Collective Agency

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Within cultural discourses and (American) cultural studies scholarship of the first decades of the twenty-first century, the term "collective agency" has become a frequent buzzword. Always valorized positively, it appears in the context of contemporary social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter or MeToo and their accompanying hashtag activism within social media, in the analysis of literary and cultural practices that are deemed oppositional to the status quo, as well as in debates around climate change. "Collective agency" here is usually associated with the resistance against structural forms of domination and the empowerment of those groups most impacted by oppression. In these contexts, the term often remains vaguely defined and is being called up as a desideratum—the desire to regain control in the face of globalized structures of (racialized, financial) capitalism that have all but eliminated opportunities for political participation. Moreover, both the rise of authoritarian rightwing political formations and the widespread realization of impending ecological catastrophe raise the pressing question of how the collectivity of humans can establish (truly) democratic forms of collaboration to create a socially just and sustainable future.

This essay contributes to a much-needed conceptualization of the key concept of collective agency by tracing the twenty-first-century conversation on political organization among political and cultural theorists of the left. The occupation movements in numerous countries across the globe starting in 2011 have animated much of the recent theoretical debates on how the left should organize in response to political, economic, and ecological crises, to actively mold a post-neoliberal order. As Rodrigo Nunes has noted, political organization in the early twenty-first century is marked by specific historical conditions: the pervasive role of digital media in social life, along with the opportunities they provide for the formation of large-scale collectives; a crisis of confidence in liberal democratic institutions, as well as the decline of the traditional organizations that organized popular movements in the twentieth century (190). In the light of these trends, scholars have emphasized a number of central characteristics of the new social movements of the twenty-first century: the rejection of leadership figures as well as of established institutions such as unions and parties, the pursuit of new strategies and tactics of horizontal and networked

organization, and the heavy reliance on new digital media. Yet, whether these new forms of activism succeed in fostering collective political agency has been subject to intense debate. As the occupation movements, in the view of many, fell short of delivering substantial policy change, established institutions such as the party experienced a renaissance. Still, it remains an open question if a return to old forms can deliver the kind of transformations that have become urgent in our contemporary moment.

In the following, I will first trace the history of the concept of agency: arising in scholarly debates concurrently with neoliberalism in the 1970s, the term has always been strongly associated with the individual. The idea of collective agency thus remains haunted by the framework of individualism, which impacts our ability to conceptualize the collective capacity to act. In the subsequent sections I address some of the major contestations among the political left which emerge from the debate between hegemonic and post-hegemonic conceptions of collective agency: While the former current, paradigmatically represented by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, thinks of the political sphere as a vertically organized realm within the framework of the state, the latter, represented by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, opposes all state structures and hierarchies. This opposition leads to radically different outlooks on the forms that left political agency could assume. The final section builds on the work of Nunes and others in order to suggest that such binary thinking can and should be transcended in the collective quest for a more desirable and sustainable future.

"Devitalized Agency": Political Subjectivity under Neoliberalism

The term "agency" first gained salience in the humanities in the 1970s and 80s, responding to structuralism and its incapacity to account for the actions of individuals, as well as to political activism of the time, such as the feminist movement, which insisted that the personal was political and hence could challenge overarching power structures (Ahearn 12). Sociologist Anthony Giddens defined agency in terms of "the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events" (14). Being an agent involves the ability to make use of available knowledge and resources and a certain degree of "power in the sense of transformative capacity" (15; see also Kaun et al. 2).

Agency was thereby originally conceived through the prism of the individual, and it arose as a concept at the very moment when a specific form of individualism became a key characteristic of the neoliberal order emerging in the 1970s. At that time, the relationship between capitalism and democracy shifted from post-war Keynesianism to economic policies that affirmed free markets and financialization. As cultural critics of the political left argue, however, neoliberalism transcends the

economic sphere. Building on the work of Michel Foucault, Wendy Brown thus understands neoliberalism as a "governing rationality" which ultimately reaches "every dimension of human life" (*Undoing the Demos* 30). The individual here is enlisted to take up the position of an entrepreneur, engaging to enhance their value as human capital, while taking on responsibilities formerly born by social investments, e.g., in education, health care or social security (Brown, *In the Ruins* 38–39; Schram 60). According to Brown, neoliberalism reframes the idea of individual agency as "responsibilization" which "tasks the worker, student, consumer, or indigent person with discerning and undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving" and thus "solicits the individual as the only relevant and wholly accountable actor" (*Undoing the Demos* 132–33). Yet, as Brown makes clear, what is being celebrated here as individual agency and self-responsibility must ultimately be understood as a form of governance which organizes individuals instead of empowering them (*Undoing the Demos* 133).

