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Imagining Better Societies: A Social Psychological Framework for the Study of Utopian Thinking and Collective Action

Short Title: Utopian Thinking and Collective Action

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Abstract

We present an integrative theoretical model that specifies social psychological mechanisms by which utopian thinking, which activates the social imagination, may enhance collective action intentions oriented toward social change and human progress. The model synthesizes complementary insights from interdisciplinary research programs on utopianism, hope, construal level, and system justification to identify mechanisms by which imagining better societies: (a) increases social hope, (b) yields an abstract mindset that bridges the psychological distance between the status quo ("here and now") and a better possible future, (c) decreases system justification motivation, and (d) promotes social justice-oriented forms of collective action.

***Keywords**:* utopian thinking, counterfactual reasoning, hope, optimism, construal level theory, abstraction, ideology, system justification, collective action, social change, social justice

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.

(Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream")

We Have a Dream…

"I have a dream" resonates as one of the most celebrated speeches of all time. In an address delivered to an audience of approximately 250,000 people in Washington, DC on August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. projected his vision of what society should be like and what an ideal version of the United States would look like following the success of the civil rights movement. The power of his speech derives, at least in part, from its brilliant synthesis of ideas about what *ought* to be the case and what is *ideal*. This highlights the fact that prophetic—or utopian—thinking provides a standard against which the current state of society is evaluated as well as a vision of how to move toward a better society.

The speech inspired millions of people to organize, to work toward social change—even

at some personal risk to themselves (e.g., Godwin, Houghton, Neck, & Mohan, 2011; Jones, 2006; Kakutani, 2013). Those who heeded the call were willing to invest the proverbial "blood, sweat, and tears" to confront institutional racism and the system of racial segregation that prevailed in 1963 and to fight for "an oasis of justice and freedom" in which individuals "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." King was also well aware of the obstacles to social change: he cautioned against acquiescence, complacency, and despair and called instead for revolutionary action in which "the whirlwinds of revolt . . . continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."

Throughout modern human history leading social change agents—including artists, writers, philosophers, and community activists—have likewise rejected despair in favor of hope and sought to cultivate the "social imagination" by making the case that a better world is both attainable and morally necessary. The phenomenon has been taken up time and again by critical social theorists who have emphasized the significance of imagining ideal societies and how we (collectively) ought to live up to those ideals (e.g., Chomsky, 1999; Mannheim, 1991; Polak, 1961). The writings of certain utopian theorists—such as Levitas (1990/2011) and Sargent (1994)—is especially germane. These authors define utopianism very broadly, characterizing it as "the desire for a better way of being" and a type of "social dreaming." Such descriptions appear to fit with the usage of ordinary people—including activists—who are themselves engaged in utopian thinking.

In this article, we propose that *utopian thinking*—imagining better societies—is one of

the keys to unlocking the potential for collective action. We seek to develop a social psychological model or framework that specifies two major routes from utopian thinking to participation in social change. In particular, we identify an affective route, which is based on the experience of hope, and a cognitive-motivational route, which is based upon abstract thinking (or high-level construal). Both help to explain how and why utopian thinking can lead people to work together to improve society (see Figure 1 for a schematic illustration of the model). For participation in social change to occur, however, people must also overcome what psychologists refer to as *system justification*—the conscious and non-conscious tendency to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of the status quo.

Figure 1. Proposed Theoretical Model Linking Utopian Thinking to Collective Action

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Overcoming System Justification Tendencies

Over a quarter of a century, researchers of system justification theory have plumbed the notion that people are motivated—to varying degrees, depending upon situational and dispositional factors—to defend, bolster, and justify the social systems on which they depend, even if those systems leave them at a disadvantage compared to other individuals and groups in society (Jost, 2019). In part to assuage epistemic, existential, and relational needs to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord, people gravitate toward political and religious belief systems that legitimize the societal status quo (Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012; Jost, Langer, et al., 2017). The theory therefore helps to explain social phenomena such as resistance to social change (Jost, 2015) and lack of support for system-challenging collective action (Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017).

Researchers around the world have documented connections between the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs and ideologies, on one hand, and resistance to pro-environmental initiatives designed to address the problem of climate change, on the other (e.g., Jost, 2015; Leviston & Walker, 2014; Vaino, Mäkiniemi, & Paloniemi, 2014). System justification is also associated with support for conservative and authoritarian political leaders and parties and opposition to progressive, system-challenging leaders and parties in such varied contexts as the U.S., Argentina, Lebanon, and New Zealand (Badaan et al., 2018). Thus, system justification

tendencies appear to contribute to the maintenance of the status quo and to block or delay prospects for social change.[1]

Jost, Becker, Osborne, and Badaan (2017) proposed an integrative theoretical model that combines insights from system justification theory and the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). This integrative model (see Figure 2) is designed to predict—on the basis of ideological as well as identity-based processes—participation in two distinct types of collective action, namely, system-challenging vs. system-supporting protest on behalf of low-status and high-status groups, respectively. Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, and Sibley (2019) provided empirical support for this model in New Zealand and the U.S. In both contexts, individual differences in system justification were negatively associated with system-challenging collective action and positively associated with system-supporting collective action for members of low and high status groups alike—and these associations were mediated by group-based injustice, group-based anger, and system-based anger.

