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'Hope-full purpose': Time, oblivion, and the strange attractors of Pandora's box

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ABSTRACT

Hope lacks an obvious conceptual clarity. Yet, as a defining feature of utopian thought, it suggests a potential for new social relations (Levitas, 2010). To explore such potentiality, this chapter conceptualises "hope-full purpose"—a construction that suggests prefigurative acts which realise new social relations and, thus, reinvigorate organizing. This chapter also draws on the commons— not in Hardin's (1968) tragic terms, but as per Ostrom (1990): full of hope and purpose. The argument is advanced with empirical work carried out online at Medium—a commoning community of social journalism (www.medium.com). Analysis focuses on the hope and purpose found in individual members' contributions. Through an exploration of "hope-full purpose", the chapter argues that hope must remain a shared construct—one which facilitates the transition (as observed in acts of organizing) from individual to collective, and which renders it so potent in the pursuit of new social relations.

KEYWORDS

Hope, Purpose, Commons, Online Community

Hope . . . which is whispered from Pandora's box after all the other plagues and sorrows had escaped, is the best and last of all things. Without it, there is only time. And time pushes at our backs like a centrifuge, forcing outward and away, until it nudges us into oblivion. (Caldwell and Thomason, 2004, p. 275)

PRELUDE

Hope animates prophets, visionaries, and radicals. So, when Pandora replaces the lid of the box that is entrusted to her, it is these prophets, visionaries, and radicals who are left to conjecture as to why hope remains. Does hope remain to soothe the torments of humankind? Or is the contrary true, and hope is denied to humankind as retribution for the release of plagues and sorrows? Perhaps neither of these is correct, and hope is simply another evil: a false hope that, even in its absence, plagues and sorrows, torments and deceives. This unresolved conjecture – and the strange attractors of Pandora's box which predispose chaotic conditions to a more likely set of outcomes – offers further caution to those animated by hope. Hope, after all, is experienced in conditions which delimit, subvert, distract, and resist. Yet, if we believe these conditions to be worthy of challenge, then perhaps there is some hope.

A PREMISE FOR 'HOPE-FULL PURPOSE'

Hope is shrouded in conceptual ambiguity and contradiction; it appears easy enough to identify until one tries to capture it, when it reveals itself as little more than a vague floating signifier. Indeed, hope has rarely been discussed outside situations of the extremes: acute hopelessness (Fukuyama, 1992) or fantastical hopefulness (Snyder, 2000). Thus, whilst hope has strong heuristic power in narrative, its existence as a tangible part of everyday organizational life is not clearly defined. This chapter argues that hope is deserving of closer attention because of its potential 'to grow and overwhelm . . . nontransformative perspectives' (Butler, 2001, p. 277). The chapter draws on extant literature and original empirical work – the latter carried out in *Medium*, an online site of social journalism – to deepen understanding through critical analysis of an alternative empirical reality. My hope, ultimately, is that a transformative vision of hope may be drawn closer to the work of organizational scholars.

Latour (1999, p. 300) considers how we might go about organizing hope. He writes:

> [W]e seem to have exhausted the evils that emerged from the open box of clumsy Pandora. Though it was her unrestrained curiosity that made the artificial maiden open the box, there

is no reason to stop being curious about what was left inside. To retrieve the Hope that is lodged there, at the bottom, we need a new and rather convoluted contrivance.

