and, perhaps, future' (Josselson & Hammack, 1996, 4). Focus on form of utopia, the way the social imaginary is told, selects key elements and offers an interpretation of the key elements of imagined futures, presented through experiments and experiences. Offering experiments and experiences is part of the utopian repertoire in the sense that they offer glimpses in alternative ways of thinking or doing. They are an invitation to break with the familiar and the 'way things have always been', offering the possibility of deviance from tradition (Ricœur, 1991, 25). An important facet here is the quality of participation, as questions of governance and democracy are important in conceptualisations of the SSE, as well as in the literature on utopia.

Analysis weaves between empirical data and literature to analyse dimensions of social dreaming in the form the utopia is told, shared and adapted: descriptively, experimental or experiential, by individuals and in exchange with others. Thus, utopia becomes an analytic for the exploration of imaginaries of the good life, or as the 'expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living' (Levitas, 2013: xii). 'Following them means setting aside the derogatory use of utopianism and instead exploiting the elasticity of the term' (Prince & Neumark, 2022, 3), drawing inspiration from authors like Bloch, Friedman, Wright, Ricoeur and Vieira. Approaching utopia this way allows to analyse some of the moral, ideological and political underpinnings of social imaginaries and transformative ideas. It allows us to understand the utopian impulse at play in change processes, and how it translates into forms of sharing and implementation.

Data source are two qualitative in-depth interviews with two founders, here called David and Matthias. David founded a competence centre in rural East Germany for education for sustainable development, doing research and running a real-time lab to explore alternative futures for agriculture and rural community life. Matthias started a Germany-wide initiative that experiments with unconditional basic income, based on crowd-funded basic income raffles, analysis of recipient experiences, research and advocacy work.

Analysis

David’s story

Utopian content

Sustainable farming enhances quality of life, as it protects soil ‘with a socially engaged and regional anchor’. Inspired by de-growth as possible path to better quality of life and health, the rural area becomes a blueprint for many societal challenges, while respecting people’s limited desire for change and how that is related to people’s own stories and contexts. ‘Do-growth is honest. … How we treat ourselves we treat the soil – with our shit. If we understand that this organ in our stomach, with all the bacteria, if we understand it as a system that is regenerative, then I can transpose this to my working environment etc.’

Function of social imaginary

The first function of the imaginary is compensation for David’s own longing for the good life. It is also critique of exploitative practices that deplete soil and water resources, and that alienate communities as economic pressures push individualization and bigger, more profitable farms at the expense of locally embedded farming practices. The imaginary drives action that describes and showcases the consequences of exploitative practices like poor soil and water shortages, while pointing out possible avenues towards sustainable farming and improved quality of life.

The function of the social imaginary is related above all to the personal history. David grew up in a family in urban West Germany, was Steiner educated, with one parent an early actor in German ethical ecological banking and law for sustainable and solidarity farming. David remembers that ‘I took a box when I was seven, wrote *if you don’t change your behavior the world will die*. I singed the edges of the paper, making it look old, then stuck it in a bottle and in the river, with the intention of letting it float to Bonn, where Helmut Kohl was the Chancellor.’ David was keen to do everything right and went on to establish a start-up ‘where I wanted to do everything: Green IT, feng-shui, fair trade, CO2-neutral. After three years I realized something was missing’. David turned to study alternative economies and gathered new tools for action. ‘I was trying to reflect if this was just my parents bringing this (trying to do better), or was it also my own way? Being engaged with my heart.’

David moved to the countryside in East Germany to work with an organic agricultural cooperative, driven by the vision of living near nature with soil to work with for societal impact. The goal: to promote sustainable farming and improved quality of life, based on critique of present conditions, reconnecting to a past where soil was better and biodiversity higher. David realized that this rural area has the potential to look for solutions for many societal challenges, it seemed to symbolize everything

that went wrong with modern food systems. David was in what seemed like an experimental sand pit for change.

