Stories and Political Imaginaries

Self, Us, Now?

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Abstract

Political imaginaries are articulating future images that are framing devices for the possible options and anticipate the potential for change. The political imaginaries that are dominating the contemporary political discourse—neoliberal, apocalyptic and nostalgic—are limiting the prospective horizons by either foregrounding fear, limiting agency or perceiving the future possibilities in a rear-view mirror. In this climate of negative future anticipation storytelling is playing a crucial role to re-animate the potential for hope, articulating a concept of agency that transcends the individual and thereby reclaiming the void between today and tomorrow with a constructive vision. In the story wars which set the framework for future discussions new spaces of possibility can be created by reactivating the ruins in the periphery and perceiving the future as a quest plot and not as a one-way journey into disaster.

Former UN secretary Kofi Annan, in a meeting ahead of the Paris Climate Summit in 2015, (rhetorically) traveled back in time, back to the year 1979, back to Nikita Khrushchev, back to the menace of a Nuclear Armageddon in the Cold War. Khrushchev was reportedly warning that a nuclear war would "leave the living envying the dead." Annan replaced the fear of a nuclear war, the apocalyptic image of 1979 with the apocalyptic image of the 21st century and said: "…climate change would leave the living envying the dead." This sounds like the scenario for a perfect Hollywood disaster movie, the ultimate menace, the annihilation of all mankind, the maximum stakes, the ultimate evil, enter…the hero, the savior who, despite the immense destruction (and the millions of dead) along the hero's

journey will save the planet and eliminate all evil before the end credits start to roll. The perfect cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger, dressed in a businesslike suit, without any visible weapons, takes the microphone: "I've starred in a lot of science fiction movies and, let me tell you something, climate change is not science fiction, this is a battle in the real world, it is impacting us right now. The debate is over and the time for action is now." This is a good prologue for a trashy disaster movie. The opening credits roll, fast paced music, CGI generated intro-titles, the expectation is rising. The intro-titles are over, the Paris summit concludes an agreement, on the photos the politicians raise their arms like boxing champions, applause, then the music stops, a hard cut with a dramatic slow-down sound effect and…nothing. Almost a decade later Arnold Schwarzenegger still hasn't saved the world. After the opening credits there is no film. The time is running but where is the hero to save humanity before the end credits roll? Imagine the voice of Schwarzenegger telling you, in *The Running Man* style: "I am not into politics, I'm into survival."

Is it possible to be into survival without being into politics? Emirbayer and Mische expand the scope of the temporal understanding of any human activity, including survival, when they point out:

> "As actors respond to changing environments, they must continually reconstruct their view of the past in an attempt to understand the causal conditioning of the emergent present, while using this understanding to control and shape their responses in the arising future."[1]

Thus, survival can only be perceived in a perspective that transcends the present, and renders the past experience future perspective. One of the central cognitive devices for such a complex reconstruction of the past, conditioning of the present, and shaping of the future: storytelling.

Philip Seargeant underlines the world building power of storytelling which he sees as the key factor behind humankind's incredible success. According to Seargeant it is "the power we have to imagine complex sets of ideas into being, and then to share them among the community, which creates both the societies we live in and the cultures that provide the meanings for our lives. Remove stories from the human equation and civilization itself fades from the picture."[2]

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1 Emirbayer, Mustafa/Mische, Ann: "What is agency?," in: *American Journal of Sociology* 103 no.4 (1998), pp. 962-1023.

2 Seargeant, Philip: The Art of Political Storytelling—Why Stories Win Votes in Post-truth Politics, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2020.