My convoluted contrivance is to unite hope and purpose. Whilst hope may pose a set of conceptual problems, purpose establishes some lines of thought which may be helpful in achieving resolution. Common conceptualizations of purpose tend to capture how it is utilized to meet an organization's needs (Warriner, 1965; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1994; Basu, 2017). But this perspective only emphasizes the place of purpose in the instrumental processes and outcomes of organizing, rather than revealing any radical qualities that purpose might possess in this context. Instead, I draw on empirical material from a study of alternative organizing, where notions of hope and purpose unite to pursue wholly different ideological ends to those framed by a neo-Weberian rationalism. I propose that retrieving the hope that is lodged at the bottom of Pandora's box must be a purposeful act and, thus, that uniting hope and purpose demands a prefigurative practice which reinvigorates attempts at organizing. Furthermore, to engage in prefigurative practice requires us to become agents of change, living out relationships and practices that remedy our present shortcomings and characterize a better future. We see an example of prefiguration in Ostrom's (1990) critique of 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (Hardin, 1968). Ostrom argues that organizing need not resort to top-down regulation; she prefers to reinstitute the human as capable of self-governing its common resources. This prefigurative, commons-inspired approach to organizing resonates with the socio-ecological ideas of prophets, visionaries, and radicals such as Bateson (1972), Schumacher (1973), Sennett (2006), and Bauman (2011), whose hope-full and purpose-full approaches to organizing inspire pockets of scholarship and practice today.

In this chapter, I argue against organizing as the short-term optimization of resources for the self on the grounds that it leads to longer-term, sub-optimal benefit for the other. This requires that I attempt two things: firstly, to demonstrate how organizing for the purpose of delivering short-term interest is bad for the collective; and, secondly, to explicate how the hope of our collective selves might save us from our individual impulses. In doing this, I advance a conceptualization of hope that goes beyond soothing the torments of humankind and reveals 'hope-full purpose' as an effective guide for a common journey towards a new set of social relations (De Angelis, 2017).

HOPE, PURPOSE, AND THE COMMONS

Hope has received limited attention in organizational scholarship, and that which it has received is characterized by a conceptual breadth which delivers a variety of responses. Emblematic of one core

view are Snyder et al. (1991, p. 287): they define hope as 'a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (1) agency (goal-directed energy) and (2) pathways (planning to meet goals)'. This reading of hope finds resonance with the reformist ambitions of the contemporary corporation, in which hope-full individuals are guided by conscious efforts to pursue specific ideological ends and appraise life goals in more affirmative ways. Contrast this with Ludema et al. (1997, p. 1026), who highlight the relational nature of hope, which is 'always engendered in relationship to an "other", whether that other be collective or singular, imagined or real, human or divine', and 'almost always portrayed as having a moral, spiritual, or religious dimension'. This orientation towards hope, an affirmative form of social discourse within a constructionist epistemology, responds best to this chapter's ambition of retrieving the hope that is lodged at the bottom of Pandora's box. Hope takes its place amongst communities of people, generates new possibilities for social relations, and mobilizes the moral and affective resources necessary to translate image into action and belief into practice (Ludema et al., 1997). As a shared construct, with transformative vision of a better future, and by means of a prefigurative practice, hope is well deserving of attention from organizational scholars.

Seen through a utopian lens, hope draws attention to the need for change, suggests a direction in which change must be made, and offers a stimulus to act upon that change. For Levitas (2010), hope is the defining characteristic of utopian thought. She builds on Bloch's ([1959] 1986) work, which argues that hope enables the imagination of new social institutions and practices, embedding new ethics and values. M. Parker (2002b, p. 2) posits that 'utopias are statements of alternative organization, attempts to put forward plans which remedy the perceived shortcomings of a particular present age'. The utopian thinking which refuses to accept that there is no alternative is not without its limitations; and, ultimately, how we respond to its limitations will define what becomes of hope. The strange attractors of Pandora's box predispose our thinking as well as our doing; and Lorenz's (1963) foundational theoretical work prompts us to consider the starting conditions of our thinking and recognize how the tiniest adjustment may have huge ramifications on our doing. So, taking inspiration from Havel (1990, p. 182), I advance a conceptualization of hope which 'gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now'. But hope, alone, is not enough; enter purpose.