Over time David understood that his personal visions did not necessarily align with those of the people around him: ‘I have a nice example, an old couple in (…), their son is the last fisherman there. We were visiting a nature protection project there, a TV crew came, and we were looking for a place to have a coffee, so we ended up with them, with homemade lard and meat hunted and cured by the husband. Next to that were the cheapest *Netto* (discount supermarket chain) products, representing what has been disconnected from local production, products related to bad ecological and social impact. But not having *Netto* wouldn’t be in their vision about the better life.’

This episode represents the personal cultural learning process David went through by living and working in a rural setting with local residents. Realizing that people do not want to change everything was an important step for his personal social imaginary, ‘seeing this also as a quality: we need respect for the past, local culture, time and place’.

Form

People in the organisation like David, with transformative ideas, mostly not locals, try to connect to the local population and local culture in various experiential activities. The goal is ‘to enable people to look at what they do, so bringing more consciousness basically. Towards the past but also towards the present moment and what we want to do next. And connecting this also to people having more dialogue and more participation.’ David founded the world field (*Weltacker*), a physical space for projection, connection, conflict and conflict resolution. *Weltacker* is a 2000 sqm field, representing the area each individual on earth would have to live from if we divided the still existing 14,6 billion hectare of land by the people living in the world. It shows the human impact on land and how to use this amount of space in a sustainable way to feed and offer basic subsistence, what it takes to take care of it and how to innovate or improve current farming practices. This is an educational space for school classes to visit, but also an event space for companies or other organisations interested in learning about sustainability. A scholarship programme invited young people into the region to work on short-term projects like civic engagement or locally sourced building materials. Together with a rewilding organisation they explore solutions for water shortages. ‘My job is to bring pictures that become potentials for farms or other actors and then it takes its own life. Bringing the picture as a method, bringing ideas is a tool or an activity I do.’

Another format is nature walks that bring together citizens and stakeholders around certain issues, e.g. water shortage. ‘There we just meet as people, not representatives. It’s intimate. It’s a process, we walk together, we look at the landscape and we see what is needed. Afterwards we put the professional hats back on and report what this did to us.’ Both create experiences and encounters where people come to learn together. Film screenings or just coming together to eat and talk at

the *Weltacker* become deliberative platforms to mediate between conventional farmers and bird protection activists, or to eat and listen to music together, as celebrations of good living, introducing joy as a pathway of opening hearts and minds.

The experiential is combined with narratives that link past, present, and future. 'When you talk to them (citizens) about the past, when they share old stories and you can see in their eyes that this is a good memory – coming from there change is possible. It seems to me that people need something to lean on, a potential, and then put an image to it, in order to pursue an image of a different world.' David learned that visions of change must connect also to local culture. 'You come from the city, the landscape seems empty and full of possibilities. In the city no one holds you accountable, but here you have to deliver if you really want to talk about something. It is a nice culture, but also challenging at the beginning. It is not a tradition here to talk about visions. If I ask what do you want I don't get much of an answer. People talk about what used to be nice in GDR time. Then I can ask, what was different then compared to today and how can we move forward from there.'

Social imaginaries enable spiral progression of communication between ideology and utopia (Langdridge, 2006, 645). Utopias provide an opposition and thus 'create a distance between what is and what ought to be' (Ricoeur, 1991, 651), while centered by identity preserved through ideology. There is also the possibility of critique leading to rupture and disidentification. Utopias provide images of new goals, that help to critically reflect dominant ideology (Vieira, 2017, 69). Jameson sees the utopian moment as suspension of the political: 'It is this suspension, this separation of the political—in all its unchangeable immobility—from daily life and even from the world of the lived and the existential, this externality that ... allows us to take hitherto unimaginable mental liberties with structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seem on the cards' (Jameson, 2004, 45). This is what connects the experiential form of social dreaming through enacted agency in a rural setting to the potential of broader change through social, cultural, economic and ecological sustainability. David underlines the importance of differentiating micro and macro impact: 'From my feeling I'd say it feels much more like saving the world if I save my own small life and impact, disconnected from EU und politics. I need to feel the change myself, it feels good if I have good impact with the steps I do. It needs a good combination of vision and enthusiasm and respect for your experience.' Still, the initial social imaginary stays intact when David says: 'We are here to get a new outcome for nature'.

