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# Imagined Climate Futures and Collective Action: An Analysis of Affect in Dystopias and Utopias by Young Climate Activists

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## ABSTRACT

In recent climate mobilisations, young people have emerged as key leaders, organisers, and influencers of social change. This article examines how utopias and dystopias, embedded in affective-discursive practices, are articulated by young climate activists to support their engagement in collective action. We analysed discourse from four focus group discussions and two pair interviews with young climate activists (total participants $n=26$, ages 15–32) from groups such as School Strike for Climate in Portugal. The findings challenge much of the existing scholarship that emphasises utopias and hope as isolated experiences promoting collective action. Instead, emotionally elaborated dystopias were central in framing the present crisis and motivating engagement. From there, utopian impulses and hope emerged through solidarity and collective work, giving rise to 'real' utopias—practical visions of inclusive and negotiated future societies that embraced contingency and possibility. The article discusses how young activists intertwine imaginaries, emotions, and actions as strategic tools for world-making, highlighting their implications for theories of collective action.

> In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings (Haraway 2016, 1).

## 1 | Introduction

Research on collective action has extensively examined how future-oriented mindsets shape engagement in collective action (Badaan et al. 2020; Basso and Krpan, 2022; Daysh et al. 2024, Jost et al. 2022; Lalot et al. 2025). Utopian thinking, in particular, has been identified as a strong predictor of collective action intentions, as it enables individuals to imagine and strive for radically different and desirable future societies (Daysh et al. 2024; Jost et al. 2022; Basso and Krpan, 2022). Utopias, as transformative societal imaginaries, fundamentally differ from present realities (Thaler 2018), often reflecting emotional and mental states like hope and creativity. Research has also shown that emotions such as hope can foster political engagement when hope helps promote a sense of efficacy in achieving desirable futures (Cohen-Chen and Pliskin 2024; Geiger et al. 2023).

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However, the latest wave of youth climate activism—particularly the student climate strikes that began in 2019—has increasingly turned to dystopian imaginaries (Clot-Garrell 2023). These imaginaries focus on scenarios of climate collapse rather than hopeful visions of a better future (Friberg 2022; De Moor 2022). Emerging scholarship highlights the role of negative future scenarios and their associated emotional states—such as despair and helplessness—in driving mobilisation (Daysh et al. 2024; Kleres and Wettergren 2017). Young people are acutely aware of contemporary societal crises (Friberg 2022), recognising that they are being deprived of a liveable future and excluded from critical climate policy decision-making processes (Bowman 2020). Their claims emphasise their disproportionate suffering from the consequences of climate change and their inability to imagine better futures in the face of such a bleak present.

Rather than serving as preconditions for action, positive future imaginaries and their associated hopeful emotions emerge within youth climate activism throughout the process of participating in collective mobilisation and participation (Bowman 2020; Bowman and Pickard 2021; Clot-Garrell 2023). Youth activists employ negative future scenarios to politicise the present, challenging existing decision-making structures and articulating urgent demands for change (Kenis 2023). This article thus seeks to address a critical gap by exploring how activists complexly interweave and discursively manage dystopias, utopias, and emotional states like hope and despair.

Existing research often overlooks how dystopian and utopian imaginaries operate as meaning-making mechanisms that both arise from and influence emotional experiences, fulfilling social functions. Rather than treating these imaginaries and their associated emotions as isolated psychological phenomena, this study adopts the framework of affective-discursive practices (Wetherell 2013; Wetherell et al. 2015). This approach accounts for the discursive and emotional complexities that shape the lived experiences of youth activists within their specific context. In doing so, this study examines how utopias and dystopias are discursively constructed, their emotional foundations, and their relationship to climate action among those already involved in climate-related collective action.