Both Brown and Jodi Dean relate the emphasis on individual responsibility to "neoliberalism's dismantling of social institutions" (Dean, "Critique or Collectivity?" 173) and see in it not an enhancement, but a squashing of political forms of agency. Dean thus argues that "the celebration of autonomous individuality prevents us from foregrounding our commonality and organizing ourselves politically" (*Crowds* 4; see also Hardt and Negri, *Assembly* 157). She precisely takes issue with the construct of political agency as a capacity of individuals in which "agency [is] privileged over structure" and "the presumption that agents are individuals [which] formats the alternative of autonomy or subjugation as an opposition between individual and collective" (*Crowds* 73).

The individualization and economization of political life has contributed, as these and other scholars have argued, to a "hollowing out of contemporary liberal democracy" (Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 18), the consequences of which came to the fore in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Creating a rupture within the neoliberal order, the financial crisis of 2007–08 brought about not only economic turbulences, but also a political crisis of legitimacy (Gerbaudo, *The Mask* 30). The social movements of the second decade of the twenty-first century can thus be interpreted as discontent with what both Colin Crouch and Chantal Mouffe have called "post-democracy": the reduction of the substantial participation of citizens in political processes to the point that democracy "only signifies the presence of free elections and the defence of human rights" (*For a Left Populism* 16). While the formal components of democracy remain in place, actual political decisions are increasingly made by powerful elites (Crouch 4). Ali Aslam frames the kind of political subjectivity enabled under such post-democratic conditions as "devitalized agency": a passive form of agency, "without the world-making powers that draw citizens to public life because they believe it is receptive to their efforts" (*Ordinary Democracy* 6). Citizens experience their own position as having little control over the

circumstances of their existence and no active role within political processes and deliberation. In the face of such an impasse, many withdraw to nonpolitical spheres and try to find a sense of agency in the private realm and in consumption.

For scholars such as Brown, Dean, and Aslam, to think of agency as a capacity of the individual is a fraught enterprise that is ultimately in the service of larger structural formations and of depoliticizing populations. To counter neoliberal individualization we therefore need a revitalization of collective forms of organization that can truly exercise political agency. For these and other political and cultural theorists, the social movements emerging with the occupation movements after 2011 opened up a potential of alternative imaginaries and collective identities.

The Subject of Politics: Constructing Collective Identities

Activist organization in the context of the occupation movements was shaped by the idea of horizontalism which advocates for "leaderless" movements, in opposition to the vertical forms of organization characteristic of political struggle in the twentieth century. The rejection of hierarchical structures had its roots in the alterglobalization movements of the previous decades and was tied to the network paradigm as explanatory framework for collective organization (Nunes 160). According to Marianne Maeckelbergh, "horizontality refers to a decentralized network structure that produces non-hierarchical relationships between various nodes." Central to such horizontal networks is their rejection of "representation and delegation of command, allowing actors to reclaim 'control'" (109). W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg have argued that the new movements were defined by a "logic of connective action" which distinguishes itself from older notions of collective action by working with personalized action frames and digital communication technologies, creating expansive and flexible networks which do not require that participants strongly identify with a cause or acquire membership of an institution. "These networks," Bennett and Segerberg explain, rely on "the organizational processes of social media, and their logic does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united 'we'" (748).