Figure 2. Schematic Illustration of a Model of System-Challenging and System-Supporting Protest that Integrates Social Identification and System Justification Perspectives

[1] Critics of system justification theory sometimes claim that any occurrence of social change is incompatible with the tenets of the theory, but this is based on the faulty assumption that resisting change is tantamount to preventing it completely (Jost, 2015). In any case, it is important to keep in mind that system justification theory specifies three key motives, not just one (Jost & Banaji, 1994). That is, in addition to defending and justifying the social systems on which they depend, people are motivated to defend and justify their own interests and esteem as well as the interests and esteem of the extended self or in-group. To the extent that ego and group justification motives outweigh system justification, members of disadvantaged groups are likely to support group-based efforts to promote social change.

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

Note: HS = high-status (or advantaged) group members; LS = low-status (or disadvantaged) group members. *Source*: Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan (2017)

These studies suggest that individual differences in system justification (as well as in-group identification) are pertinent to understanding whether or not people will participate in protests aimed at opposing (or maintaining) the societal status quo. In addition, there are important situational differences in the strength of system justification motivation that have been identified through experimental research (e.g., Friesen, Laurin, Shepherd, Gaucher, & Kay, 2019). For instance, exposure to system criticism or threat appears to exacerbate system-justifying tendencies, as do feelings of powerlessness and dependence on the social system (Jost, 2019). In one experiment, participants were asked to read (and memorize) the details of a speech that (a) criticized the economic system in the U.S., (b) used the same language to criticize a hypothetical economic system in *Star Trek*, or (c) criticized the discipline of geology (Liviatan & Jost, 2014). Participants then completed a lexical decision task involving words such as *fair*, *just*, and *stable* as well as neutral (control) words. Results revealed that participants exposed to criticism of the U.S. economic system were significantly faster than participants assigned to the other conditions to recognize words pertaining to legitimacy and stability, suggesting a defensive response on behalf of the economic system.

There has been less research to date on situational factors that *reduce* system justification motivation, but some studies suggest that affirming the goodness or legitimacy of the social

system may preemptively satisfy the system justification goal, thereby weakening its impact on subsequent judgments (e.g., Brescoll, Uhlmann, & Newman, 2013; Kay & Zanna, 2009; Liviatan & Jost, 2014). This is an intriguing possibility, but because system affirmation processes explicitly proclaim the desirability of the social system, they are unlikely to motivate efforts to improve upon the status quo. Given that system justification consistently undermines support for collective action aimed at changing existing social structures, institutions, and arrangements (Jost, Becker, et al., 2017), it is important to identify means of attenuating system justification motivation that will also encourage rather than discourage support for positive social change. A promising candidate emerges from recent work in which utopian thinking was found to reduce system justification and motivate societal engagement.

Utopian Thinking and Support for Social Change

Fernando, Burden, Ferguson, O'Brien, Judge, and Kashima (2018) explored the effects of utopian thinking on cognitive-motivational processes. According to social theorists, utopian thinking can motivate criticism of the current society (criticism) and support for changing it (change), but it also may lead people to engage in a form of escapism—replacing despair with an impossible, but blissful dream, thereby compensating for the dismal reality of the status quo (compensation; e.g., see Levitas, 1990/2011). Consistent with this general formulation, Fernando et al. observed that utopianism—that is, engaging in, and having a positive attitude toward utopian thinking—was positively associated with all three tendencies, namely criticism, change, and compensation. In addition, they demonstrated that priming utopian thinking decreased

system justification tendencies and increased intentions to participate in social change.

In the remainder of this article we seek to develop a social psychological framework for the study of utopian thinking and support for collective action aimed at promoting social change that builds on critical social theory (e.g., see Hertzler, 1923; Lacan, 1977; Levitas, 1990/2011; Thompson, 1984; West, 1988; Wright, 2010). Specifically, we propose that expanding the *social imagination*—defined as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor, 2003, p. 23)—by means of utopian thinking is one highly promising way of reducing system justification motivation and therefore overcoming a stubborn psychological obstacle to social change. We focus on two possible routes to the attainment of social change through utopian thinking, namely an *affective* route, which emphasizes hope as an essential ingredient of participation in collective action, and a *cognitive-motivational* route, according to which mental abstraction is used to close the psychological distance between ideal states of society in the future and the status quo of "here and now."

The overarching idea is that imagining a possible future that is better and more just than the present—as in the type of "prophetic vision" exhibited by Martin Luther King Jr. (West, 1988)—helps to attenuate the (often non-conscious) tendency to engage in system justification, that is, the motivation to defend, bolster, and justify hierarchical social systems and to inspire efforts to improve society. In the sections that follow, we develop the theoretical rationale

underlying our proposed model (see Figure 1), while drawing on contributions from philosophy and social theory[2] to illustrate the functions of utopian thinking and its role in promoting the social imagination.

A Social Psychological Framework for Studying the Effects of Utopian Thinking

In *The History of Utopian Thought*, Joyce Hertzler (1923) noted that: "the exotic character of . . . utopianistic projects stirred the imagination of men, and we know that imagination is prerequisite to social reform" (p. 269). For centuries, utopian projects have loosened the grips of the past on individual consciousness, providing some means of mental freedom and encouraging the search for a better society—one that transcends the "limits of the actual" and cultivates a spirit of social experimentation (Hertzler, 1923, p. 269). The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines utopia as "a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions" ("Utopia," 2019).