This article is structured as follows. Firstly, we provide an overview of the literature on dystopias, utopias, and collective action, examining how these imaginaries operate as mechanisms of meaning-making that are emotionally meaningful. Next, we introduce the concept of affective-discursive practices and highlight its value in integrating emotional dimensions often overlooked by traditional discursive approaches. We then outline our methodological approach, focusing on data generation through focus groups and analysis of how imaginations of the future, emotions, and action are embedded in discourse. In the findings section, we examine how youth articulate dystopian imaginaries, exploring their dual role in evoking feelings of helplessness while, paradoxically, offering pathways to hope. We also analyse how young activists attempt to construct 'real' utopias that embrace community dynamics, social justice, negotiation, and transformation—acknowledging and navigating the inherent uncertainties of these processes. Finally, we discuss the broader implications of our findings for the literature on collective action.

## 2 | Dystopias, Utopias and Affective Ways of Dealing With the Future by Activists

In her UN speech, Greta Thunberg incited panic and anger, instead of hope, as she invited her audience to engage with collective climate action. The emphasis on a catastrophe that is already underway challenged earlier activism discourse, which viewed apocalypse as a distant threat (De Moor and Marquardt 2023). This marks an important distinction between: (1) the post-apocalyptic scenario, which sees the catastrophe as already here, lurking beneath institutions, norms, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions about the world and people's relationship to it (Cross 2023; De Moor 2022), and (2) the apocalyptic scenario, which sees the catastrophe further away in time, with a weak sense as to when action needs to be pursued (Kenis 2023). During the greatly mobilised protests of 2019, youth climate activists sought to counter this weak sense of time with an awareness of how the present can influence the future. The *now* hence gained a different significance (Kenis 2023). Images of dystopia, imaginative projections of worst-case scenarios rooted in present-day flaws (Hjerpe and Linnér 2009), prevailed in their claims and discourses.

Young people preferred imaginaries of panic, despair and anger (De Moor 2022) because hope can impede meaningful engagement with serious issues—one of the scenarios in which hope can 'do harm' (Cohen-Chen and Pliskin 2024). Contradicting the traditionally hedonistic view that hope is inherently positive or beneficial (e.g., 'does good' and 'feels good'), hope for a better future may, in some cases, obscure the need for disruptive action, encouraging conformist approaches to change instead. For instance, hope has been used to justify ideals like the American Dream (Wyatt-Nichol 2011), which may perpetuate systemic problems rather than addressing them. Van Zomeren et al. (2019) have discussed hope as an emotion-focussed coping mechanism helping to reduce negative emotions, and not altering the need or urgency to act. The term 'hopium' tries to capture 'the possibility of hope to exert a pleasant yet sedating, demotivational effect' (Geiger et al. 2023, 2). A recent meta-analysis shows that even though the influence of hope as an emotional-cognitive state may only slightly increase immediate climate engagement, it depends on whether hope is connected to specific solutions and actions (Geiger et al. 2023). We argue that it is necessary to explore how hope and visions of a better future function as an extension of the very systems that are contributing to a given problem.

Hence, the role of imagined futures and emotions in collective action is less straightforward than previous research has assumed (see Cohen-Chen and Pliskin 2024). For instance, dissecting different apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios reveals key distinctions in ways of action. An apocalyptic scenario calls for mitigation measures in the short term, assuming that greenhouse gas emissions can come to a halt (De Moor and Marquardt 2023). In this sense, an apocalyptic scenario can be driven by hope, as it opens the possibility for change, and for a better (and completely) different outcome. Simultaneously, it has the potential of keeping the crisis tucked away (Cross 2023). Underpinned by neoliberalism as a cultural



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tool for meaning-making, apocalyptic scenarios can support 'plan-oriented' ideas about the future, presupposing a goal and the defining steps to achieve it (Wallace and Batel 2024).

