Materiality of Research: Can imaginative projects complement (and not displace) more critical research? by Davina Cooper

Can projects of reimagining complement more critical research? Writing in response to comments on her recent work on reimagining the state, **Davina Cooper** *addresses the challenge of developing transformative methods, the value of institutional play in academic research and the relationship these may have to more overtly 'critical' accounts.*

A longer version of this essay was originally posted on Davina Cooper's blog. If you are interested in this topic, the author has explored conceptual methodologies and the use of play in reimagining the state further here.

This essay is part of a series examining the material cultures of academic research, reading and writing. If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at **lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk**.

Can imaginative projects complement (and not displace) more critical research?

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The task of the critical academic is often seen as one of exposure – revealing relations of exploitation, exclusion and domination; analysing their social conditions, consequences and patterned logics; and more generally demonstrating what is masked and enacted by taken-for-granted modes of thought and activity. Academic work – and I use this term loosely to include activist writers and other commentators – can do this well. Critical writing does not simply expose the bedrock and shadows of injustice conventionally ignored, but also offers eloquent, powerful descriptions with language and concepts (power-geometries, intersectionality, the prison-industrial complex, to name a few) that make particular wrongs thinkable, talkable – and thinkable through being talkable.

But as this form of writing comes to dominate left scholarship, some commentators have expressed concern about the limits of a certain kind of 'negative' critical approach. Rita Felski, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others have questioned the reliance placed on exposure and what it can accomplish. Among the many arguments made is the concern that critical work treats oppression as so tightly patterned its spores or DNA emerge 'perfectly' in all sorts of surprising places (rather than being more contingently joined-up); that it risks paying too much attention – a critical attention but still attention nonetheless – to what is dominant and mainstream (at the expense of what is innovative and marginal); and, more normatively, that it entrenches polarities of friend and enemy or else treats all social and political forms as (equally) dangerous.

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Subjecting critical analysis to its own critical tools can be useful, but it's not the approach I want to pursue here. In part because doing so remains within the realm of distrust and displacement; in part because it can erase the nuance, diversity and political complexity of critical work; and in part because it suggests other (preferred) methods are less vulnerable or flawed. All methods can be subject to critical analysis – transformative methods as much as others. I want to avoid the 'weaponising' of theory which, in its focus on particular methods' failings, diminishes and loses sight of what different approaches can offer.

Naming, describing and analysing patterned forms of coercion, oppression and exploitation, particularly where they are least expected and suspected, remains important – vitally so. Critical work doesn't just show what is wrong, it also scoops out space (destabilises a settled landscape) for other kinds of work as well.

At the same time, there is a need for writing that faces in other directions. What we might call it remains unclear: hopeful, transformative, experimental? These terms are only partially right, and indeed can apply to critical work also – which is good: my aim is not to set up a dichotomy between hopeful and critical orientations. Still, if we want to orient ourselves in our writing to more hopeful worlds, what kind of methodologies might support this task – not as blueprints or recipes but, in more provisional and fragmented ways, as suggestions, questions, resources, challenges and paths? In some fields, such methods exist; indeed, in many cases, they have long existed. Elsewhere, they are less developed or have been battered by methodological skirmishes between critical and reconstructionist approaches.

In their critique of critical analysis, Sedgwick and Felski argue for readings that are reparative, generative, collaborative and bridging. Their work, and many of the interesting responses generated, foreground literary and related texts. I want here to look at what such reimagining could mean for practice-oriented political and socio-legal studies by briefly tracing one of two methods I have recently been exploring: reimagining the state through institutional play (the other method of reimagining concepts, and the methodological challenges it poses, I discuss elsewhere (see, for instance, Everyday Utopias)).

Image Credit: (Barni1 CCO)

Can we play at being a different kind of state?

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Among critical writers engaged in exposing patterns of domination, there is often scepticism about the seemingly 'heroic' academic, advancing ahead with their new imaginaries, at a distance from the 'real', everyday life to which they believe (naively, arrogantly?) their conceptual thoughts will trickle down. Imaginative academic work, though, doesn't have to take –*or be read as taking* – a lone, individualistic form. It can be far more modest, collaborative and horizontal. This is usually recognised when writers engage in bridging work, giving voice to radical practices already in existence (or being trialled) in experimental spaces, everyday utopias or traditional communities. But the academic developing new conceptual 'lines' is also collaboratively engaged. Not only is their work shaped by wider conversations; reimagining the economy, state or gender can also be seen as a tracing or path, within a shared landscape, that others may, in turn, develop, revise, track alongside or reject.

