Critique and utopias as analytic strategies and activism for new sustainable futures?
A common sense of responsibility for social change

Mette Bladt, associate professor, University College Copenhagen, Denmark
Signe Hvid Thingstrup, associate professor, University College Copenhagen, Denmark
Mia Husted, reader, University College Copenhagen, Denmark
Frederik Aagaard Hagemann, research assistant, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden
Jonas Egmose, associate professor, Roskilde University, Denmark
Program

• Theoretical inspirations and normative approaches of CUAR
• Empirical examples – some fragments
  • Mirror, Mirror on the Wall (marginalized young people)
  • Love as Resistance (early childhood education)
  • A common sense of responsibility (sustainable urban communities)
• A workshop: Critique and utopias as analytic strategies and activism
• Discussion and questions
Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR): contextualization of a research position

- Developed at Roskilde University, Denmark
- Creating knowledge in order to create change – Creating change in order to create knowledge
- Research knowledge about
  - *What is* and *what might be*: ‘Between the actual and the potential’
  - The local/specific and the general/common/societal
- A research position that has implications for/encompasses positions on
  - Theory & theory of knowledge
  - Normativity
  - Methodology and Analyses
Theoretical inspirations and understandings


• Society and culture as repressive, conflictual, and unequal; reification vs. societal processes as unfinished; ‘all beginnings are wrong’ vs ‘allying oneself with beginnings’

• Everyday life and experience: between structure and agency, disempowerment/ reification and utopias of the good life/better world.

• Exploring power structures and struggles: scope, reversibility, openings, and alternatives.

• Connecting structural/material/cultural and local/contextual analyses
Normative positions

• Research as part of societal processes with ethical and political implications and obligations
• Research oriented towards democracy, empowerment, participation, sustainability, commonality
• Starting not (only) from ‘what is’, but ‘what might be’
• Exploration of human experiences with the most critical aspects of our lives and utopian longings for a better and more meaningful life
• Questioning conditions and understandings that shape our worldview and space for action.
• Social imagination: reworking reifications, utopias, ‘allying oneself with beginnings’
• Democracy, participation and empowerment is not only relevant for underprivileged or marginalized groups, but for us all: Transcending and transgressing existing (power) positions.
Methodological and analytical approaches

• Future creation workshops: critiques, utopias, realization
• Free space – connection to everyday lives
• Connecting the general, the common, and the local
• Researcher not just as spectator bus as participants with other participants: engagement
• A surplus of insights and knowledge: focus not only on practices as fait accompli, but as contingent, situated, unfinished reflections, dreams and actions
• Exploring critiques and utopias empirically through experiments and shared analyses
Mirror, mirror on the wall

Critical Utopian Action Research with extremely marginalized young boys from a ghetto in Copenhagen

Critique, utopias, and the mess in between: When the difference between a utopian idea and reality becomes too much
The problem with marginalized youth in DK

- In spite of the Danish welfare model, the social mobility is lower than is often expected; it is for example the same as in the USA (Landersø & Heckman, 2016).
- In the last 40 – 50 years 15-17% of every generation is considered marginalized (Vive 2018, CEFU 2016).
- The so-called NEET group (OECD), in DK accounts for 15% of people aged 20-24, ie. 15% of the 20-24 are not in education, work or vocational training.
- The complexity of social problems and number of ‘marginalization markers’ are increasing (Ottesen et al 2018).
- The severe exposure is increasing, for example 1% of the youth is now committing 44% of all offenses (Pedersen & Jørgensen 2017).
- Increase in personal offenses including especially violent and sexual offenses (Kyvsgaard 2018).
- Polarization; while the general prosperity is on the rise, latest figures shows that the social burdens are increasingly extensive for those with few resources (Vive 2018).

This shows a social situation of inequality, where more young people grow up as extremely marginalized.
The Sjælør Project

14 young boys aged 13-16
Living in a ghetto area
The police had scoped out this group as especially criminalized
We got engaged with them to find out what could be their own solutions to creating good, sustainable futures for marginalized youth, and in the local community
We collaborated closely with a range of locally engaged welfare professionals to find out how the groups ideas could be supported in the welfare institutions
The working title of the project became: ‘The Good Life for Young People in Sydhavnen and Sjælør – When We Decide Ourselves’
The Critical Analysis...