In contrast, a post-apocalyptic scenario—where a climate catastrophe is deemed inevitable—draws attention to other consequences and forms of action. These include strategies of adaptation and of loss management, where feelings of anger and despair are deeply acknowledged, but do not necessarily hinder action (Cassegård and Thörn 2018). A present-day dystopia not only makes evident a much-needed sense of urgency but also requires an integration of the contingency of the future, a recognition that plans might fail and feelings such as fear and anger need to be dealt with (instead of suppressed) in the experience of world-making (Stanley et al. 2021). The apocalypse in the now also reveals how, in the present, 'the old and new orders collide, and opportunities for political and social transformation arise' (Cross 2023, 384). Moreover, by focussing on how positive/negative futures stimulate collective action (e.g., Lalot et al. 2025), research ignores the discursive conditions in which imaginaries craft different ways of relating to the climate struggle in the *now*. There are discursive and emotional opportunities that emerge when the catastrophe becomes present (Clot-Garrell 2023). Young people thus open the opportunity of experimenting with new relational practices in their community-building efforts (Bowman 2020; Pickard et al. 2020), facilitating the emergence for positive emotions like hope or joy (Ransan-Cooper et al. 2018).

Positive imaginations of the future, then, require a certain emotional depth, incorporating the despair and helplessness of present-day predicaments. This enables integration of the contingencies of the social world to create malleable, less structured spaces for future-making (Creasap 2021; Habersang 2022). Leaving open possibilities for future-making is an important strategy that can better equip activists to deal with plurality, conflict, and loss. When a 'perfect' utopia is imagined, it offers a path to a fixed, idealised future (Wallace and Batel 2024). However, its rigid structure can overlook the tensions and difficulties that are *always* present in the climate struggle. If despair is acknowledged, then the 'real' utopia becomes open and subject to negotiation (Thaler 2018). By embracing uncertainty and ambiguity, a 'real' utopia allows for more dynamic and realistic paths towards a better future (Creasap 2021). This openness demands acknowledging emotions that young people know all too well—primarly, the fear that a climate-sustainable future may never materialise. Their collective climate change engagements provide spaces where 'complex emotional experiences can be situated [and] articulated' (Tschakert et al. 2023, 16). This might be a way of 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway 2016): engaging with the uncertainties of the future, embracing its discomfort, and fostering deep collective and political awareness.

The dynamic nature of these imaginaries, including how they help to elaborate emotion and shape different paths to engagement and action, remains arguably underexplored in academic research, particularly within the field of social psychology of collective action. This study aims to address this gap by examining the perspectives of young people already involved in collective action (see Geiger et al. 2023). Youth-led collective action is fundamental to young people's ability to envision alternatives (Bowman and Germaine 2022) and foster a sense of empowerment (Vestergren et al. 2019). During the global climate strikes of 2019, young people acted as climate educators, demanded a seat at negotiation tables, and called for their voices to be legitimised (Malafaia 2022). In our data collection, we prioritised amplifying young people's voices and experiences to gain deeper insights into how their involvement in collective action shapes their visions for social change.

## 3 | Negotiating Political Imaginaries: Weaving Affect and Discourse

Political imaginaries constitute the backdrop of collective action and social change. They have both descriptive and prospective elements, enabling the imagination of alternative political ways of organising (Machin 2022). What distinguishes political imaginaries from concepts such as narrative and discourse is the connection to the visual and the affective (Machin 2022). By intertwining the emotional, social, and interactional experience, the concept of affective-discursive practices, developed by Wetherell (2013), and combined with critical discourse studies, offers a framework that better maps affect and discourse in the creation of political imaginaries.

Affect refers to a type of intensity in which bodies are impacted (Massumi 2002). It primarily describes embodied experiences that extend beyond human consciousness and individual emotional identification (Thrift 2004). The theory of affect discourages viewing 'the realm of "personal" feelings' as distinct from broader public agendas and desirability (Thien 2005, 450). Instead, it situates emotion within our always-interpersonal relations, offering greater promise for politically relevant scientific inquiries (Thien 2005). Most theorists consider affect to be separate from mediated signification, (Massumi 2002; Thien 2005; Thrift 2004). It is assumed that affect bypasses discourse, sensemaking, and cognition due to its pre-verbal and somatic characteristics (Wetherell et al. 2015). This is why the study of affect is often regarded as 'asocial' and 'non-representational,' which can obscure the political and social justice contexts in which people live (Glapka 2019).