Stories organize and reconstruct the past, the present and the future. As Paul Ricoeur emphasizes "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience." Consequently, stories thus play a significant role in shaping the perception of the future.[3]

The bleak future images and narrative frames of Kofi Annan and Arnold Schwarzenegger are part of a political story that is hugely influential on the mind-scape of the 21st century. Stories of Armageddon through climate disasters are part of the public imagination in this new millennium. The pandemic has transported the scenarios of the most dramatic Hollywood disaster movies into the real life and locked down humanity for years. The outbreak of a war in Europe has even brought Khrushchev's forgotten warning of a nuclear war back into the public imagination. The realities of the 21st century could validate the assumption that it is not religious leaders, politicians, public intellectuals or academics but the script-writers of Hollywood disaster movies who are the prophets of the future.

In addition to the global inferno, through climate change, pandemic or nuclear war, there is another challenge to humanity: the prospect of becoming useless. According to a study by the McKinsey Global Institute (2017) half of current jobs in the United Kingdom and the United States could be automated in the near future. The Oxford Martin School (2016) has a similarly bleak prognosis for the jobs in the 38 OECD countries, predicting that 57% are susceptible to be replaced by automatization in the next 20 years. The "second machine age" is coming. Peter Fleming sees two possible paths for future development: "the societal implications of the 'second machine age' – mainly in economics and sociology – take either an optimistic view of this workless future (e.g., more leisure time) or a bleak one, envisaging levels of unemployment never before seen."[4] Yuval Noah Harari paints a pessimistic picture of the future impact of automation predicting that from an economic point of view large parts of the population will become useless. Harari asserts:

> "Whereas in the past human had to struggle against exploitation, in the twenty-first century the really big struggle will be against irrelevance. And it is much worse to be irrelevant than exploited."[5]

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3 Ricoeur, Paul: *Time and Narrative, Vol.1*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1983.

4 Fleming, Peter: "Robots and Organization Studies: Why Robots Might Not Want to Steal Your Job," in: *Organization Studies* 40 no.1 (2019), Sage, pp. 23-37.

5 Harari, Yuval Noah: *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, London: Jona-than Cape 2018.

The menace of mass unemployment on an unprecedented scale is thus added to the possibility of the global disaster of climate breakdown, global pandemic and nuclear war. In case this is not sufficiently bleak to fall into complete apathy, here are some more potential menaces that could produce catastrophic scenarios: terrorism, hyperinflation, water shortages, demographic explosions that lead to mass exoduses, conventional wars, breakdown of the global data infrastructure…

The future is dominated by images and narratives of global disaster. Apocalyptic predictions date back to the Old Testament (and even before) but they have never had the science-based plausibility that dominates the discourse in the 21st century. The apocalypse has left the realm of religious and secular storytelling and entered into the arena of perceptible, measurable, analyzable and projectible. In such a context, how is it possible to conceive the future in any other way than a threat? To understand today's future images and narratives, a journey "back to the future" allows to map the drastic change in in future images.

In the 1960s, optimism in regards to the future dominated. The potential to expand the possibilities infinitely (even into space) combined with the faith in technological progress and growing levels of economic prosperity created a mindscape of hopeful anticipation in the Western countries.

This is also reflected in Bertrand de Jouvenel's concept of *futuribles*. In a lecture given at the RAND Institute in the end of 1964, he put forward an optimistic vision of the future. For de Jouvenel, *futuribles* was a way of examining possible futures, with an emphasis on the idea that any present state of affairs can have different outcomes that depend on the intervening actions. De Jouvenel reinterpreted Cicero's division between *facta* and *futura*—between what is accomplished and solid and what shall come into being—as an encouragement to engage with the realm of the possible. De Jouvenel claimed that the future should not be perceived exclusively by the overemphasis on the facts of the present. He asserted that "while there can be no science of the future, we cannot avoid thinking of the future. We do so implicitly: it is better to do it explicitly." To explicitly articulate the assumptions of the future is thus a way of making them debatable and criticizable and thereby avoid that the future will be dominated by the faits accomplis of the dominant powerful groups. Articulating a future image is thus a way of opening the *futura*, which always contains a normative dimension, for debate.[6]