Purpose is often captured in terms of 'the noisy declamations of those who, having lost all sense of purpose long ago, adopt the lapel-badge approach to values by bedecking themselves with Mission Statements, Chartermarks, Investors in People awards and so on' (Hoggett, 2006, p. 190). Hoggett

identifies that purpose is 'saturated with value' which invests it with a transformative power such as we might associate with hope (Butler, 2001). However, implicit in Hoggett's description is the possibility for any teleological project to emerge which co-opts purpose for its own ambitions and risks the legitimacy of any organizational praxis based in hope. Purpose, thus, should be conceptualized and theorized carefully. In relationships between individuals we see how purpose relies on ambiguity to reach consensus. The definitions of purpose created by this consensus are little more than temporary fictions which bind collectives together and contain their individual differences (Hoggett, 2006). And purpose is inherently temporary and contested, requiring ongoing clarification as to its true ambitions. To address this, G. Moore (2012, p. 384) proposes 'a conceptualization of purpose in relation to the common good which is more than the simple aggregation of the organization's internal goods'. He captures something of that exchange of fiction which exists in the pursuit of purpose, and which does more than meet an organization's internal needs; rather, it embeds itself as part of a larger and interconnected whole. In emphasizing this connection, and in a careful treatment of purpose, Moore enables that step towards commoning and the social practices used to organize shared resources (Linebaugh, 2008).

'Commoning' is more than a fashionable term for cooperating. We are born into a commons (P.M., 2014): a set of shared practices and a social metabolism based on the production, preservation, and use of communal goods and services (Linebaugh, 2008). Implicit in the commons is 'a plurality of people . . . sharing resources and governing them and their own relations and (re)productive processes through horizontal doing in common' (De Angelis, 2017, p. 10). So, to accept prima facie the tragic argument made by Hardin (1968) – that the world is dependent on common resources, but that individuals using these common resources will not cooperate to achieve collective benefits – is to condemn hope to the bottom of Pandora's box: a hope denied to humankind or, worse still, a false hope. Instead, Ostrom (1990) demonstrates how individuals might become collective and organize with the purpose of the advancement of shared, long-term benefit by challenging those deeply embedded assumptions of neoliberalism which privilege the leveraging of common resources for short-term and highly individualized gain. Ostrom presents commoning as an antidote, which traverses the individual and the collective and inveigles new possibilities of social relationships (which support and sustain not just the collective but the relationships and responsibilities that emanate from the collective). De Angelis (2017) warns how commoning is constrained by the power of capital and the state, and ponders 'what if?' we might remove these strange attractors which delimit, subvert, distract, and resist its potentiality. In this 'what if?' question, he identifies the commons as a place of hope: a place where hope-full purpose can thrive.

What if hope is a *reason* for doing things? Might purpose be a *tool* for doing those things? Purpose might help negotiate the passage from ambiguity to agreement, to create those temporary fictions which allow us to share collectively in prefigurative acts, and to realize some common, saturated value. Or does conceptualizing purpose as a tool simply facilitate a careless slip back towards an understanding of the world founded on instrumental rationalism? Perhaps a conceptualization of 'hope-full purpose' will allow us to situate, motivate, and facilitate our engagement in shared prefigurative acts? In so doing, we might (re)produce more hope-full social relations and reinvigorate the hope and the purpose of organizing. In this orientation towards a horizontal doing, hope-full purpose finds its spiritual home in the prefiguration of the commons.

THE COMMONING OF HOPE AND PURPOSE

I turn now to a set of everyday interactions which rebuff those characterizations of extreme hopelessness or fantastical hopefulness. The longitudinal, qualitative empirical work on which this chapter now draws was situated in an online site of alternative organizing and interrogates hope and purpose; during this period, archival work, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews were carried out by the researcher. The nature of the research site meant that this work was predominantly carried out online and facilitated by communicative technology, and the archival data that informs this study is largely represented by articles published online and the comments attached to them by readers. These articles are identified here as sources of data which help construct an empirical reality. Qualitative content analysis (Altheide, 1996, p. 16) was developed to interrogate hope and purpose within the data set through 'recursive and reflexive movement between concept development-sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data, and analysis-interpretation'. Tacking between materials and meanings helped interrogate the evidenced empirical reality, revealing things about hope and purpose which are intertwined in those approaches to organizing which embrace the commons in their defiance of conditions of hopelessness.