In this study, we use affect and emotions almost interchangeably, following Wetherell et al. (2015), although some analytical differences are to be noted. Emotions are more easily recognised and culturally elaborated, whereas affect is more generic and less organised in the meaning-making experience, given its embodied and 'transhuman' nature (Wetherell 2015). While emotions can be considered the connective tissue shared by affect and discourse, the extent to which 'discourse and affect feature experience as separate is speculative considering the tangled, unstable constitution of the affective domain' (Glapka 2019, 602). Their interrelatedness requires an analysis that incorporates affective and emotional domains in the discussion of political imaginaries. The cracks and ambivalences in the affective-discursive practices force creative explorations of new ways of feeling, being and relating towards the future: of new political imaginaries in the making. Thus this study aims to examine the fractures and emotional tensions that emerge from future thinking, as well as how young activists negotiate these imaginaries in their own involvement in collective action.



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## 4 | Method

From a larger pool of 22 focus groups with both activists and non-activists in Portugal, this article draws specifically on focus groups and pair interviews with young climate activists only. In total, there were 26 young climate activist participants aged 15 to 32 years. The four focus groups (ranging from 4 to 7 participants) and two pair interviews (2 participants each) with young climate activists were conducted in Portuguese between December 2022 and February 2023.

We conducted focus groups with young climate activists to uncover communalities and tensions regarding beliefs, identities, and collective knowledge, which interviews alone do not fully reveal (Morgan 2019). We observed a tendency towards agreement among participants (Vicsek 2010), particularly by members who had been in the collectives for less time. This was expected, since each focus group included members of a single collective, and the discussions reflected the ideals and meanings that guided their collective struggle. Given the homogeneity of the participants (e.g., all were young activists), their familiarity with the topics, and the use of a semi-structured focus group script (see Supporting Information), four focus groups were considered sufficient for a qualitative analysis (Guest et al. 2017).

Activists were recruited through youth collectives well established in various cities in Portugal. These included the Portuguese chapters of the Student Strike for Climate in Lisbon and Porto, Climate Rebellion and End Fossil—Occupy!. Most of our participants began their involvement with the cause in 2019 through the Fridays for Future movement but soon established and expanded collectives tailored to their specific contexts. At the time of data collection, these collectives expressed deep frustration over government inaction. In response, some escalated their protests by occupying schools and universities, demanding an immediate end to fossil fuel dependency. In Portugal, these occupations received minimal media support. Their disruptive tactics were widely criticised as lacking 'diplomacy', and television coverage failed to engage with the alternative political visions that young people were advocating (Santos et al. 2024).

As recommended, all focus groups were co-facilitated by two members of the research team (Cyr 2019). The two paired interviews were initially planned as focus groups, but lacking a large enough number of participants to create a group discussion, the facilitators decided to use the same focus group script, dedicating more time to explore each topic in depth.

The focus group script (see Supporting Information) started with a photo elicitation exercise, where participants were invited to select or bring with them an image that reflected how they understood their involvement with climate change. This activity served both as an ice-breaker and a starting point for elaborating on the relevant topics (Walstra 2020). The script then progressed with questions about youth agency and political involvement with climate change (e.g., 'How would you describe your involvement with the climate issue?). The final section focused on future political imaginaries and the role of young people in building alternative futures (e.g. "What does the ideal climate future look like?"').

The study received approval from the ethical committee of one of the universities involved in the project (Iscte-iul—decision 122/2022). Prior to beginning the discussion, we established ground rules, such as speaking one at a time and respecting all opinions equally. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. We were mindful of power dynamics arising in the group (Ayrton 2019) and tried to minimise these by encouraging all participants to intervene. Each participant aged 18 or older signed an informed consent form. Participants under 18 expressed their acceptance to participate via verbal consent, and their parents provided written informed consent. To protect data privacy, participants' names and other personal information were replaced with pseudonyms assigned by the research team. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by team members.