Utopian thinking activates, catalyzes, and reshapes the social imagination, defined as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor, 2003, p. 23). It addresses what *ought* to be rather than what *is* (Webb, 2013, p. 156). Ruth Levitas (2013), for instance, regards utopianism as "the expression of the desire for a better way of being or living" (p. 42) and rejects

[2] Scholars working in this area founded the Society for Utopian Studies in 1975, and the organization publishes its own peer-reviewed academic journal, *Utopian Studies*, which publishes multidisciplinary work on the topic.

caricatures suggesting that it necessarily reflects wishful thinking, mere fantasy, or totalitarian impulses. More generally, utopian theorists have argued that utopian thinking represents much more than a form of escapism (e.g., Levitas, 1990/2011; Sargent, 1994). It involves a process that *ordinary people*—not just artists, writers, or political activists—engage in when they envision a better society (Levitas, 1990/2011). The emotional currency in which utopian thinking trades, then, is that of hope—and the overcoming of despair—in the face of injustice (Box, 2011, 2012; Marcuse, 1964).

The Affective Route

The concept of social hope is fundamental to many versions of critical social theory and to utopian philosophizing in particular (e.g., Bloch, 1986; Browne, 2005; Levitas, 2004; Morgan, 2016; Rorty, 1999). As in Gramsci's notion of "optimism of the will," collective experiences of hope are thought to link subjective and objective processes of reality construction, ideology and praxis:

> The hope I am concerned with is not merely an attitude, or a mood, or a feeling—all of which emphasize its subjective side. It is, rather, a unique combination of the subjective and the objective. Rooted in human needs and longings, it attempts to change the world. In hoping, we are pointing to an objective future that we wish to see happen, and anticipating that a certain state of affairs may come about (Aronson, 2015, p. 10)

Social hope—that is, hope that the individual holds out not only for the future of his or her own

social group but for society at large—should not be understood as naïve or decontextualized. It is deeply rooted in a state of disenchantment with the societal status quo and with prevailing social and economic approaches that are short-sighted (Browne, 2005). According to Teruelle (2012), hope is an essential ingredient to any effort to bring about meaningful social change; he blames apathy and a lack of imagination for the historical decline of social imagination and utopian thinking in society.[3]

In a very different sense, the concept of hope holds a great deal of promise for the social psychological study of collective action. This is because hope is considered to be an approach-oriented emotion that promotes the taking of action, rather than an avoidance-oriented emotion (like fear or guilt) that inhibits it (e.g., Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). Most existing research on collective action, which has taken SIMCA as its starting point, has focused on a rather different approach-oriented emotion, namely group-based anger, which is indeed linked to the experience of relative deprivation and willingness to protest on behalf of the in-group (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013; van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). Theory and research on system justification theory has likewise emphasized the role of system-based anger in increasing support for protest against the status quo (Jost et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2018).

Although it is clear that anger at injustice plays a key role in support for many protest

[3] Morgan (2016) provides a very useful discussion of the ethical responsibilities of academic scholars to foster social hope and contribute to envisioning a better shared future.

movements, there are at least two major advantages of focusing on a positive emotion like hope. First, hope is a constructive emotion that may enable people to break out of destructive, self-perpetuating cycles that characterize many intergroup conflicts. According to research involving people who are involved in seemingly intractable conflicts, hope is associated with decreased dehumanization of (Halperin, Bar-Tal, Nets-Zehngut, & Almog, 2008)—and increased support for humanitarian aid provided to (Halperin & Gross, 2011)—out-group members, and it is also associated with reduced desire for retaliation (Moeschberger, Dixon, Niens, & Cairns, 2005) and increased desire for reconciliation (Cohen-Chen, van Kleef, Crisp, & Halperin, 2019; Rosler, Cohen-Chen, & Halperin, 2015). Importantly, experimental studies have demonstrated that exposure to information about the out-group's judgments can facilitate intergroup openness, at least to the extent that it increases hope (Leshem, Klar, & Flores, 2016; Saguy & Halperin, 2014).

Second, hope is a future-oriented emotion, although it is experienced in the "here and now" (Snyder, 2002). It is "a positive emotion that arises due to a cognitive process involving thought regarding a desired outcome in the future" (Cohen-Chen, Crisp, & Halperin, 2017, p. 209).[4] Thus, it contains within it the critical assessment that the status quo should be changed as well as the optimistic assumption that it is possible to change the status quo (Baumgartner, Pieters, & Bagozzi, 2008). This means that hope is likely to be associated not only with system

[4] For a comprehensive review of the emotion of hope from the perspective of appraisal theory, focusing on the context of intergroup conflict, interested readers are referred to Cohen-Chen, Crisp, and Halperin (2017).

dissatisfaction but also with another antecedent of support for collective action, namely perceived group efficacy (see Figure 2). Hope may also function as a *moderator* of the relationship between efficacy and collective action, such that the link between efficacy and collective action holds only when levels of hope are sufficiently high (Cohen-Chen & van Zomeren, 2018). To the extent that members of disadvantaged groups are able to overcome a sense of *collective hopelessness*—defined as "negative expectations about the capacity of [the] ingroup and its future" (p. 106)—they are more likely to support collective action aimed at improving the present situation (Aubin, Amiot, & Fontaine-Boyte, 2016).