This case is an example of incremental change or *interstitial metamorphosis* as described by Wright: through experiences of gradual enhancement of social power, through rebuilding community or understanding solutions for local production and regeneration which has, according to Wright, the potential to shift the underlying configuration of power that controls economic activity (Wright, 2010, 368). Experiences of 'what could be' are open ended and dynamic 'regulative ideals' (ibid., 370), pointing towards an unrealised normative potential grounded in existing society

and values. As David concludes: ‘For my record it’s the best format to bring people together and make them think – look here, the badger is back’.

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Matthias’ story

Content

Unconditional basic income (UBI) is portrayed as possibility for transformation without fear: It builds on values of equality through redistribution and combines the liberal ideal of freedom with expression of love for people through unconditionality. Matthias describes UBI as a tool to ‘raise everybody just a little bit …not a tool to promote world changers or visionaries.’ It projects liberation from a sense of helplessness and stress due to economic woes, mutual trust and societies’ readiness to address shared challenges. ‘Just let the other human be. And I think it’s a magical principle, it’s the biggest leverage for change. And I think we can’t solve the climate crisis if we don’t solve the social crisis. And it’s the most efficient and it’s radical and it’s doable at the same time. It’s just the sweet spot between both worlds.’

Function of social imaginary

One function is compensation for Matthias’ own fear of conservativism and populism. The other is critique of a system that leaves people in economic fear and risks its own capacity to deal with the challenges it faces; it challenges the dominant system by testing an alternative.

Matthias was born in East Germany and was a child at the time of Germany’s reunification. Matthias knows that his parents had to start over again in a new political, economic and social system and learned that systems can crash and transform. The parents remained critical of capitalism, a viewpoint which was passed on to Matthias, while both him and his parents have ‘business mindsets’, combined with a communitarian mindset that Matthias describes as East German attitude. Matthias loved the experience of American liberalism and entrepreneurial enthusiasm during an exchange year in the US. Matthias started a first business at age 16, started a new political party at 19 in his hometown and decided that politics ‘is not my theory of change’, turning towards a ‘start-up activist career’, which Matthias said gave him the illusion of big impact. Arguably it also gave Matthias a sense of power to be able to shake things.

The communitarian aspect kicked in again after founding a start-up that started running without Matthias’ presence, and Matthias received a basic sum of money

every month ‘without having to do anything – and this really changed my perspective on life’. Matthias came across the concept of unconditional basic income and it matched Matthias’ values, hopes and dreams, but doubts remained about ‘this whole idea that human beings would turn out to be good when there’s no pressure’. Matthias believes that there is a lot of fear in society. ‘They fear losing what they have and so they are rather conservative.’ Overcoming fear is a prerequisite for change in the future. UBI is not only an utopia in its own right, it is also a tool to address the challenges societies are facing. The function of the vision is to explore the possibility of change, but also compensation for Matthias’ own fear of a future in which people will not agree with necessary changes because ‘they fear losing what they have. And there’s so much to lose that we stick with the old stuff, even though we know it’s killing us.’

Form

The social imaginary is experimental: to find out how UBI affects people, the organisation regularly awards crowd-funded unconditional basic incomes for one to three years in raffles. The stories of recipients are documented and published, by now more than 1.700 people have received a UBI. ‘I still have doubts, when you consider that a whole generation was growing up under conditions of basic income, how would they change? What would be the cultural shift?’ This is what the organization wants to find out.

It is also experiential: hundreds of people donate money for the UBI crowdfunding every month and follow the raffles online. Matthias knows that people who give money for the UBI raffle often do so because they hope to be winners themselves in future, but also because they believe in the idea of unconditional giving and receiving. The idea gains exposure that way: ‘Every month they get in touch with this topic. It doesn’t feel like reading the papers, but it is imagining utopia for myself, not on a societal level. I think that’s the most important tool we have.’ Matthias is aware that not everyone is in it out of love but hopes that it can still be the tool for the good society.