Getting kicked out of school
Gangster-attitudes
Bad contact with authorities
Prison
One can’t be oneself in Denmark
There’s no space to get to know oneself...
.. Nor can one find out how to become the person you want to be.
The Utopian Idea

Find out ‘who I am’,
Find out ‘what could I be’
Just to be normal
Learn to handle one’s own life better
Go abroad – away from Denmark
...
Make a travel-documentary!
Producing the documentary

We produced a documentary.

The documentary was supposed to do four things:

1. Who am I?
2. Feel safe in the group and the area
3. To show another story of themselves and their neighbourhood
4. Clarify how their life-conditions differ from the lives of other young people.
The breakdown

.. And then it all went haywire, the content was not there...

”This is fucking stupid!”
”This is not interesting!”
”This is only violence!
.. Or is it? This is our lives.”
How we understand this.. Here, and in society!

The documentary became a mirror:
What they see themselves doing is not what they want to be doing, and even what they think they ARE doing.

The interplay between the group and society is not existing, fx themselves and their local area

They recognized that they ought to be doing something different than what they are actually doing now

The gap between their utopian vision, their life-conditions, and the power of reality becomes too wide.
Despite of all this, we have seen change at different levels:
Social learning among the youth (the project-the documentary)
The professionals becoming more than educators
Recognition of the urgent need for radical changes in welfare institutions
to deal with these groups

... 
Lately, we’ve seen the group move in three different directions. But we will meet again in September.
LOVE AS RESISTANCE

Some reflections on resistance when trying to open the world and encourage children’s critical thinking about resources and our common future in early childhood education
Participants

2014-2017: daycare centers

- Participants: Pedagogues and children from five daycare centers + UC teacher's as ‘reflection team’

- Projects: developing existing nature-oriented activities in daycare round nature to integrate stronger perspectives on sustainability

2018-2020: University College Copenhagen

- Participants: 6 UC teachers and 3 researchers + other UC teachers as ‘reflection team’

- Projects: developing existing education of pedagogues round nature and outdoor living to integrate perspectives on sustainability
Point of departure

Nature activities they believe educate for future sustainability;

- To visit an historical farm and clap a free range cow
- To incubate chickens in the living room
- To grow beans and tomatoes in the garden
- To climb threes and make bonfires

Will these nature and farming experiences form a sufficient basis for developing sustainable awareness as they rarely echo modern living or modern industrial processes?
Dominant nature pedagogy in daycare in Denmark

We believe that children will develop future sustainability through their knowledge about the original nature. We show them the good and the best way of being in and with nature – the fact that this way cannot be realised is up to them to discover along the way.

(pedagogue)

Nature pedagogy is about children experiencing nature and being in nature in playful, investigative, safe and curious ways.

→ leads to investigations of scientific knowledge
→ leads to knowledge about relations between human and nature
→ leads to formation of humans able to take part in democratic processes and act on environmental questions

local eco friendly activities bloomed

Waste, water, energy – recycle, reuse, separate, substitute ressources

Do it yourself - paper, soap, toys, etc.

Act responsibly - routines......to create an awareness about sustainability that is second-nature.
Some critical reflections...

Eco-friendly behaviour

- Places a lot of responsibility on the pedagogues, the children and their parents and not so much on decision-makers, companies and political regulations
- Does not, in and of itself, stimulate investigative thinking on how to respond to sustainability problems when there are no easy solutions.

We’re talking in the same way as always. We use the same kind of arguments. We need a bigger picture and a connection to the big society.
Caring for childrens state of mind

There is a reason why childrens books have to have a happy ending......they need hope and a way out...

We need to provide the children with answers. Or hope. They need to be able to sleep at night...