We conducted the analysis of the Portuguese full transcriptions and translated only illustrative extracts during the writing stage of this article. The first author provided an initial translation proposal, which the co-authors refined to ensure alignment with the original meaning.

### 4.1 | Data Analysis

We combined analytical strategies from critical discourse studies (Fairclough 1992, 2003) with the concept of affective-discursive practices derived from discursive and rhetorical psychology (Wetherell 2013; Billig et al. 1988). Both traditions share a common understanding of discursive practices, wherein language users act as both products and producers of discourse, reproducing and transforming ideas (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). This combination is fruitful as it highlights discursive functions at two levels.

Firstly, critical discourse studies' main interest is in the analysis of societal power dynamics (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). One of the main questions of interest is the relationship between the text, that is, the uses of language, and its social, political, and economic context. The focus is on social permanence and social *change*, on how counter-rationalities are forcing their way into the public debate or being barred access (Carvalho 2020). Secondly, the analysis of affective-discursive practices extensively explores how affect and these societal discourses are strategically used in interaction through everyday language use. The available discourses are flexibly used to create and negotiate representations of the world (Billig et al. 1988).

Our analytical strategy consisted of the following steps, inspired by Carvalho (2020), Creasap (2021), Gibson (2011) and Wetherell et al. (2015). Firstly, after extensively familiarising ourselves with the data, we identified utterances where dystopian and utopian imaginaries emerged, including descriptions of emotions such as frustration, despair, or hope. Given the 'non-representational' characteristic of affect, we contend that it is not necessary for emotions to be explicitly cited. Affective dispositions are inevitably present within descriptions of different imaginaries. Secondly, by looking at the interactional aspects of the focus group, we analyse the affective-discursive practices of those utterances. Particularly, we looked at the rhetorical



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strategies that connect utopias and dystopias scenarios with the trajectories of participants (i.e., the types of imaginations and actions by participants) and their emotional/affective experiences. Thirdly, we explored the quality of the dystopias and utopias presented. We evaluated whether these thick descriptions of the future were fixed discursive entities or whether they were malleable, and open to (collective) negotiation, making use of the language of contingency and possibility (e.g., I/We 'hope', 'want', 'wish', Creasap 2021). Following Wetherell et al. (2015, 58) we considered how 'affective-discursive practices construct relations of proximity and distance, affiliation and detachment, and inclusion and exclusion'. We also examined whether the described scenarios were prone to inclusive imaginaries supportive of social justice. Fixed imaginaries that are distant from lived ones often stem from the margins of conventional/hegemonic thinking while imaginaries of contingency and possibility can emerge from cracks within established frameworks, in connection with discourses of the present (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). These attempts at negotiation and openness create tentative spaces for thinking between the categories and fixed meanings. We view this capacity for malleability and negotiation as the result of cracks in the hegemony of climate action, stimulating what Haraway (2016) refers to as 'response-abilities'.

## 5 | Analysis

In the first part of the analysis, we discuss data extracts in which dystopian scenarios were discussed in detail, either as they are imagined in the present or projected into the future. These descriptions highlighted the dilemmatic aspects of dystopias, which carry both mobilising and demobilising potential, underpinned by diverse emotions. In the second part of the analysis, we show how dystopias make possible world-making experiences that are kept open to allow for the possibility of inclusion of diversity in the creation of political imaginaries for the future.