Finally, UBI as utopia is descriptive in form: the stories of UBI recipients are shared on the website, the organisation gets many requests for interviews and the staff have become experts on basic income in Germany. ‘We create real life examples and we try to lead by example. We are an actor in the debate. (…) It’s a perfect media story. It’s real people with a positive story from your local area. And it’s somehow political, but not too much, not like party politics, but like a big vision thing.’ To solidify the vision of UBI’s impact on society there is now also scientific research, so as to avoid confirmation bias. ‘We get a lot of stories. But then also maybe the people only tell us the good things and don’t talk about the other things.’ More elaborate research with tax simulations and UBI over longer periods of time is running.

For Matthias, UBI is a way to reduce fear and make society more adaptable to challenges societies are facing. Starting the organization helped answer Matthias' own questions, which 'created a kind of a movement around it, which was never my intention'. Active reflection can be the first step on a continuum of actions triggered by social dreaming, like Carvalho's education for desire to imagine another becoming (Vieira, 2017, 68). Bloch described utopia as an 'anticipatory consciousness' being all around us, encapsulated in partly unconscious glimpses of a better world. His *concrete utopia* is based on a sense of possibility, starting in the present, but still 'an as yet impossible potentiality' (Thompson, 2012, 33) that gives us hope and anticipation of possible other futures. Actors can also engage in utopian experiments as described by Wright's real utopias or in Jakobsen's grounded utopias, which refer to cultural practices that are alternative forms of living that can function as some kind of example, focussing 'on the possibilities for better societies latent in the present' (Jakobsen, 2017, 39).

Matthias decided to turn UBI into an experiment to confront his own initial doubts that such a radical idea could work, describing this doubt as the result of 'a big propaganda that tells you that different thing every day'. Central to critique in utopian thinking is the question of ability to think outside the dominant ideology of a specific time or place. Ideology refers to dominant positions within specific socio-cultural contexts. How can we think outside hegemonic ideology? Ricoeur brought ideology and utopia together in a co-constitutive relationship. He referred to social imaginary, the ensemble of stories and narratives that helps mediate reality in any given society and that both limits and enables understanding (Ricoeur, 1991), which is what the initiative started by Matthias is doing, carried by a movement of citizens that believes in the not-yet possibility that UBI as utopia projects. The initiative pursues incremental change by combining old structures with new approaches: 'There's a social aspect and then there is also this fascination for the liberal aspect, and that both comes together in this very human idea.' However, Matthias also sees the potential for radical system change or *ruptured transformation* that changes existing institutions and social structures through direct confrontation (Wright, 2010), the reason they take a social design approach of building prototypes, testing and sharing.

Discussion

The short analysis of the two cases illustrates some of the moral, ideological and political underpinnings of transformative ideas and ambitions. Those are partially rooted in the biographies of the founders, who both grew up in academic households that as far as evident from the interviews questioned the status quo or were themselves engaged with questions of transformation. David and Matthias, both male and in their thirties now, made transformation a career choice early on, with start-ups meant to promote alternatives for more sustainable futures, bridging their own pasts with the present, pursuing their imaginaries for the future, for which

change must occur, as the challenges are threating people and planet. Both attach individual and emotional markers to what they do, like love, trust, or quality of life.

Both organisations that were created from the initial imaginary intent are intermediaries that enable mostly experimental (UBI) and experiential (both) forms of participation. David is more directly involved with the community, engaged in the organisations' activities and the local context in which they act, which has provided him with first-hand experience that people's visions for the future differ from his own. This had an impact on the design of experiential actions, where participants are invited to come together as persons rather than functionaries, and where atmospheres that invite sharing are more important than getting a point across. Matthias' assumptions of people's attitudes are more indirect, and he is a founder of new ideas rather than an implementer. Nevertheless, the organisation he set up essentially pursues an experimental approach in order to examine the utopian element in action, using stories and research, never stating that UBI is the answer, but believing that it could be the answer.