Greenaway et al. (2016) demonstrated that feelings of hope—as measured and experimentally induced—were associated with increased support for social change, even after adjusting for other emotions (such as anger, fear, sadness, and happiness) that are correlated with collective action intentions. Table 1 below summarizes key findings from this research program. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, Harré, Madden, Brooks, and Goodman (2017) found that exposing participants to "word clouds" of "infinite" values—those that were considered inherently and intrinsically valuable—elicited a sense of collective hope, which is presumably integral to the success of social movements. Building upon the findings from these research programs, we hypothesize that hope would not only increase support for social change through the perception of group efficacy, as Greenaway and colleagues showed, but that it would also attenuate system justification motivation.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

There may be several reasons to conjecture that utopian thinking would reduce system justification motivation, as in the research program by Fernando et al. (2018), through the activation of collective hope. Chief among these reasons is that people are less likely to defend and rationalize outcomes and arrangements that are perceived as changeable (vs. unchangeable; see Kay et al., 2002; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Laurin et al., 2013). The important points here are that (a) hope—unlike despair—encourages people to regard the status quo as evitable rather than inevitable, and (b) the perception of society as changeable should foster hope—rather than despair—when it comes to thinking about the future. Thus, we propose that cognitive and affective processes are mutually reinforcing and both have motivational consequences. To the extent that utopian thinking brings cognitive alternatives to mind, it should make the current state of society seem more changeable, and it should also elicit hope for a better future, and both of these should encourage people to participate in collective action aimed at improving society.

The Cognitive-Motivational Route

We turn now to a consideration of the cognitive-motivational route from utopian thinking to increased support for social change, focusing on the ways in which mental abstraction helps to bridge the psychological distance between the status quo in the here and now, and a better possible future. According to Levitas (2013), an essential aspect of utopian thinking is that it helps people to conjure cognitive alternatives—counterfactuals in which society is better and fairer than it presently is—thereby activating the creativity of the social imagination. The fruits of utopian thinking can help to inform and, indeed, reform institutional practices in a more just

and/or egalitarian direction and to provide general blueprints—or at least a broad vision—of how to effect structural change and social progress.

Thus, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech succeeds by connecting abstract principles and concrete images. He invokes a utopian image of racial equality, but he does so by calling to mind the specific description of his own four children and then "little black boys and little girls" in Alabama and then the whole country and eventually the high moral plane of "Let freedom ring," culminating with a reference to the old spiritual song, "Free at last, Free at last, Great God a-mighty, We are free at last." King's vision is a transformative one, we submit, by virtue of the fact that it traverses the distance from the "here and now" to a world in which we are all living according to our ideals.

Utopian theorists differ in the extent to which they believe that ideal societies that are perceived to be relatively close in terms of temporal and other dimensions—that is, not so different from existing societies—should be considered "utopias." Theorists also differ when it comes to equating utopian thinking with radical (or transformative) visions, which tend to be more abstract, as opposed to more pragmatic conceptions, which tend to be more concrete (Levitas, 2008). When people are asked to engage in utopian thinking, they are likely to generate a fairly wide range of possible worlds that vary in (a) their temporal proximity to the current social order (with some existing in the past) and (b) the degree to which they would be classified as radical and/or pragmatic.

On the basis of construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003), we would hypothesize

that insofar as people think about more (vs. less) abstract images of society that are distant (vs. close) in time and/or geographical space and more (vs. less) radically different from the present, they are more likely to engage the psychological mechanism of self-transcendence. A core assumption of the theory is that the closer an "object" is—that is, an event, person, group, goal, or in the present case, an imagined state of society— the more concretely we mentally construe it; the further away it is, whether temporally, spatially, socially, or psychologically, the more abstractly we tend to construe it (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Abstract representations of distant objects constitute high-level construals, and they are essential to planning, understanding, and integrating others' perspectives into one's own, as well as considering alternative possibilities and hypothetical outcomes (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wening, Keith, & Abele, 2016).

According to a large body of research, people are more motivated to pursue goals that are perceived to be psychologically close. But what about goals that are further away, psychologically speaking? Mental abstraction can be a useful tool for bridging psychological distance, bringing distant goals closer to one's mind, and activating goal pursuit in individuals. According to Liberman and Trope (2014), "traversing all distances involves the use of abstraction" (p. 364). Meta-analytic reviews confirm that there is indeed a robust association between psychological distance and abstraction and that abstraction facilitates goal pursuit in situations that involve psychological distance (Soderberg, Callahan, Kochersberger, Amit, & Ledgerwood, 2015).Thus, high-level cognitive processes make the distant future more cognitively accessible and therefore less "out of reach," motivationally speaking. Distant goals

begin to seem more achievable.