De Jouvenel already acknowledged in the 1960s that the "rapidity of change implies that our present knowledge of the environment has a short validity." The

6 De Jouvenel, Bertrand: *Futuribles* (= Studies and Documents on Prospective), Paris: Centre d'études prospectives 1965, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P3045.pdf

remedy is thus what he called "reasoned conjectures", informed speculation of the consequences of decisions in the future. These reasoned conjectures are in essence taking the shape of informed narratives. While it is easy to dismiss de Jouvenel's optimism in the current intellectual climate, his call for an open articulation of the ideas of the future, his insistence to engage with the normative dimension of future images and his perception of the future as the realm of possibilities are still valuable contributions to any contemporary debate.[7]

Roughly a decade later, Fred Polak interpreted the images of the future more ambiguously. The untarnished optimism of the mid-1960s was gone and in his book *The Image of the Future* the admonitory undertone became more perceptible. Polak described the image of the future not only as a barometer of the present time, but also as a regulative mechanism that can either open up or close down certain possibilities in the future. The future image is thus a reflection of contemporary choices, serves as a promotion tool of these choices and thereby determines the future. Polak sees "the positive image of the future at work in every instance of the flowering of a culture, and weakened images of the future as a primary factor in the decay of cultures." The strength and optimism of future images is thus a barometer for the whole culture. The decisions on the future thus also reflect the self-perception which is projected into the future, or, as Polak explains, the future image becomes the future in a move from diagnosis to prognosis. The future is thus influenced by the future image and the question of who defines the future images is thus inherently a power question. Polak emphasizes the role of agency in the definition of future images:

> "The choice for modern man is no longer between this image of the future and that, but between images of his own choosing and images which are forced upon him by outside pressures. The empty void between today and tomorrow cannot withstand the magnetic pull of tomorrow…"[8]

Renouncing to define future images thus means to renounce the control over the future. Polak thereby echoes de Jouvenel's call for an open discussion about the possibilities of the future. And he adds a strong warning of a passive attitude towards the future:

> "Our contemporary culture negates just those qualities which would be virtually necessary in giving new life to our culture, such as faith in man's essential worth in spite of social

7 Ibid.

8 Polak, Fred: *The Image of the Future*, Amsterdam: Elsevier 1973.

cataclysms. There must be some basic certainty that in spite of the current dehumanization of man there can be some radical reversal of the existing order."[9]

Abandoning the idea that the future could be different thus leads to a growing dehumanization and a loss of vitality. From the contemporary perspective of the looming disasters pessimistic future images and narrative appear plausible. But, seen from Polack's perspective, those pessimistic future images and narratives reduce the options to act in relation to the future take the vitality out of the effort to develop possible futures that are different and thereby reduce the scope of the action. Polak diagnoses that any culture that is "turning aside from its own heritage of positive visions of the future, or actively at work in changing these positive visions into negative ones, has no future unless strong counterforces are set in motion soon."[10] The question is whether the disaster discourse that animates contemporary debates has the potential to change negative visions into positive visions and thereby set the necessary counterforces in motion.

Franco Beradi asserts the importance of collective imagination as a source of alternatives to trends that are leading to devastation. He identifies the outside pressures that, as Polak described, force future images and thereby define choices. For Beradi, it is evident that "capitalism has become a system of techno-economic automatisms that politics cannot evade." Therefore, future images, including the contemporary disaster images, are defined by these techno-economic automatisms. Beradi claims that the 21st century is the century with no future because the spatial exploitation of new territories has come to an end. Thus, the spatial understanding of the future ("new territories") shifted into a temporal understanding. Beradi explains: "The future is the space that we do not yet know; we are yet to discover and exploit it. When every inch of the planet has been colonized, the colonization of the temporal dimension has begun, i.e., the colonization of mind, perception, of life." Despite ongoing attempts to colonize to new spaces, for example Elon Musk's Space X and its mission to colonize Mars, the visionary power is not the same as in the 1960s. Space X and Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic appear to be prestige projects of billionaires in need of approval.

