A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

Geoff Mulgan, *Another World Is Possible: How to Reignite Social and Political Imagination*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2022. ISBN: 9781787386914 (cloth)

Managing Our Imagination? Musing on Geoff Mulgan's *Another World Is Possible*

As large swaths of the world population suddenly found themselves in isolation over the course of 2020 and 2021 during the global pandemic, I vividly remember feeling a strange kind of excitement sparked by the realisation that life as I had been experiencing it up until then, could be fundamentally different. This feeling was fuelled by and echoed in newspaper editorials and essays, especially during the early COVID-19 period. Interpreters from across the political spectrum viewed the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns as a watershed moment that could lead to system-wide social change. In the first year of the pandemic, *Politico* headlined "Coronavirus Will Change the World Permanently. Here's How" (Politico 2020), while rock-star philosopher Slavoj Žižek pondered the possibility that the global events of 2020 "will also compel us to reinvent Communism based on trust in the people and in science" (Žižek 2020).

This sudden moment of large-scale stillness and introspection, which opened up imaginative possibilities and hopes for social change, also inspired Geoff Mulgan, Professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation at University College London, to write *Another World is Possible*, in which he explores what role creative imagination can play in achieving a better future. The book starts with the observation that "we're suffering from an 'imaginary crisis'", which results in a collective apathy in which "[w]e can more easily imagine the end of the world than a better future" (p.5). To support this claim and open up possible solutions, Mulgan takes his readers on a journey covering a wide array of perspectives on imagination, in the hope of inspiring them to "look at any social arrangement and see not just what it *is* but also what it *could be*" (p.10). Guiding the way, Mulgan unfolds his inquiry in three stages. The book first sheds light on the concepts of social and political imagination, roughly defined as collective fictions that serve as mental maps that help us make sense of the past, present, and future. Recognising that our individual and collective life is built around imagination, rejects a deterministic view of the progress of history and shows that we can actively shape and alter its course. Mulgan identifies the fundamental role of imagination in the Old Testament, emancipation movements such as 19th century

abolitionism and the more contemporary Zapatistas, utopic (and dystopic) literature, and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. The main point: imagination is an essential human activity, practised throughout history, in countless places and forms. Then, the book zooms in on ideas as the product of imagination and tracks how ideas are born and how they can be successfully translated into action. These chapters provide a blueprint for Mulgan's conceptualisation of social imagination, which he understands to spring from the collective unconsciousness of a society. This process of imagination is influenced by external factors, such as time and money and the social milieux, and ultimately leads to the formulation of ideas. Ideas are in this sense the tangible nuggets that arise from the unconsciousness through the activity of imagination. In the third set of chapters Mulgan sketches contours for the possibilities of imagination in the coming years, while warning of the threat of dangerous imaginaries and exploring possible routes for future political imaginaries. These two chapters stand in an interesting contrast. On the one hand, Mulgan underlines the need for political imaginaries that reject negative politics and rather take up a truly positive project that opens up future potentials. On the other hand, he rightfully warns his readers of the destructive forces that can be unleashed in the name of imaginaries, referring back to 20th century extreme left- and right-wing ideologies that justified killing as a means to the ends of a better world. In the final chapter, Mulgan urgently calls on his readers to "use some of the methods described in this book to push the boundaries of our imagination" (p.245). While inviting individuals to act within their communities, Mulgan stresses that political and social imagination need to be institutionally grounded and supported, for which he provides some rough brush strokes as inspiration.

Mulgan's long-standing career, throughout which he travelled through many layers and around numerous corners of the UK's bureaucracy, which includes amongst other things posts at 10 Downing Street and Nesta (the British foundation for innovation), endows the book with a stunning breadth of perspectives and examples. Combining his personal experience with literature ranging from Gramsci's prison notebooks to the newest discoveries in neuroscience, some of the more abstract parts of the book are situated in real-life examples while providing readers with numerous leads for further reading. Particularly insightful are the chapters on collective consciousness and the role of art in social imagination, and Mulgan has published more extensively on these topics in *Big Mind* (2018) and *Prophets at a Tangent*

(2023). Concerning consciousness, Mulgan ties the question of social imagination to that of the evolution of human consciousness, which he sees as the fundamental level at which collectives understand the past, present, and future. Making this jump allows Mulgan to include questions on the very inner workings of the human mind and the sources of human intelligence. It also facilitates consideration of how new ways of organising society and advancements in technology, such as the now omnipresent developments that have catapulted AI into the mainstream, can potentially have on expanding collective wisdom and advancing the consciousness of our species.

Although the role of the arts in imagining a new world is often mystified, Mulgan presents us with quite a sobering argument about the part that artists can play. Already hinting at the title of his latest book in which he takes on the realm of the arts more elaborately, he contends that "[t]he arts play a role in amplifying the social imagination that is tangential rather than head on" (p.233). The arts, then, provide "perceptual training" (p.242), they have the unique potential to make us see the world in new ways. The imaginative potential of the arts is limited by the fact that they are bound to dominant ways of thought in a particular time and place, a point which Mulgan demonstrates with the example of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. Quoting cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2009: 9), he analyses that any rebellious art is at danger of falling prey to its own success (p.235). Although art may start off critical of the system, rising popularity will entangle artists into the commercial system that they were previously protesting; this shows how capitalism evolves by absorbing critics. Indeed, the radicalism of Nirvana was in the end commodified, as such feeding the very thing it was protesting against.