According to such accounts, aggregates of individuals assume a collective capacity to act through technology which replaces affective forms of group formation. However, this blanket rejection of collective identity as a prerequisite for political agency has raised objections. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiaporello have taken issue with the primarily positive valorization of the network paradigm and pointed to its deep entanglement with the logic of capitalism and its shortcomings for addressing questions of justice (103–108). Jan-Felix Schrape, in his contribution to this volume, points to the recurring discursive patterns within debates on technological innovation since the 1960s that project democratization through decentralization, which

however has never come to fruition (91). And Gerbaudo, countering Bennett and Segerberg's argument specifically, warns that we should not reduce movements to infrastructures: Technology is not purely instrumental, but also possesses symbolic functions—it becomes part of the protest culture itself and thereby lends coherence and a form of identification ("The Persistence" 266). While he concurs with Bennett and Segerberg on the use of personalized action frames within the occupation movements, he also identifies "a new desire for collectivity […] in which individual users through the internet and beyond come to develop a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves" ("The Persistence" 268). In other words, the sense of collective identity cannot simply be substituted with new technological forms of organization.

Different theorists emphasize that collective identities must be constructed out of social positions characterized by difference and particularity. Thus, Ernesto Laclau in his political theory strongly emphasizes that "the people" as a political category do not exist as "a *given* group" but emerge out of "an act of institution that creates a new agency out of a plurality of heterogeneous elements" (224). Laclau addresses what he sees as essential, but also rivaling components in the construction of the social: difference and equivalence. Political agency requires that differences and particularities be subsumed under a universalizing operation. The emergence of "the people" as a category depends on the creation of a "chain of equivalence" between different social demands—different particular grievances must be formed into one overarching one in order to form a popular identity (74–86). Laclau suggests that one particular demand becomes a stand-in for all other demands in the process of "crystallizing" a common identity. The chain of equivalence must ultimately be unified into a "stable system of signification." Ultimately, the process has to lead to the formation of a singular identity; the movement requires a leadership figure which acts as a projection screen, an (empty) signifier that unifies the people.

For Laclau, the construction of "the people" is a discursive operation, which encompasses both signifying processes and affective dimensions (111). Judith Butler, by contrast, puts an emphasis on the material component of bodies "acting in concert" as a way of constructing a collective political subject ("We, the People" 50). They conceive of popular sovereignty as "a performative exercise" which "necessarily involves a performative enactment of bodies" ("We, the People" 55). In *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), Butler points to the significance of public assemblies within occupation movements, as well as to what they see as bodies becoming "the object of many of the demonstrations that take precarity as their galvanizing condition" (*Notes* 9). For Butler, these occupations and demonstrations are a form of "exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity" (*Notes* 11).

In Butler's conception, precarity emerges as the unifying signifier which, in Laclau's sense, creates alliances between different social groups and subject positions that perform their precarity as a shared condition. Butler sees precariousness as a fundamental human condition, but also emphasizes that "the condition of precarity is differentially distributed"—the notion of precarity contains difference, but can also generate resistance "based on the demand that lives should be treated equally and that they should be equally livable" (*Notes* 67). Commenting on Butler's ideas, Sanford Schram notes that their "turn to precarity […] reflects a profoundly political move enacted by movement actors themselves to bring together diverse groups uniting them around their shared economic marginalization" (61). The notion of the "precariat," coined by Guy Standing to refer to a new class of citizens that encompasses a diverse group of people of different social positions whose life conditions have become more fragile, from the poor to marginalized middle-class professionals, and many others who view their lives as increasingly precarious, underlines the unifying function of the concept (Schram 61). As Schram argues, "Butler's focus on precarity highlights how people's shared vulnerability becomes a basis for achieving political agency by way of public performances that serve to represent the common interests of those being variously marginalized by ongoing economic change" (62).

Like Laclau, both Butler and Schram place central importance on the question of how difference and identity come together in collective political action (Schram 63). The slogan of the Occupy movement, "We are the 99 percent," here exemplifies what Laclau refers to as an empty signifier that lends itself to broad identification. Several commentators have noted that the accompanying Tumblr page serves as an example of how diverse people come together under that banner (Gerbaudo, *The Mask* 149; Schram 64–65). The page collects images of people who tell their individual stories of precarity on handwritten notes that usually make up most of the photograph; the tumblr thus presents singular stories, which however collectively represent a shared condition (Occupy WallSt.). The individual and the collective are thus interwoven without reducing singular experiences. In "occupying" precarity, participants do not accept their condition, but "adopt this status as a source of their collective agency" (Schram 71).