Turning attention to those vestiges of alternative organizing practice that sit somewhere infrequently visited by critical scholars, it befits the analysis that will follow to first provide some contextual detail.

IN SEARCH OF HOPE AND PURPOSE

The commons inspires discourses and practices of alternative organizing. Scholarly attention has already been drawn towards those responses to modernity which reject ideological modes of rationality (Baunsgaard and Clegg, 2012) and reproduce organizing practices and structures, conditioning local action and conventional wisdom (Adler et al., 2007). An important body of scholarship extends consideration of alternative organizing onto more radical ground (M. Parker et al., 2007; M. Parker, 2011; Kostera, 2014; Reedy et al., 2016) and challenges the social perspectives and norms of organizing that envelop us in their discourses and practices. This includes attention to commons-oriented approaches, ranging from collectivist organizing (Edley et al., 2004) to open-source technology (Pearce, 2012); approaches which share in challenging current discourses and practices and nourishing alternatives. The empirical work which is now presented was undertaken in *Medium* – a website which takes a commoning approach to social journalism. It was selected as a research site in order to connect with discourses and practices of alternative organizing, in a space enlivened by such discourses and practices, and specifically pertaining to hope. *Medium* has a hybrid collection of amateur and professional writers and embraces Creative Commons licensing as it responds to a large community of contributors sidestepping mainstream channels (Sussman, 2014). The hope of the commons in this space is pervasive and persuasive, and *Medium* publishes articles encompassing a rich discussion of blockchain, open-source technology, panarchy, sociocracy, and other organizing methodologies which attend to the horizontal doing of the commons rather than top-down ordering of mainstream responses to organizing. *Medium* is, itself, an expression of the commons, a space for sharing new ideas and resources, developing communities of thought and practice.

'The Purpose of Life . . .' and 'Foster a Sense of Purpose . . .'
Two articles provide an entry point to the discourses pertaining to hope and purpose in this community. The first introduces the ideas of Darius Foroux (2016). He states: 'What really makes me happy is when I'm useful. When I create something that others can use. Or even when I create something I can use.' He quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.' With a flourish of rhetoric, he concludes: 'What are you *doing* that's making a difference?'

Two responses to this article posted by readers pick up on his conceptualization of purpose and the corresponding links he makes to hope. Louisse, who describes herself as 'desperately trying to live and not just breathe', articulates a staggering sense of hopelessness:

I'm only 23 and I don't want to live anymore because I find no purpose in life. I have a good paying job, I take holidays often, I travel a lot but I am simply not happy. . . . I think, what the hell am I doing here? I don't know what I want to do to be useful to others yet, what I lack most is conviction. This is really great, thank you for this.

For Louisse, purpose is not found in happiness constructed from good employment or frequent travel. Purpose, for her, is elusive. Indeed, the absence of purpose causes deep, desperate hopelessness in understanding her own, individual existence. Louisse wants to be 'useful to others', and recognizes some residual hope that she, as an individual, might become part of a larger, collective self; she yearns for a sense of connection with others, believing that this would bring purpose. However, unsure of how she could realize this herself, purpose and hope remain disunited.

Similar themes are expressed by Matthew, a Lutheran pastor, who perhaps brings a spiritual or religious dimension to his understanding of hope. His response reads:

Thank you. I am truly sick of hearing that the purpose of life is happiness. That's BS. Happiness is a fleeting emotion that comes and goes. . . . What we define as the purpose of life will determine how we approach life. Well done with this article. Thank you.