The 21st century is thus dominated by the idea of growing spatial limitation: demographic growth meets growing spatial limitation. The projected rise of sea level due to climate change is likely going to decrease the Earth's surface while the United Nations prognosticate 10 billion Earth inhabitants for 2070. But in spite of all, the image of (economic) progress as expansion is still dominating global

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

policies. As Frederic Jameson writes, with a remnant of Marxist undertones: “our imaginations are hostage to our own mode of production (and perhaps to whatever remnants of the past ones it has preserved).”[11]

Immanuel Wallerstein sees our epoch, the early 21st century, as a point of bifurcation, as a transition point of world systems. The permanent crisis mode is thus in Wallerstein’s interpretation a result of the, from a historic point always hyper-conflictual, transition of the capitalist world system into something unknown. As Wallerstein describes:

> “…the science of complexity is teaching us that, in such chaotic situations resulting from a bifurcation, the outcome is inherently unpredictable. We do not know— we cannot know— how this will come out. What we do know is that the present system as such cannot survive. There will be a successor system or systems. It may be better; it may be worse; it may not be too different in its moral quality.”[12]

The painful side-effects of the transition of the economic world system and the transition of the global power structure from a unipolar to a multipolar order validate Wallerstein’s claim that points of bifurcation are chaotic and conflictual. However, Wallerstein claims that despite the obvious negative side effects, in the chaos of our epoch “the free-will factor will be at its maximum.” That means that individual and collective action can have a greater impact on the future than in times when the historical world system is stable. Wallerstein calls these moments of bifurcation and historical transformation in which the possibility for change becomes real “transformational TimeSpace.”[13]

If we understand the current chaos as transformational TimeSpace, in which the dysfunctional capitalist world order will transform into something else, then it is even more surprising that the imagination is still hostage, in Frederic James’ words, to our mode of production. As Arjun Appadurai criticizes, “the future had been more or less completely handed over to economics.”[14] In this future handed over to neoliberal economics, according to Jens Beckert “the present is assessed

11 Jameson, Fredric: Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, London: Verso, 2005.

12 Wallerstein, Immanuel: Utopistics. Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century, New York: The New Press 1998.

13 Ibid.

14 Appadurai, Arjun: The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition, London: Verso 2013; B. de Jouvenel: Futuribles.

principally through the lens of the future, which is itself considered using imaginaries of future states in order to anticipate as yet unrealized profit and loss."[15]

In *Futuribles*, de Jouvenel emphasized that possible futures should be discussed in a "market place of ideas." In the current downsized mindscape, futures are merely discussed in the framework of the market, thus in the categories of economic profit and loss. Appadurai calls for "a victory of a politics of possibility over a politics of probability."[16]

Possibly the abundance of disaster images is covering up the fact that underneath the narrow focus on (neoliberal) economics there is no imagination, and certainly no imagination that transcends the narrowness of the horizon. If the solutions to the real existing problems thus cannot be thought or conceptualized outside the narrow horizon of neoliberalism, the only alternative to the status quo is a complete break-down. The exclusion of alternatives and the focus on disaster narratives are thus control mechanisms to keep the production of different future images in check. Thinking and conceiving the disaster disables the mind in relation to the future. As Maurice Blanchot pointed out:

> "We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather already past, and yet we are under the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come-if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has to put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster […] is to have no longer any future in which to think it." [17]

Despite its limiting effect on thinking and imagination, the disaster is the dominant motive of contemporary political imaginaries, especially in the climate movement. Greta Thunberg in her 2019 Davos speech echoed Annan's "leave the living envy the dead" reference to Khrushchev when she stated: "I do not want you to be hopeful. [...] I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act."

