

# **JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK**

vol. XXXXI 2-2025

## **STRUGGLES FOR HOPE: NEGOTIATING FUTURE(S) IN TIMES OF GLOBAL CRISES**

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Published by:  
Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik  
an den österreichischen Universitäten

**Journal für Entwicklungspolitik (JEP)**  
**Austrian Journal of Development Studies**

**Publisher:** Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik an den österreichischen Universitäten

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**CORINNA LAND, SEBASTIAN GARBE, EVA GERHARZ**

**Struggles for Hope: Negotiating Future(s) in Times of Global Crises<sup>1</sup>**

**1. Introduction**

Contemporary society is characterised by multiple insecurities which are often experienced as crises: all over the world, people's everyday lives are challenged by economic crises, climate catastrophes, rising authoritarianism, violent conflicts, and war. Such threats not only spur anxieties and dystopian imaginaries; they may also open spaces to (re)create (forgotten or once-disillusioned) hopes for the future (Traverso 2017). Experts and governments busy themselves for the future by developing plans that do not always mitigate the effects of crises, and sometimes even exacerbate them. One of the reasons for these unwanted outcomes are the conflicting interests of corporate actors and different societal groups. Other actors, such as social movements, also attempt to renegotiate social change and perhaps conceive different future(s).

Against this background, this special issue explores visions and practices of future-making in the global, multifaceted crisis of capitalist-colonial modernity. It seeks to illuminate social contestations of and negotiations over collective future(s) and asks the following questions: What are people's hopes and fears, and their ideas and strategies for social transformation? How are possible futures expressed and already enacted today – and what does this teach us about the here and now? These questions are addressed in four contributions, focusing on findings from empirical research in four different parts of the world: South Africa, Canada, Rojava, and Germany. The articles inquire as to how future imaginations are socially constructed and negotiated, and how people make use of their room for maneuver to shape the near as well as the long-term future. Through the lens of hope, the contributors investigate affective, strategic, and action-oriented ways to relate to the future. This introduction's objec-

tive is to provide the basic conceptual background which anchors the individual contributions. After some general remarks, we provide a short overview of the included articles and then elaborate on common themes. Thereby, we support an approach to future studies that takes into account how social structure, imaginations of the future, and agency are interrelated.

## **2. Future in the social sciences**

Inquiries concerning the future are seemingly everywhere. An inter- and transdisciplinary research field, Future Studies span not only the social sciences and humanities, but also have their hooks in the natural sciences. While future-planning oftentimes relies on forecasts and prognoses which are produced with the help of scientific inquiry and calculations, future studies in the social sciences and humanities also relate to questions such as how people *want* to live and work in the future. Debates in sociology as well as in social and cultural anthropology, literary studies, political science, and critical theory are, *inter alia*, concerned with the production of future(s) through visionary and imaginative practices (Fischer 2009; Levitas 2013; Schulz 2016). The interest in these fields ranges from the preconditions for envisaging other future(s) to the ways in which individuals and collectives act upon utopian and/or dystopian imaginaries.

The variety of corresponding topics and themes is broad and cannot be fully covered here. One important strand of research deals with conceptualisations of future orientations and temporalities (Bryant/Knight 2019), as do others with the future of (racial) capitalism (Bahng 2018; Beckert 2016; Bhattacharyya 2024; Boldizzoni 2020; Fishwick/Kiersey 2021; Milanović 2021), and human and non-human survival within capitalist and climate crises (Haraway 2016; Sheller 2020; Tsing 2015). Other scholars inquire into affective relations towards the future and the unequal distribution of hope and aspirations (Appadurai 2013; Berlant 2011; Hage/Papadopolous 2004; Hage 2009; Kleist/Jansen 2016; Bennike et al. 2020), or the complex and ambiguous relationship between hope and education (Jeffrey et al. 2008; Renschler/Gerharz 2022). Further, debates about black futures and afrotopias (Kelly 2020; Sarr et al. 2020), and the future of political contestations, social struggles, and solidarity movements (Castells 2015; Conway

et al. 2021; Escobar 2020; Haiven/Khasnabish 2014; Juris 2008; Yates et al. 2024; Daniel et al. 2024) constitute important fields of inquiry.

