

# Chaos and Hope – Nano-Utopian Moments of Activist Self-Organisation

This paper presents the idea of a nano-utopian moment as a mode of prefigurative analysis for spontaneously arising acts of resistance. First, it introduces Ernst Bloch's concept of utopia as a disruptive process, one that is forward-facing and aims to create a better world <sup>1</sup>. This theory contains within it the normative assumption that a better world is possible given the right conditions, but that this must also be an unclosed system of ongoing critique <sup>2</sup>. It then looks at some of the existing theories on modes of process-based activist utopias, exploring how these arguments are productive in developing the field of activist utopian studies. These micro-utopias mainly describe events and projects that are small, planned resistances and social experiments. However, there is scope to examine further descriptions of brief and unexpected utopian moments that may happen within, as a result of, or that are generative of the order and planning that lead to these micro-utopias.

Building on this, the new nano-utopian category aims to describe unplanned or spontaneous activist moments, viewing them as accelerated processes of self-organisation that appear to arise out of chaotic situations or breakdown. It draws on the work of Prigogine and Stengers. They note how under certain circumstances "entropy itself becomes the progenitor of order" <sup>3</sup>. Likewise, the nano-utopian moment while disrupting one system has within it the possibility (not a certainty) of creating a "higher level" of order, i.e. one that reaches towards a new horizon of hope for a fairer ordering of the world for the participants. Finally, this paper looks at an example of nano-utopian activism, the initiation of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, where student protestors were holding up umbrellas to protect themselves from teargas went viral on social media, triggering massive spontaneous self-organisation. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, ed. Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, vol. One (The MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Bloch.

<sup>3</sup> Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos*, Reissue (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Edmund W. Cheng and Wai-Yin Chan, 'Explaining Spontaneous Occupation: Antecedents, Contingencies and Spaces in the Umbrella Movement', *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 2 (4 March 2017): 222–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2016.1252667>.

Dr Heather McKnight

[heather@magneticideals.org](mailto:heather@magneticideals.org)

## **Bio**

Heather McKnight completed her PhD in Law Studies at the University of Sussex Law Department, studying resistance to the marketisation of higher education through the lens of a reimagining of academic freedom. She is a critical utopian scholar and activist with research interests in unions, protest, education, feminism, gender, aesthetics, utopian analysis of science fiction television, and speculative fiction. She has fought to preserve the archives of the National Union of Students and has been involved in relocating them to the Modern Records Centre in Warwick where they will be available as a public interest archive.

Heather is an experienced trainer and researcher in students' unions, university and the public sector. Coming from a working background in equalities, campaigning and education research, she has worked for charities, students' unions and local government. She is founder of the social enterprise Magnetic Ideals which works on projects that use creative and artistic ways of bringing communities together to create social change. She was the co-founder of the Critical Studies Journal at the University of Brighton, serving on the editorial board for three years and has also been the Co-Editor of Excursions Journal at the University of Sussex. She is a founding member of the anti-racist and trans-inclusive CHASE Feminist Network.