### 5.1 | Dystopian Dilemmas: The Interconnectedness of Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Imaginaries

As noted in other studies of young climate activism and future imaginaries, the activists in this study mobilised post-apocalyptic discourses to justify their engagement with collective action (Friberg 2022; Clot-Garrell 2023; De Moor 2022; De Moor et al. 2021). Their descriptions tended to be bleak and pessimistic, sharply contrasting with hopeful depictions of the future. The persistent inaction of governments towards radical change has demoted young people from imagining a better future to come. However, while their emotional state was often one of anger, it was not one of defeat. Leonardo offers such a dystopian description, yet retains an impetus to fight:

***Leonardo:*** (...) I see here a world already completely destroyed with people wearing masks because they can't breathe and are still fighting, not because they believe that the fight will change anything, but because they believe that the fight will prevent the world from changing us. And well... without wanting to be too defeatist, I think we're going to die standing, hmm... but if I could choose any image to describe climate change, it would be a car going the wrong way against a wall and accelerating.

***Facilitator:*** Is that the image you say would represent your...

***Leonardo*****:** Yes, the way I see things happening, there is an obvious and clear path, it's easy to know what needs to be done, although there are many ways to do it, but it's easy to distinguish what is advantageous and what is not. I think the focus must be on social justice and from there everything else, everything they said would apply... but it's all connected to this concept of social justice. And it's easy to distinguish which way we should go, but we're going in the opposite direction, and the car helps illustrate the thing, but also because there are no trains here (laughs).

***Facilitator*****:** So, Leonardo says that, despite having a negative perspective on this issue, we also have, at the same time, a posture of resistance.

***Leonardo*****:** Yes, and that's how I still think it's possible, I don't think it's possible to reverse, but I still think it's possible to mitigate a lot of things... I believe that in the scientific sense of the matter. In the political sense, I don't believe in it because I don't think there will be change in that sense and... well. But that's my optimism speaking!

(Focus group 1-Climate Rebellion)

The brutal metaphor of a car crashing against a wall animates the sense of imminent tragedy in which young climate activists are living. Such metaphors and symbols illustrate how affect dispositions are ingrained and exteriorized (Ransan-Cooper et al. 2018). The metaphor signals the speed at which the whole population is moving towards an announced catastrophe. For young people, collective climate action serves as a way to 'die standing'. Activism, in such a scenario, works to keep defying current ways of functioning, and to keep beliefs of social justice alive. Leonardo begins with a pessimist view, reiterating later, 'I don't think it's possible to reverse'. His language is of deep certainty: it is the way he sees the future unfolding. For him, there is an 'obvious' route that decision-makers are choosing not to follow. This route, he argues, needs to be supported by social justice as a core value and a guiding principle for decision-making. Leonardo insists on the image of the car to explain how the temporal landscape is configured and its emotional charge. He ends with an attempt at comic relief, justifying the image of a car because trains are not available in the region. This is a reference to a severe shortage of train investment in Portugal, a constant demand by local activists to improve conditions for sustainable transportation. Yet, he argues that it is still possible to soften the blow. By envisioning different degrees of apocalypse, Leonardo introduces a semblance of optimism or hope, albeit without belief in real change. Within a dystopian scenario, cracks and openings provide faint possibilities of transformation—even if minimal and probably unreachable, but present nonetheless.

The focus on dystopias may be associated with action-oriented anger, an emotional tenet mobilising action (Kleres and Wettergren 2017). However, an emphasis on bleak prospects risks leading to inaction and paralysis (Tschakert et al. 2023). In the next interaction, the dramatically different effects of fear that such scenarios elicit are explicitly elaborated by two activists.



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***Anis:*** I think maybe we can deconstruct the idea a bit here that young people have more time, that's not true. Being depressed staring at the ceiling takes up a lot of time. We have to consider this, people are anxious, and moreover, young people, most of them, don't have the tools to deal with the dystopian society we live in…

***Frederica:*** Yes…

***Anis:*** This will hinder any agency…

***Frederica***: Okay, but in a dystopian society either you… okay, mental health is a serious problem… but either you face the dystopian world and ignore it and don't mobilise yourself to be okay, or you do a lot and feel… or am I creating a fallacy of 'either… or'…?