The obvious irony is that while we are, according to Wallerstein, in a "transformational TimeSpace", the imagination is impaired by its focus on disaster. At a point of bifurcation, collective imagination matters and alternatives to the politico-economic status quo are more essential than ever in order to stimulate the free-will factor.[18] Yet the dominating future image is the apocalypse.

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15 Beckert, Jens: *Imagined Futures*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2016.

16 A. Appadurai: The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition.

17 Blanchot, Maurice: *The Writing of the Disaster*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1986.

18 I. Wallerstein: Utopistics. Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century.

A polarized world, often divided by often opposing values, norms, and priorities, needs a more pluralized future image. So, the reigning future image of disaster should be replaced with collective future images that encourage the free-will factor in the transformational TimeSpace in which we are living. These future images can only be developed in political imaginaries that are transcending the status quo and its dominant disaster images.

As Charles Taylor pointed out, social imaginaries define "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[19] The deeper normative notions and images are thus related to the future expectations in relation to social existence. These normative notions and images are shaping the imaginaries. As Cornelius Castoriadis explains, social imaginaries are "norms, values, language, tools, procedures, and methods of dealing with things and doing things, and, of course, the individual itself both in general and in the particular type and form."[20]

Social and per definition political imaginaries are thus in a circular relation to future images. If there are no deeper normative notions and images about the future, it affects the present and the future simultaneously. Jens Beckert has underlined the importance of the articulation of expectations in imaginaries: "Under genuine uncertainty, expectations become interpretative frames that structure situations through imaginaries of future states of the world and of causal relations." [21]Imaginaries are therefore defined by fictional expectations of the future.

The current intellectual mindscape being dominated by neoliberal and apocalyptic imaginaries reflects normative notions that are either related to profit maximization or to global disaster. The third type of political imaginary is nostalgic (for a more detailed taxonomy of political imaginaries).[22] The nostalgic imaginary is animated by a longing for an (imagined) past and drives the right-wing populist and reactionary political movements.

All three political imaginaries—neoliberal, apocalyptic and nostalgic—are limited in their future image (profit/disaster/nostalgic past), their concept of agency, their spatio-temporal scope and their dominant emotional drive. The

19 Taylor, Charles*: Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2004.

20 Castoriadis, Cornelius: "The Imaginary Institution of Society," in: Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books 1984, pp. 175-197.

21 J. Beckert: *Imagined Futures*.

22 See: Hoyer, Dirk: *Retopia*, London: Routledge 2023.

concept of agency defines the space of possibility and the spatio-temporal scope: the geographical range and the temporal dimension (past, present or future). The dominant emotional drive delineates a deeper emotional attitude towards the perception towards change in the present and the future. Philip Seargeant describes this as a basic fundament of any effective political story: "You pin your story around two emotions: hope or fear. This is what drives the desire for change; it's this which leads to the conflicts which give to shape the plot."[23] The dominant emotional drive affects the potential for mobilization and the scope of the political horizon. As Ernst Bloch has pointed out:

> "Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly." [24]

The neoliberal imaginary is limiting agency to the idea of economic agency, from the idea of freedom to the idea of economic freedom, and thus narrows down not only the future images but also the potential for agency in the present. The spatio-temporal scope is global, and limited to fictional expectations of profit maximization. Neoliberalism projects hope as a dominant emotional drive, albeit the hope is limited to privatized profit maximization. Privatized hope is narrowing down the idea of a better future to the individual dimension, and thus is thus confined towards interpretative frameworks that limit collective action.

The apocalyptic imaginary is reflected in disaster images and dystopian visions of the future. The future is thus increasingly defined by the outside pressures that Fred Pollack was warning about, and not by images of one's own choosing. The concept of agency is thus diffused, often articulated in an abstract "we", and activism becomes a way of avoiding the worst possible outcome. The global scope of planetary destruction and the unknown moment of the "apocalypse", thus the revelation of the moment of tribulation, are creating a sense of fear. As Greta Thunberg has underlined in Davos, she wants everyone to feel the fear she feels every day. The dominant emotional drive is thus in correspondence with the final chapter of the bible in the Book of Revelations: fear of world destruction.