Matthew refuses to equate purpose with happiness. Moreover, he claims that happiness is a short-term state which, in any case, has limited value; the purpose of life holds a longer-term benefit which is, by implication, a more valuable and hope-full endeavour. He clearly establishes the link between how we understand the purpose of life and how we prefigure the purpose of life, reinforcing that relationship between thinking and doing found in theory and practice which is shared and expressed in multiple realizations of the commons.

Louisse and Matthew wrestle with purpose in a way which accentuates their sense of hope. They find their own purpose ill defined and absent, yet they hold out hope for it. They seek purpose with individual relevance and collective coherence, and Foroux's article provides some sort of temporary fiction which binds them to the hope of the 'other' without crushing the 'self'.

The second article, by Kimber Lockhart (2016), is entitled 'Don't create a sense of urgency, foster a sense of purpose'. She argues that purpose 'is a deep understanding of the reasons behind our

efforts'; it 'resonates with the impact we'd like to make on the world'; it is 'immersion in our cause'; and it is 'about going faster and smarter toward a mission we all see clearly'. Her suggestions identify purpose as something which underlies practice, connects with outcomes, and is shared, articulated, and understood. Furthermore, she identifies the latency of purpose: it is something that is crafted, an ontological construction, a temporary fiction which must lay out common ground for any collective of individuals.

Her article attracts response from Ian, a professional working in 'growth' for an online legal marketplace in Seattle. He says:

> This is great. Urgency without purpose is poison. It will burn everyone out, ultimately bringing down the team and creating churn. I think in startups or in product, creating a sense of purpose and illustrating the vision is priority #1, however, some form of urgency can be positive. Urgency can create excitement and heighten focus around a purpose. . . . You'll need everyone to be on board, but a finite timeline to do something great, with purpose, can fuel the fire. It can push the team past any self-imposed limits and produce great results.

The workplace focus of this article prompts a wholly different response. Ian regards purpose as a counterbalance to urgency. Urgency, portrayed as the pursuit of short-term gain for individuals, represents a distortion of the commons, where sustainable, long-term benefit for the collective is promoted. Ian identifies that, in a time-pressured environment, shared purpose can contribute to collective achievements. The constructed nature of purpose, for individuals and collectives, emphasizes its temporary and contextual qualities; this renders it susceptible to manipulation in the workplace, where it may be hijacked for commercial benefit rather than for common benefit. Perhaps in response to the conceptual hijacking of purpose for a short-term, individualized gain, a commoning approach to purpose legitimates long-term, collective endeavour, and mobilizes the moral and affective resources necessary to retrieve hope from the bottom of Pandora's box.

Lockhart herself conceptualizes teams with a high sense of purpose as engaged and as having a high output. 'Fostering a sense of purpose is different [to urgency]', she claims. 'It's a collaborative endeavor, and it requires trust that your team members will translate their sense of purpose into increased effectiveness.' Still, the language of mainstream organizations (e.g. 'faster', 'smarter', 'effectiveness', 'efficiency', 'growth') all feels a little incongruous around these more holistic conceptualizations of purpose, maybe emphasizing the predominance of the logic of the

corporation, even in this alternative space. Moreover, it serves as a reminder that, even when we might hope for better things and seek the purpose that might help deliver on our hopes, strange attractors continue to delimit, subvert, distract, and resist.

The Hope of Purpose-full Organizations

Medium traverses the individual and the collective. The writings of Foroux and Lockhart explicitly link individuals to wider collectives, many identifying with professional communities embracing the commons, experimenting with self-organization, and expressing hope in their experiences of work and life. These collectives are given good coverage by *Medium*. There is widespread discussion of alternative organizational ideas which propose more hope-full and purpose-full ways of working; together, I argue, they articulate a sense of hope-full purpose. Capturing the mood of many individuals, these collective movements respond to purpose in statements articulating their beliefs. Four such collective movements emphasize their different, negotiated fictions. *Holacracy* distributes power, giving individuals the freedom to organize in a way that is aligned to the organization's purpose. *Teal Organizations* encourage individuals to listen to the purpose the organization wants to serve. *B Corporations* proclaim their approach balances purpose and profit, whilst *Sociocracy* claims it is values that give our lives purpose, and we act because we value (Rego, 2016).