High-level construal also promotes self-control (Carnevale, Fujita, Han, & Amit, 2015; Fujita & Carnevale, 2012; MacGregor et al., 2017), a more realistic assessment of one's abilities (Yan, Hou, & Unger, 2014), and a stronger sense that one's goals are meaningful and self-concordant (Davis, Kelley, Kim, Tang, & Hicks, 2016). In the context of bargaining and negotiation, which may be relevant to the implementation of social change, adopting an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset tends to increase information sharing and the likelihood of obtaining an integrative (win-win) solution (Wening et al., 2016). In a separate line of research, political conservatives who were prompted to think in more abstract terms subsequently expressed more concerns about fairness as well as less prejudice and more outgroup tolerance with respect to stigmatized, non-normative groups such as gay men, lesbians, Muslims, and atheists (Napier & Dovidio, 2012). Adopting a high- (vs. low-) level construal also elicits moral decision-making (Agerstrom & Bjorklund, 2013) and prosocial behavior (Vivien & Singh, 2013).

There is, however, one important caveat, which is that abstract thinking may also promote social stereotyping. In five studies, Napier, Luguri, Dovidio, and Oltman (2018) found that individuals who adopted an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset were more likely to make genetic, essentialist attributions for individual and racial group differences, and these attributions were associated with anti-Black bias. Thus, any attempts to harness the benefits of abstract mindsets in the context of utopian thinking and support for social change would do well to focus on the overarching social system (or society at large) rather than the specific groups that

comprise the social system.

Ideology and the *contents* of utopian thinking. An important caveat to keep in mind is that the *contents* of utopian visions may vary considerably as a function of political orientation, consistent with the theory of ideology as motivated social cognition (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). A study of social media discourse concerning "the good society," for instance, revealed that liberal and conservative Twitter users exhibited ideological convergence and divergence with respect to utopian (and dystopian) images of the social system. In particular, Sterling, Jost, and Hardin (2019) used machine-learning methods to analyze the contents of over 3.8 million messages sent by over 1 million English-speaking Twitter users containing keywords such as: (a) *society, world,* and/or *system,* (b) *good, great, wonderful, ideal, evil, bad, terrible, awful, horrible, fair, unfair, better, worse, best, worst, just,* and *unjust,* and (c) *utopia[n]* or *dystopia[n]*.

Consistent with previous research based on self-report measures, liberals were more likely to raise themes of social justice, global inequality, women's rights, racism, criminal justice, healthcare, poverty, progress, social change, personal growth, and environmental sustainability, whereas conservatives were more likely to mention religion, social order, business, capitalism, national symbols, immigration, and terrorism. Importantly, however, there were also a number of areas of convergence: liberals, moderates, and conservatives were equally likely to prioritize family, community, economic prosperity, and the pursuit of health, happiness, and freedom. All in all, it seems likely that the contents of utopian visions would differ

considerably as a function of political orientation, but at the same time there will be consensually shared interests that should prove useful when it comes to identifying counterfactual possibilities and negotiating social change.

Recent work suggests that the specific contents of utopian visions affect the motivation to participate in social change. Fernando, O'Brien, Burden, Judge and Kashima (2019) asked participants to imagine and write about one of two utopian visions: a "Green" (pro-environmental) utopia and a "Sci-Fi" (futuristic, technological) utopia. Results revealed that imagining the Green utopia—providing that it was positively evaluated by the individual—elicited greater motivation for social change, and this was mediated by stronger perceptions of participative efficacy, namely the sense that ordinary people can make a difference when it comes to achieving the utopian vision. The Sci-Fi utopia, on the other hand, elicited relatively low levels of motivation, suggesting that not all utopian visions may encourage social change orientations.[5] The Green utopia was also associated with positive emotions such as warmth, which may be related to its motivational capacity.

An Integrative Model for Future Research: A Summary

Utopian thinking is, among other things, a psychological tool that draws a sharp contrast between current social conditions and some alternative ideal society that, for the time-being, exists only in theory (e.g., Box, 2012; Harmon & Mayer, 1986). By activating the social

[5] It is also possible that imagining the Sci-Fi utopia would have increased the motivation for other types of social change—such as consumption behaviors or voting decisions—that were not measured in the study by Fernando et al. (2019).

imagination, utopian thinking inspires hope and enables individuals and groups to mentally represent images of society that transcend the "here-and-now." Although some would object that such images are bound to be unrealistic, there is a power that comes from mental abstraction; as MacGregor et al. (2017) put it, "high-level construal affords the ability to think about remote content" (p. 608; see also Soderberg et al., 2015). As noted above, high-level construal also sustains motivation and promotes goal-directed behavior, which might well include collective action designed to improve upon the present situation.

To the extent that mental abstraction produces a sharp contrast between the status quo and utopian images of society, we would hypothesize that it would also diminish the tendency to defend, bolster, and justify the existing social system (see also by Fernando et al., 2018). Thus, utopian thinking is likely to reduce system justification motivation not only through the affective route—consistent with work by Greenaway et al. (2018)—but also through the cognitive-motivational route. These pathways are illustrated schematically in Figure 1.

Putting the foregoing together, the major propositions of the integrative theoretical model are as follows:

(1) Certain forms of utopian thinking will increase intentions to participate in collective action aimed at social change, and this process is likely to be mediated by several psychological variables, as shown in Figure 1. (There may be other direct and indirect effects that are not presently included in the model).