Svetlana Boym has defined the essence of the nostalgic imaginary: "The twentieth century began with utopia and ended with nostalgia." The nostalgic

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23 P. Seargeant: The Art of Political Storytelling—Why Stories Win Votes in Post-truth Politics.

24 Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1986.

imaginary reflects the longing for a lost past. Right-wing populist movements such as the Rassemblement National in France, the Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany or the Vox in Spain are capitalizing on the feeling of nostalgia. Nostalgia translates as "longing for a return home" (from the Greek "nostos" and "algia"), so as an emotion it is perfectly suited to paint the home of the past in golden colors and use them as fantasies of restoration. But, the nostalgic imaginaries of right-wing populism are, per definition, divisive and narrowed down. Boym explains that "Algia (or longing) is what we share, yet nostos (or the return home) is what divides us." The concept of agency is thus limited to the "in-group" and delegated to a leader and thereby nullified. The spatial scope is the nation state, and the temporal scope the narrowed down idea of the past. In the absence of hopes for a different future there is a fear of change and an alienation from the present.[25]

None of the three political imaginaries—neoliberal, apocalyptic or nostalgic—are thus articulating ways of imagining a different social existence from either 'more of the same,' 'destruction' or 'lost home(s).' Geoff Mulgan diagnosed that the world faces a deficit of social imagination:

> "We find it easy to imagine apocalypse and disaster; or to imagine new generations of technology. But we find it much harder than in the past to imagine a better society a generation or more into the future. There are many possible reasons for this decline; loss of confidence in progress and grand narratives; declining imaginative capacity; slowing down of innovation."[26]

The absence of political imaginaries that are articulating an "otherwise" or an "elsewhere," which is not locked in the dominating neoliberal, apocalyptic or nostalgic limitations of agency, spatio-temporal perceptions and emotional drives of the contemporary mindscape are also reflected in the stories that are told. Christopher Booker writes that the "plot of a story is that which leads its hero or heroine either to a 'catastrophe' or an 'unknotting'; either to frustration or to liberation; either to death or to a renewal of life." The "from rags to riches" plots of

25 Boym, Svetlana: "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," in: Daniel Herwitz (ed.), *The Star as Icon: Celebrity in the Age of Mass Consumption*, New York: Columbia University Press 1999, pp. 189-203.

26 Mulgan, Geoff: "The Imaginary Crisis (and how we might quicken social and public imagination),"in: *UCL Demos Helsinki and Untitled*, 2020, https://demoshelsinki.fi/julkaisut/the-imaginary-crisis-and-how-we-might-quicken-social-and-public-imagination/

neoliberalism, the fear driven "overcoming the monster" plots of apocalypse or the "voyage and return" plot of right-wing populism are all based on what Booker calls the "cycle of self-destruction." According to Booker this cycle has five stages: "from the initial mood of anticipation, through a 'dream stage' when all seems to be going unbelievably well, to the 'frustration stage' when things begin to go mysteriously wrong, to the 'nightmare stage' where everything goes horrendously wrong, ending in that final moment of death and destruction." At the moment, the plots of these political stories are stuck somewhere between the third and the fourth stage: frustration and nightmare. (Political) Storytellers and their imaginaries are thus leading their heroes and heroines into a 'catastrophe' rather than an 'unknotting.'[27]

What does this mean for storytellers in the 21st century? As Jackson emphasizes:

> "[…] we tell stories as a way of transforming our sense of who we are, recovering a sense of ourselves as actors and agents in the face of experiences that make us feel insignificant, unrecognized or powerless. This covers the connection between storytelling and freedom—the way we recapture, through telling stories, a sense of being acting subjects in a world that often reduces us to the status of mere objects, acted upon by others or moved by forces beyond our control."[28]