While vulnerability has often been associated with victimhood, and thus been opposed to notions of resistance and agency, Butler's and Schram's reading of Occupy emphasizes precarity as a shared vulnerability and a mobilizing force that begets collective action and identification (Butler, "Rethinking" 14). Relatedly, commentators on Black Lives Matter have also pointed out how that movement makes vulnerability and the experience of social injury the basis of their activism. Black Lives Matter sets out to expose and challenge "all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state […] [and] Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity" (qtd. in Oliviero 265). The movement thus identifies "social injury as a condition of collective life" (Aslam, "The Future"

261). Negative affects, such as the persistent and collective experience of racialized violence, become the basis of political organizing and for envisioning alternative futures "in which bodily security is realized for all of those who identify as Black, including queer and trans-individuals" (Aslam, "The Future" 277).

The People vs. the Multitude: Models of Collectivity

As the previous sections have illustrated, contemporary political and cultural theories of the left have identified collective agency as a gap which results from the dismantling of social identities and institutions under neoliberalism. Hence, to construct new practices of "acting in concert" to foster new forms of collective identity appears pivotal. Yet what kind of collectivity should the left strive for? There is a rich vocabulary of terms referring to collective political agents, such as the crowd, the masses, the mob, the people, the multitude, the citizenry. Each of these terms comes with its own specific valences and a complex intellectual history, and has implications for the forms of social organization we envision. When conceptualizing collective agency in the twenty-first century, the use of each one of these terms may generate different models of collectivity.

In the face of new protest movements around the globe, the concept of the crowd has experienced a renaissance both in the streets and in scholarly inquiry (see, e.g., Borch; Dean, *Crowds*; Schnapp and Tiews). First theorized by Gustave Le Bon as a distinct form of collectivity in 1896, crowds have traditionally been conceived rather negatively as primitive, violent and suggestible. Crowds were taken to signify both mass democracy and mass tyranny, configured as "the people" or "the mob" (Dean, *Crowds* 8–11). In the twenty-first century, crowds have received an inverted valorization—and been appropriated by neoliberal discourses—with the idea of the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki) at work in the collective production of knowledge in the digital sphere. Picking up on such notions of swarm-like intelligence, some scholars have described the occupation movements as "crowd-enabled networks" that manage to achieve new forms of coherent organization through aggregated action (Bennett et al. 234).

As described by Dean, following Le Bon, the power of crowds is in that they constitute a collective being, that they are more than an aggregation of individuals. Amassing in public space, crowds possess a radical potential that allows them to "poise themselves against democratic practices, systems, and bodies" and "reclaim[] for the people the political field" (Dean, *Crowds* 10, 11). But Dean also forcefully asserts that "the crowd does not have a politics. It is the opportunity for politics" (*Crowds* 8). By that she means that a crowd can generate a rupture which opens up possibilities to exercise political agency, but because of its transient, spontaneous character, the crowd lacks intentionality. In order to gain political subjectivity, the crowd must

become the people (*Crowds* 103). Yet, whether the objective should be to unify a collective subject, or whether the goal is the abolition of all centralizing (power) structures and hierarchies constitutes a major controversy among political theorists.

Thus, in conceptions of collectivity within recent theoretical debates, one major point of contestation emerges between hegemonic and post-hegemonic understandings of political agency (Katsambekis 170). In the post-hegemonic camp of theorists, John Holloway's programmatic book *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2002), a central reference text of the alterglobalization movement, envisioned a revolutionary transformation of social relations through the abolition of power structures (17–18). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point in a similar direction: In their influential work *Empire* (2000), as well as their subsequent publications *Multitude* (2004), *Commonwealth* (2009) and, most recently, *Assembly* (2017), they introduce the multitude as their preferred concept of collectivity. They conceive of the multitude as explicitly counterhegemonic, rejecting the idea of a "people," which, they argue, always implies the existence of oppressive political structures and hierarchical positions of leadership. As Jonsson explains, "multitude is the motley essence of humanity," it is "open, manifold, and boundless" (10). Unlike terms such as the crowd, the people, the masses, or the working class, Hardt and Negri argue, the multitude does not suggest a single identity or stress indifference; instead of a figure of unity, it denotes "an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed free and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common" (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* xiv). "Multitude" and related concepts such as the "swarm" and the "network" capture the effort to at once account for a postmodern conception of singular identities and the desire for horizontal political agency that exerts power from below. In their recent work, Hardt and Negri acknowledge the need for some leadership, but suggest it must exist only as "entrepreneurial function, not dictating to others or acting in their name or even claiming to represent them but as a simple operator of assembly within a multitude that is self-organized and cooperates in freedom and equality to produce wealth" (*Assembly* xviii).