Childrens right to a childhood without fear - and the right to participate in questions relevant for their own life and future (Hägglund & Pramling Samuelsson (2009))
Caring for the love for nature (and science)

Nature and science first – then maybe sustainability values as a horizon. (UC teacher)

The child needs to know that milk originate from a cow and not that milk is produced in modern farms. Children are not to visit a chicken farm. If you show children how things are produced today they will become noncritical. It will become baseline. Love for nature is the motivating force of the child to make a change in the world later on. Daycare must be fun and trickery. (UC teacher)
Critique of society

Carries the wish to protect children from anxiety and uncertainty produced by societal management of nature - and a hope, that children will make a better world in the future.

The nature/culture divide works by preventing children to have relations to the complex worlds they are part of (Taylor 2013, Pacini-Ketchabaw et al 2014)
Small steps to include more.....

A student: Why don’t you show an aquarium of dead coralls?

The employee: we rather want to show the nice and beautifull stuff – so that people can see how fantastic coralls are. So they will feel the urge to protect them...

Group of students: Oh..but it would be enlightening with just one small aquarium of dead coralls. We have to show films of it to the children ourselves..
A step towards including anger and critique?

- Love of nature and critique and anger everytime nature is ruined can create new feelings of meaning and belonging (Vetlesen & Willig 2017)
Ref.


A Common Sense of Responsibility
between civic engagement
and professionalised practice

Jonas Egmose, Roskilde University

‘Providing Local Communities with a Say in the Future of Urban Sustainability Research’

Citizen Science for Sustainability

An open agenda. Being invited?
What is it like to live here?
This does NOT fit into any sustainability agenda

“It’s a bit different to separate out what’s most important from what’s most interesting (…) I didn’t get so excited about crime, but that’s not because it’s no less important, it’s not just such an interest for me” (Appendix I-R2).

“Some of the professionals could do with perhaps living in the real world, well this reality, to experience firsthand how things are. But then... they experience a different life. (…) perhaps they have one intention and everything, but they just can’t put their head into that space of being somewhere like here, they just don’t understand” (W4 090326).
Critique and Utopias as immanent aspects of everyday life practice
Envisioning sustainable futures: Societal dimensions of everyday life
Listening, learning and responding

Perhaps one of the best things was to take part, without the usual role of being a professional.
“It’s got me thinking about the kind of research I do. At least [it] makes me think: ‘wait a second, I’m doing research that is supposed to be benefiting the sustainability of cities,

**then actually** talking to people, but in a way that I’m listening to them and trying to really take on board their ideas,

**and not** trying to fit them into a prescribed sort of theory or notion or ideas, but really working with them. I think it helps me more”
Openings
...ready for new silos

Interconnected key themes:

1. Crime and Safety
2. Eco-Social Housing
3. Affordable Green Energy Services
4. Urban Food Production and Consumption
5. Sustainable Urban Transport
6. Greenspace, Parks and Places to go
7. Rubbish and Recycling
8. Shopping and Local Services
9. Health and Well-being
10. Community Cohesion and Empowerment
Change happening on the ground
Workshop: Critique and utopia as analytic strategies and activism

• How does this relate to your (life and) work?
• Challenges, issues, experiences, dilemmas, ambitions, utopias etc.
Action Research for Democracy
New Ideas and Perspectives from Scandinavia

Edited by Ewa Gunnarsson, Hans Peter Hansen, Birger Steen Nielsen and Nadarajah Srisankarajah

Commons, Sustainability, Democratization
Action Research and the Basic Renewal of Society

Edited by Hans Peter Hansen, Birger Steen Nielsen, Nadarajah Srisankarajah and Ewa Gunnarsson
Critique & Utopia

Levels of Utopias

How to work with norms/morality when "all beginnings are wrong!"

Does it matter that communities consider themselves as utopian?

Levels of Utopias

Eg. Utopias to exclude, across the question differently

Work; every answer is right - and means trust

How to deal with visions you don't think are right?

How to deal with very conflicting diverse utopias?

The challenges of envisioning utopias

How to deal with these visions?

Accepting differences

Time, trust, physical environment needed

Communities vs. networks of actors

Working with plurality of dreams and actions

How to cope with contradictions

Code of conduct

How to deal with "failures", hate, war.