Jackson sees storytelling as a vital strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering conditions. The emphasis, according to Jackson, is that stories disclose "not just '*who*' we are, but '*what*' we have in common, not just '*who*' we think we are but *'what'* shared circumstances bear upon our lives and our fate." The emphasis is on "we" as one of the key elements is a renewed understanding that the hero and the heroine can only exist in plural. Agency thus exists only in the heroines not in the heroine. A group based on 'being in common' has the potential to undo the disempowering conditions by articulating shared circumstances. Thus, the privatized hopes of neoliberalism's 'rags to riches' plots have to be dismantled as opposed to be merely criticized. The understanding of the 'heroines' as acting subjects transcends the protest culture that is nurtured by apocalyptic imaginaries. The emphasis of freedom challenges the authoritarianism of the nostalgic imaginaries.[29]

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27 Booker, Christopher: *The Seven Basic Plots*, New York: Continuum 2004.

28 Jackson, Michael: *The Politics of Storytelling*, Copenhagen: Museum Tuscalanum Press 2013.

29 Ibid.

Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning maintain that the "currency of story is not truth but meaning."[30] In his famous presidential campaign for Barack Obama for 2008, Marshall Ganz, in his public narrative method, capitalized on the hope for change. His approach was to activate citizens through the power of storytelling. Ganz considered the idea that a story should reflect the "self, us and now" as a fundament for effective political storytelling. Even if during his presidency Obama did not deliver on his promises on hope for a change, the campaign was groundbreaking and successful. This shows that meaning can be provided by fear narratives, or stories that create a sense of agency. As Will Storr points out, the appeal to a heroic self is an essential part of the creation of meaning. Storr writes:

> "…if we're psychologically healthy, our brain makes us feel as if we're the moral heroes at the centre of the unfolding plot of our lives. Any 'facts' it comes across tend to be subordinate to that story. If these 'facts' flatter our heroic sense of ourselves, we're likely to credulously accept them, no matter how smart we think we are."[31]

In the neoliberal imaginary, the self is the only reference point for the creation of meaning, the apocalyptic and the nostalgic imaginaries create a sense of "us" that is created through fear, whether it is fear of the apocalypse or fear of a disintegrating national community. The hope image is present not in its future dimension but as a reference to the (unattainable) past. The protagonists of the contemporary political imaginaries are either alone, or united in imaginary communities of fear. Whenever some form of protest against the very foundations of this societal arrangement flares up the absence of a real community, an authentic "us" leads to the ultimate disintegration of the movement. The 21st century has given birth to too many protest movements that dissolved after a very effective creation of a short time momentum.

Reinsborough and Canning call the momentum that ignites protest movements and gathers thousands or even millions of people on the street "the story of the battle." Of, course, these moments of rallying are essential for a democracy and can affect change. But the system reverts back to "business as usual" if, after the mobilization, there is no narrative that unites the protesters. Due to the absence of an alternative political imaginary, it is easy to unite people in protest but difficult

30 Reinsborough, Patrick/Canning, Doyle: Re:Imagining Change: How to use story-based strategy to win campaigns, build movements, and change the world, Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing 2010.

31 Storr, Will: The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better, London: Harper Collins 2019.

to sustain the momentum in the aftermath. Reinsborough and Canning write: "The story of the battle is about mobilization; the battle of the story is about persuasion." [32]

Without a narrative that animates the "battle of the story," the neoliberal, apocalyptic and nostalgic imaginaries will continue to dominate the public discourse. Without a story that has a strong "currency" of meaning, that activates the heroic self while at the same time articulating an idea of "us", that goes beyond the protest momentum, politics reverts back to the status quo. The absence of these stories, or myths, since they are based on meaning and not on truths, is leaving a void that can be filled by the marketeers of short time happiness and self-indulgence. Jonah Sachs underlines that "we live in a world that has lost its connection to its traditional myths, and we are now trying to find new ones—we're people and that's what people without myths do."[33]