Both initiatives focus on individuals as units of transformation. They offer opportunities for change in perspectives without being prescriptive, hoping for a change of hearts by focussing on quality of community as well as on quality of food and soil, or on projections of more equality in the distribution of power in society through financial redistribution based on trust and human worth. Both cases are more concrete in their utopian intent than Bloch's concrete utopia. They fit the 'real utopias' described by Wright: they experiment how what is desirable can be pragmatically possible (Wright, 2010, 6). They pursue emancipatory social transformation, stress the role of human agency, and the willingness of people to participate in the realisation of alternatives (ibid., 370). Both pursue incremental rather than radical change, even if Matthias sees radical potential. They are rational dreamers who pursue a theory of change. 'We don't go the way of revolution. We don't go the way of reform. We just built prototypes to show that utopia is possible'. Social change occurs on the inside of actors and on the outside through professional ways of sharing, as David explains: 'People need to learn something, a potential, and then put a picture to it, to pursue a picture of a different world'. Initiatives invite participants at times as private persons and in their professional capacity, opening hearts and minds for alternatives one at the time in very localized settings.

David and Matthias also reflect on their own changes in views and orientations through the experience. They do not see that transformative change is possible without at least the readiness to consider alternatives, and this requires an attitude that is willing to consider something else. Concrete utopias as described by Bloch, in the form of proposed solutions can be a tool as much as activities that bring different people and attitudes together. Trying to share their social imaginaries through experiential and experimental form is their attempt to bring 'new visions (or a reformulation of older visions) of social justice, engendering and re-activating a politics of hope' (Prince & Neumark, 2022, 2).

Analysis of function and form of utopia in the two cases allows us to follow the utopian impulse at play in change processes pursued by founders and the initiatives they started. It also shows how social imaginaries about better quality of life, a healthy environment and life without economic fear translate into forms of sharing and implementation, and the quality of participation. The ways the stories are told are not coercive. Aware that it is social behaviour that must change to promote both well-being and the planet, they invite people to participate and decide for themselves, leaving room for individual bridging of past, present and future. Guided by ideals, both initiatives offer ideas for solutions and make them experiential (walks and talks, basic income for a year) as opportunities to experience something different or different positions without value judgements of good or bad/ right or wrong. It feeds into the principle of democratic self-organisation of the SSE framework. The organisations become ordering principles for personal dreams. 'I was wondering if I would get sick of it. But then you know, it's the thing I love. It's emotionally interesting, economically interesting, socially, politically, everything I love' (Matthias). In order to create a narrative, other active participants are needed and the dreams need adaptation – a reality David experiences more directly than Matthias. 'When I first came here, I thought we will change everything, meeting people who didn't want to change everything. I had to learn seeing this also as a quality, we need both, respect for the past, local culture, time and place' (David).

What can be the value of the concept of social imaginary and utopia in SSE research? It is a driver, and open-ended utopias such as those presented here are lined with ideas of the good life, the common good, love and trust in society. The utopian spark, the imaginary of a different future is a strong motivator for these organizations to exist in the first place. They seem to resonate with people, more or less immediately, and they are pursued in a democratic manner from within civil society. Individual imaginaries thus take on a social function, as the activities of the resulting SSE organisations start producing collective representations of possible alternatives, utopian destinations that at times seek connections with values of past (healthy soil, local production, community) and popular discussions in the present (UBI). The social imageries presented, tested and enacted become a sort of social glue, something that might stick in niches and work its way from the periphery. The narratives they produce actionable contexts, emotionally connected to values and hopes for the future.

An important question remains, one that must also concern SSE research with all its focus on empowerment: What does social imaginary take? What past and present does it require to be an active visionary or to be able to join the experience? What about those who are too fearful today to confront the future? Whose personal stories are less favourable as those of David and Matthias? If social imaginary as utopian spark is 'made possible only by the double perspective of backward reasoning, which interprets the present and the future in consideration of past events, and projectivity, which enables the detection of the seeds of the future in past events' (Bazzani, 2022: 389), how to integrate that in the emancipatory missions of SSE organisations?

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