Besides using Fisher's example of Nirvana to illustrate his analysis of the imaginative potential of the arts, Mulgan's book resonates with the work of Fisher in a broader sense as well. Mulgan's notion contrasting the ease with which we can imagine apocalypse and our imaginative inertia for alternatives sounds familiar. Indeed, it seems to echo the remark that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2009: 2), which is attributed to both Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson and was later popularized by Fisher in the introduction to his searing cultural critique *Capitalist Realism*. However, while Mulgan has evidently read and used Fisher for his own analysis, he seems to have done so while neglecting the critical fundaments of Fisher's argument. In contrast to

Fisher, Mulgan believes that our imaginative apathy can be cured within the confines of our current system, mainly by applying a mixture of technological and managerial interventions, such as the application of artificial intelligence to advance collective consciousness and applying corporate R&D methods to policymaking to create a future government that can "itself imagine and create, in partnership with its people" (p.194). Here it serves to compare Mulgan's adaptation of the Žižek/Jameson utterance to the original. Where the original immediately lays bare the source of our imaginative deadlock, namely the pervasive power structures of modern-day capitalism, Mulgan presents a sterilized version purged of the critical analysis of our current predicament. How can we open up our social and political imagination if we do not fully understand the extent to which our current imagination, or lack thereof, is influenced by the socio-political order of our specific place and time? Fisher (2009: 15) noted that "[t]o reclaim a real political agency means first of all accepting our insertion *at the level of desire* in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital". In other words, to have any chance at imagining and creating another world, we have to appreciate fully how everything from our everyday wants and needs to our understanding of the past, present, and future is affected by our current capitalist system. Capitalism has effectively become our lived reality: capitalist realism, as Fisher called it. The second decade of our century is perhaps mostly exemplary of the persistence of capitalist realism. In the wake of the of the 2007 crash, European and US governments argued that the crippled financial institutions that had caused the crisis were "Too Big To Fail"; they were bailed out with collective funds. In the subsequent eurozone crisis, Southern-European countries were forced to swallow the pill of austerity to safeguard Northern-European banks. As Žižek warned in 2009, based on Klein's (2008) *Shock Doctrine* thesis, the crisis would lead to a strong reassertion of the ruling ideology (Žižek 2009: 18-19): capitalist realism in full force.

The work of Fisher and Žižek are some examples of critical engagements with the realm of the imaginary building on the capitalist realism thesis, but they teach an indispensable lesson when the aim is understanding the deepest categories of culture, such as imagination and the unconsciousness. That is, these categories do not stand on their own and they are inevitably influenced by and entangled with existing power dynamics. An analysis that asserts that our imagination is frozen and that aims to defrost and open up our imaginary potential but at the same time lacks a rigorous understanding of how that imagination got

frozen in the first place, will have an extremely difficult time achieving its aim. It could be compared to a lazy physiotherapist giving a patient with back pain a generic set of stretches and strength exercises related to the back in the hope that one of them will solve the problem, while a good therapist will first determine the underlying cause to prescribe a well-tailored rehabilitation. Much like the physiotherapist, the academic will need to provide a thorough assessment of the problem at hand, revealing the underlying power structures that contributed to the symptom that is observed, before being able to outline directions for a treatment plan.

At this point, it is important to stress that while critical analysis of our current predicament is a prerequisite to fostering alternative imaginations, this does not entail that we can only start imagining anew once we have completely escaped the mental cage of capitalism. One of the most influential thinkers in the field of social imagination, the Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, critically explored the notion of social imagination and social change in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Castoriadis 1987). In this original contribution, he stresses that it is an illusion to think of social change as a predetermined *plan*, something that can, for example, be effected through rationally created five-year plans. Real social change, the kind of radical change that is arguably required in the face of the multiple crises that our societies face today, has to be conceived of as an ongoing *project* aimed at creating autonomy for all individuals. Castoriadis defines this autonomy as the ability to (collectively) constitute the rules of conduct and continuously reevaluate them. This approach to social imagination shows that alternative imaginations stem from a combination of critical assessments of our deepest convictions and the creation of a space where the rules and principles that flow from these convictions can be challenged and reformulated in an ongoing process.

Towards the end of the book, Mulgan in effect addresses Castoriadis' point, when he asserts that social imagination is a part of our freedom, to which he concludes that the real solution is to realize more freedom (p.199). However, Mulgan does not engage in the continuous critical evaluation that is part of maintaining this freedom, or autonomy in Castoriadis' words. It is exactly in this realm of the critical assessment of the roots of the problem that Mulgan's inquiry into our social and political imagination remains silent, which will make it difficult for his book to reach its desired aim. The book approaches our stunted imagination as a technical problem, which means it can be solved with the help of techno-

managerial interventions. Interventions that are, admittingly, provided in an impressive breadth, drawing, as said, from Mulgan's personal experience and sources from all corners of science, the arts, business, and civil society. As such, Mulgan does provide an interesting map of all the options there are to broaden our imagination, as long as we stay acutely aware of the underlying power structures that have immobilized our current imagination. *Another World is Possible* alone will not help us to open up our collective imagination, but when read in tandem with critical perspectives on our current predicament, it certainly has the potential to motivate a curiosity, a first spark, for alternative imaginaries. A spark we dearly need in times of societal inertia.

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January 2024