***Isis:*** False dilemma…

***Frederica:*** Yeah, thanks [laughs]… just 'either… or'… okay, yeah, it's not just 'either… or'…but you can take that… I don't know, that's how I do it, I see a problem in front of me and instead of like 'okay, this is too dystopian, I'm not going to solve it', like at least I'll take a step towards its resolution and like…

***Anis:*** But you see, you already have the ability to think like that and to look at it with that approach. For example, a mental health issue, a person who has traumas—and everyone is traumatised in some way, won't have the ability to approach situations in their life with that perspective of 'now I have to act'. That's not how it works.

(Focus Group 2-Student Climate Strike)

Anis starts by saying how a dystopian society can immobilise the youth. Specific emotional states that may derive from fear are seen as responsible for a lack of engagement. Depression and anxiety are described as pathological emotional states that derive from the current dystopia. The lack of 'tools' to deal with the dystopian society keeps agency unattained. Exactly what tools are being referred to is unclear, but one can suppose they relate to ways of overcoming pathological mental states that hinder motivation for change. Francisca, however, contradicts this view, and sees the dystopian society as a motivator for action, to 'walk a step into its resolution'. Francisca presents her viewpoint as an 'either…or' dilemma, but quickly recognises this approach is flawed. She initially suggests that a dystopian society should increase youth involvement in collective action, despite the lack of a clear end or goal. Although she states this idea emphatically, she corrects herself, and Isis supports this correction. Her original perspective did not account for the nuanced and complex ways in which social reality is shaped.

These activists, then, acknowledge the tensions that perpetuating a view of a dystopian society may produce. They also acknowledge how depression and eco-anxiety are natural conditions of current circumstances and social structures, although mental health issues are commonly understood as individual life experiences/outcomes (Kurth and Pihkala 2022). By saying that 'everyone is traumatised', Anis also points to the continuous tension between the private and the public, where affective experiences connect the political/ideological and personal realm (McAvoy 2015). Importantly, these emotions are understood and legitimised by the participants because they are contextualised in relation to social and political discourses that continuously emphasise the irreversible issues surrounding climate change and loss of biodiversity (Hjerpe and Linnér 2009). Moreover, the reference to mental health is an important point towards signalling their emphatic commitment towards others. This is probably an attempt of opening opportunities for engagement and understanding with the Other, who might be less engaged and concerned with the cause.

There is a sense of accomplishment described by Francisca, expressed in a call 'to take a step towards its resolution'. Getting involved with collective action produces a release effect, a sense of accomplishment that works towards tackling injustices. This is a strategy to achieve other objectives beyond proposing specific changes (Clot-Garrell 2023). Within continuous government climate inaction, and the prevalence of post-apocalyptic scenarios, it is a political act to feel 'encouragement' or the opportunity of 'sowing a seed' of transformation, as demonstrated in the following extract, from a different focus group discussion. It also highlights the potential for transformation created by collective action, despite negative and bleak scenarios (Vestergren et al. 2019).

***Tatiana:*** As we delve deeper into things like activism, in this case, the more we know, it's amazing, but it's also unsettling. Deep down, it's good; it's almost like group therapy (…) it's about trying to incite political action, and that's what gives me encouragement. Okay, I'm taking to the streets, but it's good to go to schools and inspire the kids who also want to do things and sow the seed of wanting things to be different.

(Focus Group 1-Climate Rebellion)

Tatiana discusses how getting more involved in the climate cause also brings her into closer contact with dystopian scenarios, providing depth to her claims and positionality, while also creating the basis for 'unsettling' emotions. Indeed, at the core of post-apocalyptic discourse is shared suffering (Tschakert et al. 2023). The reference to activism and the work of the collectives as group therapy is an important metaphor for understanding how joining a group of people with the same concerns becomes a collective political endeavour to counter the dystopia of today: creating the space for a hopeful and empowered way forward (Prosser et al. 2024; Vestergren et al. 2019).