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe take issue with the post-hegemonic approach propagated by Hardt and Negri. Similar to Dean, they conceive of politics as a hegemonic struggle for power and see the construction of "the people" as the subject of politics as a prerequisite of democratic agency. Laclau has thus posited that "the political operation *par excellence* is always to be the construction of 'a people'" (153). In *On Populist Reason* he outlines populism as a political logic which he also views as constitutive of the political as such. In this framework, social orders need to be conceptualized as hegemonic formations and politics as the struggle for hegemony. A break occurs in a given social order if it is no longer able to meet social demands; this gap between the status quo and accumulating social demands serves as the starting point for the formation of a new internal antagonistic frontier, the

"people" vs. "power," in which those in power are constructed as an enemy. In her recent works, Mouffe similarly advocates for a radicalization of democracy that "aims at federating the democratic demands into a collective will to construct a 'we', a 'people confronting a common adversary: the oligarchy" (*For a Left Populism* 24).

Kevin Olson points out that among different forms of collectivity, that of the people is attributed with "a significance not shared by other collectivities," namely that it is "endow[ed] with normative value" (107, 121). The Western democratic imaginary posits the people as the source of political legitimacy and hence also of power. In other words, the concept of the people has a particular draw to mobilize and unify the agency of citizens that other concepts, such as the multitude, lack. If Laclau and Mouffe advocate for a reformation of the state, Hardt and Negri call upon us to "smash the state" (*Assembly* 133): They ultimately advocate that we should do away with all established (state) institutions and build new, nonhegemonic forms of collective organization from the realm of social relations (*Assembly* 14).

The hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positions appear all but irreconcilable in theory, yet much more blurred in activist practice. Thus, the occupation movements between 2011 and 2016 both advocated for horizontal organization and a reformation of state structures. Gerbaudo has described the new protest form as "citizenism" which he defines as "the ideology of the 'indignant citizen'" who is "outraged at being deprived of citizenship, chiefly understood as the possibility of individuals to be active members of their political community with an equal say on all important decisions, which is increasingly in question in the neoliberal 'post-democratic' condition" (*The Mask* 7). The protests, he argues, constitute a new form of democratic populism, which is decidedly not anti-statist, but seek to reclaim the state (*The Mask* 10). Yet he describes this new populism as different from traditional forms, as "a populism with a libertarian twist": "[C]itizenism appeals not to the People in its collectivity, but to the Citizen as an individual component of the People" (*The Mask* 17). The practices of the occupation movements thus point beyond the strong binary oppositions that mark the theoretical discourse on collective organization.

Beyond Horizontality vs. Verticality: Collective Agency in the Twenty-First Century

With the faltering of the occupation movements, and the rise of right-wing populism, theorists of the political left have increasingly stressed that the most urgent unresolved question is how to organize effectively in order to create a democratic and sustainable future. Much of the debate on collective agency during the last couple of decades has been dominated by the opposing positions of "horizontalists" and "verticalists": Should left politics be organized within the framework of the state or take power to abolish all state structures? Should we conceive of the political sphere

as an autonomous realm or as a continuum of social relations and material practices? Do we need the leadership by a vanguard that organizes political struggle and represents the people, or should we abolish all representative structures and let the people represent themselves? In short, what are the forms that social organization should take?