(2) Utopian thinking is expected to produce both affective and cognitive-motivational

consequences, including the following:

a) Increasing *hope*, which is a future-oriented, action-related emotion with cognitive and motivational aspects;

b) Inducing an *abstract* mindset, which is characterized by processes of high-level cognitive construal that reduce the psychological distance between the status quo and counterfactual alternatives to the status quo; an abstract mindset is also likely to promote action aimed at achieving prosocial goals.

(2) The experience of hope is expected to promote the consideration of cognitive alternatives and collective action intentions to improve upon the status quo; and, conversely, the consideration of cognitive alternatives is expected to facilitate the experience of hope.

(3) An abstract mindset will promote collective action intentions aimed at improving upon the status quo.

(4) The associations among hope, mental abstraction, and collective action will be mediated by system justification motivation, such that:

a) By increasing the cognitive accessibility of alternatives to the status quo, utopian thinking is expected to reduce system justification (see also Tajfel, 1978)—and this will be mediated by increases in the experience of hope and mental abstraction, both of which will strengthen collective action intentions.

b) A reduction in system justification motivation—regardless of group status and independent of the effects of group identification—will strengthen intentions to

engage in collective action aimed at improving upon the status quo.

It would be useful to build on previous work by developing experimental manipulations of utopian thinking. Laboratory interventions might include inviting individuals to freely consider what an ideal society would look like (Fernando et al., 2018) and/or having them read (or watch) depictions of utopian societies in which human beings appear to flourish (Fernando et al., 2019). Another possibility would be to present people with factual information about contemporary societies that come closer than their own to ideals of social and economic equality, as in Scandinavia (Norton & Ariely, 2011). It would be especially useful to manipulate proposed mediators (such as hope and levels of cognitive construal), as Spencer, Zanna, and Fong (2005) have recommended. Psychological approaches to promoting social change through utopian thinking hold great potential in the laboratory and beyond. Illuminating the specific cognitive, affective, and motivational mechanisms involved in utopian thinking is, in our estimation, very likely to produce valuable practical knowledge when it comes to organizing for social change.

Concluding Remarks

Although great strides have been made in the reduction of extreme poverty around the world, economic inequality has been on the rise globally for decades. At this point, the richest 1% owns 45% of the world's wealth. Between 1980 and 2016, they experienced twice as much income growth as the bottom half of the global population (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2018; Credit Suisse, 2019). The United States, where income inequality has been high

and rising for forty years (Saez, 2016), is the most "top-heavy" of developed countries (Balestra & Tonkin, 2018). The top 1% take home the lion's share of income in the U.S.—a disproportionate share even compared to the top 20% (Congressional Budget Office, 2016).

The racial divide in economic inequality is staggering as well: the Forbes 400 richest Americans are wealthier than 16 million Black and 15 million Latinx households (Collins & Hoxie, 2015). Of course, there are also other many other social problems pertaining to health, education, sexism, classism, and anthropogenic climate change, among other things. According to many observers, we are living in fairly dystopian times—circumstances that are crying out for the imaginative capacity to envision and work toward better societies (Webb, 2015).

According to the 2017 results of a Gallup Poll, less than one in three respondents is satisfied with "the way things are going" in the U.S., and one in five respondents is highly dissatisfied with government and political leadership (Swift, 2017). Another survey conducted in 2018 found that only 25% of U.S. adults were satisfied with the status quo, compared to 58% who were dissatisfied (Summers, 2018). Furthermore, there have been "severe storms and catastrophic flooding" as well as "record-breaking droughts and deadly wildfires" that are adversely affecting the lives of millions (Burrows, 2017). Dissatisfaction about the way things are, and even cynicism, creates a possible opening for utopian thinking.

Thus, it may be no coincidence that progressive politicians in the U.S. are starting to embrace utopian rhetoric. For instance, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, the youngest member in the history of the U.S. congress, released a video about a social-democratic utopia

that features a “Green New Deal” and images of a bright future for the planet and all of its inhabitants (Klein, 2019). Utopian thinking, as Martin Luther King Jr. knew all too well, helps people to rise above despair and work toward an alternative vision of a better future. Could it be that we are approaching a once-in-a-generation opportunity to envision and enact public policies that are grander and more hopeful than what we have come to expect?

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Figure Legends:

Figure 1. Proposed Theoretical Model Linking Utopian Thinking to Collective Action

Figure 2. Schematic Illustration of a Model of System-Challenging and System-Supporting Protest that Integrates Social Identification and System Justification Perspectives

Note: HS = high-status (or advantaged) group members; LS = low-status (or disadvantaged) group members. *Source*: Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan (2017)

Table 1. Summary of Findings from Greenway et al. (2016)

	N	**Type**	**Key Findings**
Study 1	274	Correlational	Hope was associated with increased support for social change among advantaged and disadvantaged group members, both in the U.S. and the Netherlands. For advantaged group members, the relationship between hope and support for social change was mediated by perceived group efficacy.
Study 2	165	Correlational	Hope predicted collective action above and beyond emotions typically implicated in collective action (e.g., sadness, anger, fear).
Study 3	100	Correlational	Replicated findings from studies 1 and 2 (with multi-item hope scale). Hope predicted support for social change after adjusting for positive mood.
Study 4	58	Experimental	Experimentally induced hope motivated greater support for social change, when compared to induced happiness and control conditions.