Across the *Medium* community, purpose is presented as a unifying device; it is held up as powerful and responsible. Individuals gather here because they hope for similar things. Consequently, they become subject to similar promises, made by individuals and collectives, which are themselves contested. Tom, another *Medium* writer, disputes the claims of Teal organizing. He argues that 'an organisation isn't a separate soul or entity with its own purpose, it's a story of an idea which is gradually becoming reality . . . ultimately held by one individual author' (Nixon, 2015). For him, purpose is not a neutral, common resource, and he cautions against any presentation of purpose which is set apart from its political intent. This reveals that purpose, alone, may be problematic, but that commoning can re-frame purpose in terms of hope. It may be possible to engage hope-full purpose to affect a more sustainable temporal outlook which resists the habitual attraction of short-term, individualized gain in favour of a longer-term prosperity for the collective selves.

In this view, individuals express hope, sometimes in unconventional ways, but to serve a collective ambition. Nadia and Paul comment:

I feel like I want to give up hope but I'm not ready to do that yet because I think that I should persevere for the sake of my children. (Nadia, in *Medium*, 2016)

This is not a good time, but we must still hope. Something deep inside me tells me that things will change for us all. (Paul, in *Medium*, 2016)

Drawing on data from the commons of *Medium* helps enlighten our own discourses and practices by attending to an empirical reality whose expressions of hope redefine organizational purpose away from the justifications of the prevalent socio-economic conditions which are characterized by short-term gain and individual egoism. Hope-full purpose, or the search for hope-full purpose, can be observed in these individuals, in the collectives with which they connect, and furthermore in the common purpose that characterizes their shared hope.

PURSUANT TO HOPE

Exploring *Medium* (as a community whose collective expression of the commons is characteristically hope-full) draws the hope of the commons closer to the work of organizational scholars and demonstrates how hope is deserving of critical attention. In uniting hope and purpose, I have presented a portmanteau construction – hope-full purpose – which describes how retrieving the hope that is lodged at the bottom of Pandora's box might only be achieved with the assistance of purpose. This illuminates how uniting hope and purpose embeds a prefigurative practice which finds repeated and often unstated expression in the commons. And, in refusing Hardin's (1968) narrative of those using common resources not cooperating to achieve collective benefits, hope-full purpose offers an organizational alterity to the short-term optimization of resources for the self. Hope may still reside in situations of acute hopelessness or fantastical hopefulness; and, in that context, it is likely to remain lodged at the bottom of Pandora's box. Yet identifying expressions of hope within this specific empirical setting has highlighted its potentially transformative qualities, and demonstrated the relevance of organizing hope in the context of a community hitherto lesser explored by empirical research. Ludema et al. (1997) find hope in communities of people, in the new images of possibility for social relationship they generate, and in the moral and affective resources of prefigurative practice. Empirical evidence which inspires this chapter finds great sympathy with this description. To activate its transformative qualities, hope must remain a shared construct and become a shared practice; and this is precisely the purposeful transition from individual to collective which renders it so potent in the context of organizations.

POSTLUDE

The story of Pandora's box has inspired many readings, which give rise to a multiplicity of interpretations. If hope is simply another evil, then our efforts in this volume may be in vain; if this is the case, then the thread spun by the editors should reveal how our good intentions have helped pave the road to organizational oblivion. If hope is to be denied to humankind as retribution, then perhaps we are guilty of misidentifying hope in ourselves or in our objects of study; my convoluted contrivance – uniting hope and purpose – establishes a conceptual link to suggest we do correctly identify hope and that we may share a pursuit of its promises. And, if hope is to be the soother of the torments of humankind, then this volume may enliven scholarship and stimulate debate which informs discourses and practices within organizations, such that we better attend to our present shortcomings.

I hope so.

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