Reimagining concepts highlights the place of different kinds of practice. One form I have become interested in, in part because it remains underexplored within political and socio-legal analysis, involves mimetic institutional play. Mock parliaments or mock UN meetings might be an example. They do not make laws with 'real' effect but nevertheless work pedagogically to induct children into existing political systems.

Mimetic play, however, does not have to affirm the status quo. As a way of practising the imagination and putting the imagination into practice, it can also be used to explore how states and state institutions might become more democratic, egalitarian and caring. Examples here include the establishment of micro-nations, simulated constitutions, feminist judgment writing as well as some local currencies, peoples' tribunals and free universities. Calling these initiatives 'play' doesn't mean they are trivial or light-hearted – far from it. While play suggests subjects' willingness to engage in creative, open-ended practice, what is also important is the *aspirational surplus* play identifies.

Take the crowd-sourced constitution developed through the LSE (2013-15). This was an ambitious project to produce a new democratic constitution. As such, it demonstrated a readiness and ability to undertake a task normally seen as the responsibility and prerogative of parliament, even as the university-led process was unable to give its constitution legal effect. Likewise, the still ongoing, globe-crossing feminist judgments project, where feminist academics, simulating judges, write judgments on already decided cases, demonstrates how legal judgments could give greater priority to equality and relations of care (among other feminist values) even when constrained by the terms of legal and social knowledge governing the original decision. At the same time, while feminists can produce new judgments, these cannot do what judgments are expected to do – as authoritative decisions held up through a complex matrix of institutional power.

Play, then, can be understood as a register of action that involves actualisation (or doing), but where, at any given moment, a space remains between what is done and what is *realised*. I have called this space one of aspirational surplus rather than failure deliberately, because it identifies play's capacity to reach beyond what is materially possible in other registers at any given moment.

What counts as play (or not-play) can change. It is also often contested as participants disagree over whether a particular form has been *realised* – for instance, are local currencies 'real' money or 'pretend' money? – particularly when they involve reimagining what money is and can do. Yet, while we can get caught up with questions of effect and what experiments can accomplish, what is important about mimetic institutional play is the *practical* space it provides for progressives (and others) to develop social ambition – exploring what legal judgments and money, but also universities, tribunals, states, constitutions and embassies, could be like in ways that refuse to be dissuaded and disempowered by the notion that forging institutions and institutional imaginaries is the exclusive terrain of elites.

I am not arguing for critical academics to switch gear – to move from describing and analysing social harms, from uncovering domination and control in unexpected places, to engaging in practices (conceptual, utopian, mimetic) that simulate (and stimulate) new hopeful imaginaries. At the same time, I do think we need a clearer, stronger, more confident space for the latter within the broad auspices of contemporary critical work.

Discourses of play have generated much mistrust in left academic quarters with their apparent orientation towards, and investment in, light-hearted, mischievous amusement, valorising (it would seem) a refusal to commit; where play's unsteady and endlessly shifting form means there is always slippage or something else going on. We might think of Gregory Bateson's description of the playful nip, which signifies a bite but not what is signified by a bite (feminist judgments likewise might signify legal rulings, but perhaps not what is signified by a ruling). Play then seems like an accordion – stretching in and out, and refusing to be pinned down to a single, stable consistent form.

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This mutability, the ability to be and not be simultaneously, supports forms of institutional mimesis-with-revisions (such as feminist judgments, new constitutions and currencies). It also reveals qualities of play which are helpful for thinking more positively about the relationship between critical analysis and more hopeful reimagining. While each produces its own endless spiral of reflexivity – critique leads to more critique; transformative imaginaries produce new, 'improved' aspirations – both simultaneously depend upon, and in a sense enact, the other. Critical accounts matter because other ways of living are possible; hopeful reimagining is motivated by, and anchored in, a critical dissatisfaction with what is. This is not an argument for their fusion or side-by-side placing, but for understanding their interrelationship in more complex, tangled, playful ways.

In short, we need to get out of the game of determining whether it is critique or hopeful reimagining that is most worthy of our time and attention, and instead develop richer ways of thinking through their interconnections. This is a project to which the language of play can, I think, helpfully contribute.

Davina Cooper is Research Professor at Dickson Poon School of Law, KCL. Her most recent book is *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Duke UP, 2014). She is currently completing a project exploring the state's reconceptualisation for a progressive transformative politics. Davina Cooper would like to thank Antu Sorainen and Didi Herman for their helpful suggestions for this piece.

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