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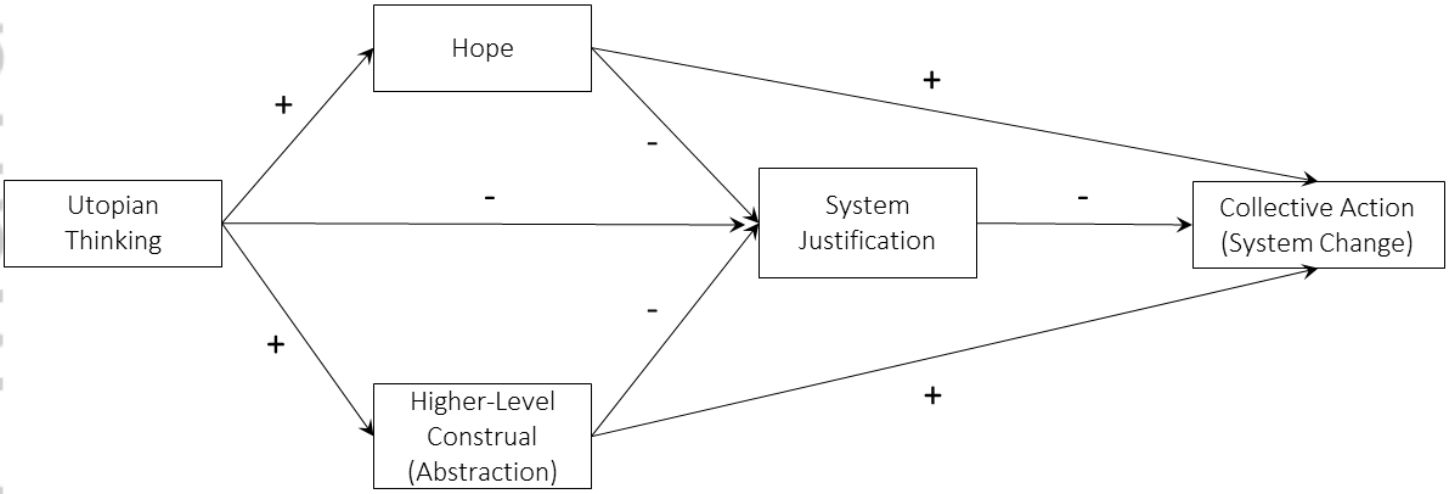
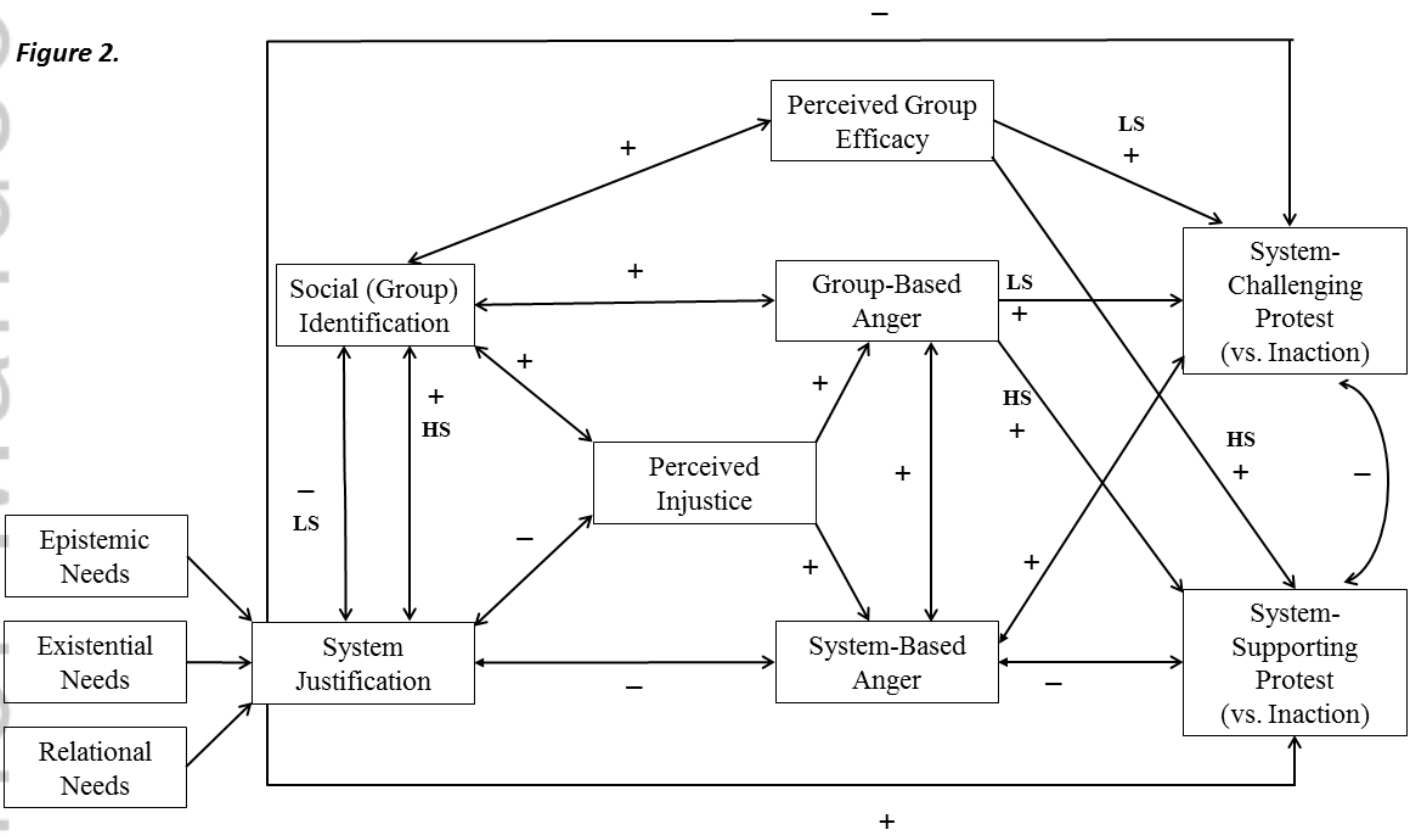