Our interest in the field lies particularly in understanding how social actors construct future imaginations and how these relate to their everyday political and contentious practices. We draw from a rich palate of conceptual viewpoints ranging from Bloch's (1959) philosophical foundations to the "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004) and a "political economy of hope" à la Bourdieu (Kleist/Jansen 2016), to the emergent scholarship on prefigurative practices (Monticelli 2024), as well as the multiplicity of possible futures (Goldman 2024) and proposals for "radical" (Thaler 2024), "slow" (Mauch 2019), and "critical hope" (Zaliwska/Boler 2018), predominantly arising from constellations described as being in a state "of despair" (Huber 2023).

Drawing on these discussions, we argue that the notion of hope offers a lens that helps us to explore the relations between a) the agency of future-making, b) individual and collective social positions and societal structures, and c) imaginations and the imaginable. The four contributions in this issue are located at the intersection of these three dimensions and investigate their entanglements from an empirically grounded perspective.

### **3. The contributions to this special issue**

Antje Daniel's article focuses on the social movement Reclaim the City (RTC) and its struggle to promote social housing in the inner-city areas of Cape Town, South Africa. She investigates the future imaginaries of evictees by analysing how they strive for and enact material and nonmaterial ownership through prefigurative practices, combining this with a biographical approach to show how activists are socialised and how their socio-demographic belonging shapes their activism. On the one hand, the biographical perspective helps in understanding the forms and limits of engagement and imaginations. On the other, it shows how collective experiences can strengthen agency and give rise to hope for the future.

Sara Minelli and Kaveh Ghoreishi examine the historical conditions under which the Rojava experiment, a de-facto autonomous territory in the North of Syria, emerged as a "politics of revolutionary hope". Their article discusses Rojava's theoretical foundations, and then turns to polit-

ical practices, such as the drafting of the ‘Social Contract’, feminist liberation, and educational alternatives. The focus on the relationship between historical conditions, theoretical developments, and political practices reveals the practice of political hope as processual and therefore open to disappointment and learning, articulated through the ongoing transformation of individuals and the reconfiguration of social relations.

Rebecca Spencer and Jodie Asselin’s article takes us into the world of environmentalist grassroots movements in Canada. Building upon Victoria McGeer’s “art of hoping”, their focus lies on the emotional labour that is embedded in the future-making efforts of environmentalists. Drawing on ethnographic research among environmentally-oriented non-profits and community volunteers in Southern Alberta, the article centres on how and where hope manifests itself, in order to draw attention to the possibilities and risks of recognising or failing to recognise the oftentimes invisible labour of sustaining and recreating hope. Hope, thus, is not primarily contingent upon feelings but instead rooted in moral responsibility and action toward – and with – a community.

Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez and Slađana Branković address refugee struggles for common futures under conditions of structural, racial, and ordinary violence within the context of the colonality of migration and necroborders. They approach this issue through a co-labouring effort and critical discourse analysis of digital archives of two activist groups: Women in Exile and The Caravan. Focusing on two sites of political organising, namely the Lager and the Street, they show how demands for human rights are complicated, challenged, re-signified, and coupled to the immediate potential and material realisation of common futures.

#### **4. Hope as an analytical category for social practice**

The four contributions follow different conceptual and methodological approaches in order to explore and understand struggles for hope in diverse cases and contexts. However, there are some common themes which bear the potential to further develop our understanding of the ways in which futures are socially constructed, configured, and negotiated. In the following, we seek to clarify and specify the explanatory value of the notion of hope which is common to this special issue.

All contributions inquire as to how social actors collectively struggle for hope in challenging contexts from specific positionalities; be these conditioned by racialised marginalisation (Daniel; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez/Branković), nationalist assimilationism (Minelli/Ghoreishi), or the existential threat of the climate crisis (Spencer/Asselin). Minelli and Ghoreishi focus on the surprising rise of revolutionary hope amidst a social context which appears to be hopeless due to marginalisation, oppression, and conflict. Spencer and Asselin's environmentalists share how they collectively maintain resilient hope against the omnipresent climate catastrophe while simultaneously being confronted with neoliberalism and precarious life conditions. Gutiérrez-Rodríguez and Branković's actors espouse hope amidst or even despite being deprived of their rights while addressing a common future for all members of society, while Daniel looks at the relationship between suffering and activism through a biographical lens, in order to see how activists struggle for a physical space that allows for imagining the future in the here and now, which not only shows the limited horizons of hope but also ways to transcend these limitations.