The discourse of horizontalism held much theoretical currency in the 2000s and during the occupation movements after 2011. Most recently, the pendulum swings in the opposite direction: Many left scholars now strongly advocate for concrete strategies that make use of existing institutions to transform, rather than to smash political structures. Caroline Levine, as well as Kai Heron and Jodi Dean, take issue with the inertia of the political left to go beyond fatalism and fantasies of revolution in order to pursue pragmatic paths in the battle against climate change. In a similar vein, Chantal Mouffe advocates for a "green democratic revolution" that is achieved through political organization within the structures of the state (*Towards*). In this context, the institution of the party has experienced a renaissance. For Dean, a strong proponent of party organization, enduring political struggle requires the party as an institution that provides both affective identification with a collective and stands up to the structural forces of capitalism that have long been using state institutions to secure and expand their powers. In the wake of the occupation movements, activists themselves began to embrace more formal organization structures, even the founding of new parties, as with Syriza in Greece or Podemos is Spain (Gerbaudo, *The Mask* 208). "The movement of the squares was thus not just a 'destituent' moment," Gerbaudo argues, "but also a 'constituent' moment: an event of foundation of a 'new politics' matching the requirements of the post-neoliberal era" (*The Mask* 210). In the U.S., Bernie Sanders's presidential campaigns have inspired progressive organizing within the Democratic Party (Lipsitz).

Yet, judging from the limited impact that leftwing parties and party factions could generate in the last years, it remains doubtful that sweeping transformations can be created through the institution of the political party alone. Moreover, it is unclear that parties are the best and only candidates for the creation of activist collective identities and affective identification, as Dean wants us to believe (*Crowds* 249). Though less stable in structures, social movements might be better suited to organize activism, whereas parties have the unique function of organizing electoral politics, and thus aim to generate majorities by targeting people outside activist circles. Parties are limited in their function as they are tied to the state and the exercise of state power. And the capacity of the state to act is also superseded by transnational powers (Nunes 232–33).

Both hegemonic and post-hegemonic theories have significant shortcomings when it comes to devising strategies that can produce social change. Laclau and Mouffe's greatest liability may be that their conceptualization of the political is founded on a theory of discourse, which makes it hard to account for the non-

discursive dimensions of lived experience (Nunes 252). "Left populism," Nunes notes, "is ultimately a much better theory on how to build consent or win elections than it is on how to produce change—which is something that may include winning elections, but is certainly also much more" (253). By contrast, Hardt and Negri attend to the necessity of rewiring the cultural scripts of everyday experience, but their radical rejection of power structures seems utopian. Their theory is based on the strong assumption that every member of the multitude will ultimately buy into radically democratic decision-making; this take, however, underestimates that many people are significantly invested in hierarchical thinking, not least illustrated by the success of authoritarian populism.

In his theory of political organization, Nunes proposes that we move beyond stifling oppositions and recognize that we need different, concurrent forms of organization that mediate between qualities of horizontality and verticality, diversity and unity, centralization and decentralization (13). He prompts us to think of the political sphere in terms of an ecology that comprises a diversity of initiatives and forms. In this sense, left politics would be organized as distributed action with different "organizing cores" (Nunes 203) and forms that assume different functions, with more or less centralization, weaker or stronger forms of leadership depending of the specific objectives of the initiatives. Crucially, Nunes differentiates between leadership as a *function* and as a (power) *position*: While a democratic movement may eschew hierarchical power relations, he convincingly shows that some degree of leadership "performing the function of concentrating and orienting the collective capacity to act in certain directions" remains indispensable (203).

Making the case that only political organization in a distributed fashion and on multiple levels may succeed in generating transformation, Nunes proposes that the left should start by identifying strategic wagers which "start from issues that are both structurally significant and have base-building potential" (217). Radical causes will only garner mass support if they can be connected to anxieties and discomfort people are experiencing in their everyday lives; an appeal to idealism is not enough. "Most people," Nunes writes, will not be moved by the idea of a different world alone, but "because they can either see themselves living better in it, or can no longer see themselves as surviving in this one. For that commitment to hold, it cannot prove incompatible with their well-being in the medium term, and must therefore offer material as well as 'non-material' returns" (219). Thus, long-term and aspirational goals must be imbricated with short-term improvements of people's lives.

The challenge of collective agency in the twenty-first century is not the design of new visions of an alternative, more livable future, but how to create roadmaps that will guide us from our present situation to a more desirable and sustainable one. These roadmaps will have to account for various types of resistance that we will invariably encounter, by forces that pursue contrary political and economic interests.

In the light of contemporary political crises and developments, this will not be an easy feat.

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