Figure 2.



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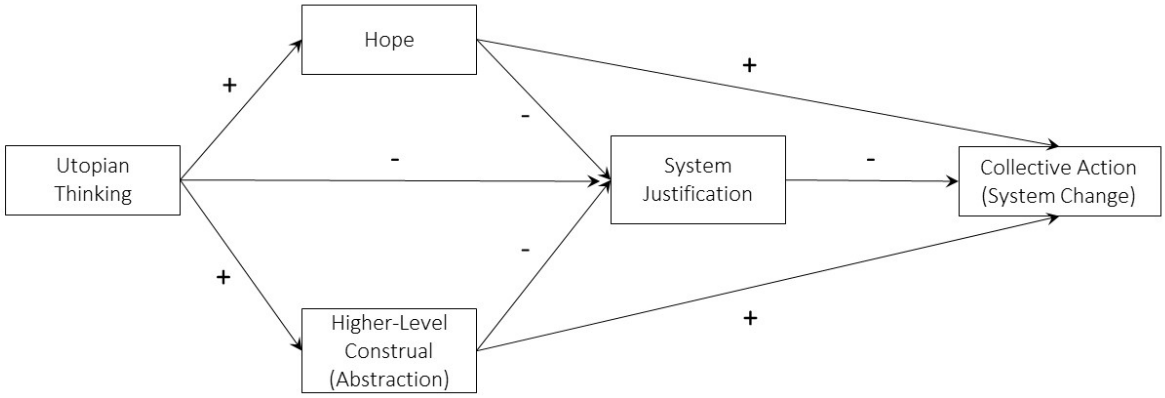

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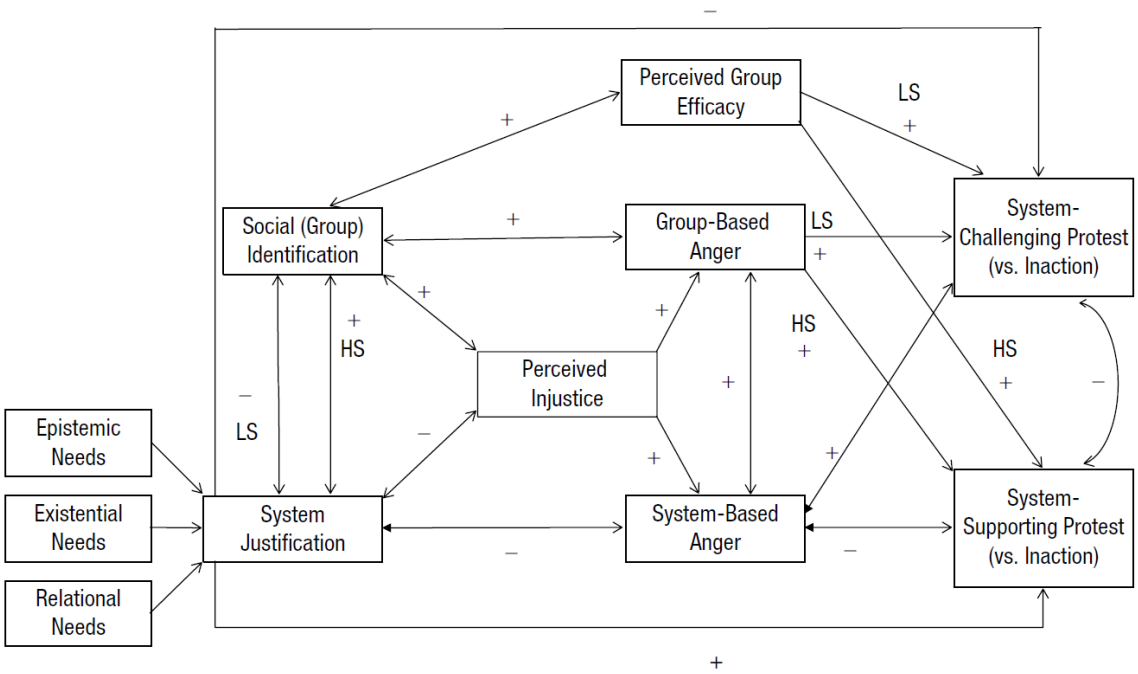

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Imagining Better Societies: A Social Psychological Framework for the Study of Utopian Thinking and Collective Action

Short Title: Utopian Thinking and Collective Action

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