Thus, the authors in this special issue do not stop at simply showing how the struggles for hope are restricted by structural conditions and positionalities, but rather highlight how collective actors put 'hope to work'. Asking how forms of hope are created, sustained, or even broadened, the contributions to this volume highlight the relevance of hoping as a social practice. While Minelli and Ghoreishi conceptualise hope as an open-ended process and speak of 'learning hope' as enshrined in democratic procedures and rituals that embody revolutionary potential, Spencer and Asselin highlight the 'labour of hope' as an active practice that pertains to either the concealed work of sustaining emotional resilience in the face of various barriers, or to the labour geared towards producing and maintaining hope. Gutiérrez-Rodríguez and Branković, as well as Daniel, focus more on the well-established concept of prefiguration which is embedded within spaces of political action against spatial marginalisation (the case of South Africa) or dehumanising isolation (the case of *The Lager* in Germany). The horizon of hope articulated in these struggles does not appear in a linear future but is embedded within the activists' biographies (Daniel) and the ontological conditions of a violent border and migration regime (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez/Branković). These insights offer a recursive understanding<sup>2</sup> of horizon(s) of hope, one that is only understandable

through an analysis of the social and cultural formations under which they were articulated and which ultimately undermine the very possibility of their existence. The ways in which the authors deal with hope thus focus on agency and the enactment of hope as a political and contentious practice in the everyday lives of those social actors. The actors engage in a variety of social and political struggles through hope (as a biographical or even ontological condition as well as a moral responsibility), with hope (as a tool for organising and relating to each other), and for hope (as a negotiated horizon and shared imagination).

A tendency to focus on ideas of hope and sticking to hope as an affect or human condition sometimes masks the dangers of hope. Hope can promote or even generate passivity, hide or legitimise limitations, or generate false hopes with intrinsic disappointments (Mains 2013; Schielke 2015). The contributions here show how these dangers are articulated by certain actors – or not. The approach presented in the contributions demonstrates answers to questions such as the following: which actors are able to address hope through their actions, and which tend to hope more passively? Or, equally important, which visions of change are imaginable and actually shared by others? Understanding hope as a social practice *mutatis mutandis* allows one to explore both its dangers and its potential as well as to accommodate the dialectic contradictions between these two sides of the coin.<sup>3</sup>

## **5. Back to the future of the present**

What can we learn from the different ways in which social actors develop future imaginations and ways of future-making? What does hope as an analytical lens offer in terms of studies of the future in critical social and cultural science?

First, we make an argument for hope as a useful lens to explore the relationships between societal structure, individual and collective positions, imagination, and agency. The contributions assembled here show that ‘hope matters’, not only as an affective relation to the future and as a medium of concrete objectives, but also as a social practice in the here and now. Thus, it is important to analyse the labour inherent in hope and how it shapes future imaginations and the (un)imaginable. Such interest

is not merely academic but aligns with ideas of a committed sociology that aims to engage with contemporary public debates. It not only helps to make alternative futures be heard but also establishes a dialogue with those struggling for hope.

The second major contribution of the special issue, we hope (pun intended), is to remind us of the fact that the only point of reference to speak, think, and shape the future is the present. Struggling for the future is an open and unfinished practice materialised and enacted in the here and now. Therefore, a better understanding of future-making practices and future visions through practices of hope can serve as a point of departure to analyse the struggles of today and their inherent power relations. The sociological interest in historical contingency and human agency not only fertilises the ground for future research (Schulz 2019), but also contributes to endeavours in understanding the diverse and intersecting inequalities inherent in knowledge production, in contentious and emancipatory politics, and in struggles over competing interpretations of the world. To put it another way, we make the argument that more research should go back to the future in order to understand the present.

*The publication of this Special Issue has been supported since 2024 by the Research Cluster “Shaping Future Society”, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – FIP 27 – 528585458.*

- 1 This debate started in a collectively organized workshop “Struggles for Hope – Negotiating the Future in Times of Global Crises” at Fulda University of Applied Sciences in 2022. We want to thank all contributors, particularly our co-organis-er Anja Habersang for her support. Following that workshop, we developed the discussion further, and research leading to the publication of this Special Issue has been supported since 2024 by the Research Cluster “Shaping Future Society”, funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG, German Research Founda-tion) – FIP 27 – 528585458. We also thank the team of the *Journal für Entwick-lungspolitik* (JEP) for their kind support throughout the publication process and Tom Triglone for taking care of the language editing.
- 2 See the notion of recursiveness as discussed by the Native American political phi-losopher Robert Nichols (2020).
- 3 We find this dialectic understanding of hope as social practice with its potentials and potentialities, dangers and restrictions, nicely illustrated in the cover picture by cross-disciplinary artistic researcher Frida Teller (<https://fridateller.com>). We sincerely thank her for granting us permission to use her artwork.

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