The stories with the potential to win what Jonah Sachs calls "story wars"[34] will certainly not be found in way of a blueprint utopia that fits all humanity. In an increasingly complex world, these stories are bound to have a specific location and a specific community. They will articulate a sense of agency, a local scope, a concrete future orientation and an emotional drive based on hope. When Thomas More created the term utopia, the neologism carried an ambiguous meaning. The composite word based on ancient Greek contains "ou-topos" (no place) and "eu-topos" (good place). Often this was interpreted as the good society can only exist in a no-place, which was seen as a place in the imagination. Lewis Mumford creatively reinterpreted Thomas More's neologism when he asserted that the good place can only be possible in a no-place, but this no-place is not in the imagination but in the peripheries deserted by capitalism because they lost their meaning in the (economic) value creation process. Lewis Mumford wrote in 1922, underlining the eu-topos (the good place) aspect of Utopia: "It should not surprise us therefore if the foundations for eutopia were established in ruined countries; that is, in countries where metropolitan civilization has collapsed and where all its paper prestige is no longer accepted at paper value."[35]

Coming back to Jackson's idea that stories disclose who we are and what we have in common, another dimension becomes crucial for political storytelling: where we are. Stories of hope are more likely to be found in the ruins of

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32 P. Reinsborough/D. Canning: *Re:Imagining Change.*

33 Sachs, Jonah: *Winning the Story Wars*, Boston: Harvard Business Press 2012.

34 Ibid.

35 Mumford, Lewis: *The Story of Utopias*, New York: Boni and Liveright, 2008 [* 1922].

metropolitan civilization. So, the heroines of the new stories can inhabit the peripheries and its spaces of possibilities. In Christopher Booker's typology, these stories would be the 21st century equivalent of quest plots.

In times of environmental degradation, the possible emergence of a "useless class" and the growing spatial limitation (which, at least in Europe, is paralleled by the depopulation of the periphery), these quest plots have the potential to generate stories of hope, based on "being in common" as opposed to "having in common". The heroines, pioneering the revitalization of ruins, would gain spaces of possibility, and therefore also freedom and agency, to experiment with different forms of cohabitation. Christian De Cock and Damien O'Doherty have pointed out that "stories always fill in the gaps left by the ruin's material remains."[36]

Thus far, dystopian and science fiction stories, have often depicted ruined spaces as spaces of oppression and located the battle for a better society in the (distant) future. A new understanding of ruins would revalidate them as contemporary places with a high free-will factor, places of struggle for a new form of cohabitation, places for society start-ups. These places are not located on Mars, as Elon Musk tends to believe. These places are not the squares and streets of the "story of the battle" protests. These places are located on the European map, in the depopulated periphery. Whether Sicily, Pleven in Bulgaria, or Liepaja in Latvia, peripheral regions can become spaces of possibility at the very moment when the "ruin" is not seen as a dystopian and apocalyptic location, but rather, in Mumford's terms, as a utopian space.[37]

The stories about the future cannot project agency, hope or potential to explore the possibilities of what Wallerstein calls the transformational TimeSpace, if the only horizon is a future where, in Kofi Annan's words, we 'leave the living envying the dead'. It is time to stop being the audience of a disaster film in the making. The 20th century action heroes, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, with their 'I am not into politics, I'm into survival' ethics and their one-dimensional understanding of action are blocking the view on the potential heroines of the future (stories): people who transform the ruined peripheries not only in order to survive, but also as a strategy to develop new political stories that leave the living envying the life of the new heroines. These lives have the potential to become the new stories of self, us, and now.

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36 De Cock, Christian/O'Doherty, Damien: "Ruin and Organization Studies," in: *Organization Studies* 38 no. 1 (2017), pp. 129-150.

37 L. Mumford: The Story of Utopias.

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