Tatiana employs a 'yes, but' concessive format ('Okay, I'm taking the streets, but it's good to go to schools') to expose a dilemma in her repertoires of action. Street demonstrations can be a form of disruptive dissent (O'Brien et al. 2018), aimed at breaking with the status quo and the current societal structure. But her involvement with activism also allowed her to pursue a different type of dissent, that may be understood as dutiful (O'Brien et al. 2018) because it perpetuates certain power dynamics and relations (those within the educational system), though it still serves to 'inspire the kids'. The metaphor of 'sowing the seed' is probably the most vivid one to signal hope, re-birth and opportunity. A web of affective dispositions can connect unsettling emotions with acts of encouragement. Indeed, these are the utopian impulses that live within dystopian scenarios (Friberg 2022). Collective action is described as a route of 'encouragement' within the lived and experienced 'unsettling' scenarios.



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## 5.2 | Tentative Utopias: A Negotiation of Many Voices

In a less elaborate manner, alternative political imaginaries were discussed in the form of utopias. In the following excerpt, two activists discuss what a utopia could look like. When the facilitator asks about activism in the future, Carlota envisions a utopian state where activism would no longer be needed.

***Facilitator:*** And now, how do you see activism in the future?

***Carlota:*** I would like it not to be necessary. In utopia, there is no activism; in utopia, everyone is respected and included, and there is no money or capitalism, because everyone builds for the same...Without capitalism. Without the idea of some beings being superior or becoming superior...

***Facilitator:*** So, how would people organise themselves? On a horizontal basis, is that what you propose?

***Sasha:*** There you go, there's no one answer, that's why I was talking about anarchism earlier, which seeks more individual solutions, doesn't give answers because we will find those answers along the way. We can't envision how an organisation would be... We are extremely complex and imagining that there is a general solution for us to organise as a society is difficult. There's no one way...

(Focus Group 1-Climate Rebellion)

Her vision of utopia is one where capitalism or money would not exist. The logics of the neoliberal common-sense (Hall and O'Shea 2013), such as interpersonal competition, would not be guiding the organisation and priorities of this political imaginary. Instead, she emphasises values like respect and inclusion to envision this place where activism could finally 'rest'. Yet, when the facilitator prompts her to elaborate as to how this society might be imagined, Sasha keeps the *process of utopia* as open as possible. Citing anarchist ideals, she states that 'we will find those answers along the way'. She adds that defining a concrete society for the future might not make sense because 'we are extremely complex'. Sasha uses an inclusive 'we' to encompass humankind and to explain why the paths to utopia need to be broad and malleable. She opens Carlota's initial attempt at offering a specific utopian imaginary, showing how there is a need to slow down the emergency and to avoid authoritarian and exclusionary approaches to producing alternatives. Haraway's (2016) concept of 'response-ability' helps to illuminate this malleability. Response-abilities involve empathic responses tailored to context and circumstance, instead of fixed ethical principles guiding action. Embracing ambiguity and complexity can lead to more lived and consequential ways of engaging with the climate cause.

A similar dynamic of closing and opening utopias is evident in the next excerpt.

***Isis:*** (...) My utopia, precisely the one I envision, is of various interconnected, autonomous, and independent communities acting on the basis of extremely participatory consensus and with a greater connection to the Earth than we have had. Not in the sense that we all have to be planting potatoes with our own hands and having soil under our nails, that's not the goal. But in the sense that we are aware of the impact that our own existence inevitably has, and we try to remedy and mitigate that... Oh, I hope it's a vegan world [laughs] and that treats animals with respect... we'll see... And... actually, from there, the rest builds itself, from the moment that communities are small enough to feel their own impact, instead of being alienated from what both their work and life cause or require. So, they naturally organise themselves to minimise that impact and maximise their [...]. The problem is the distribution of power.

***Facilitator:*** [Your vision] Mm-hmm. This vision is very interesting. I don't know if you have alternatives or if you think that this is a... a world that can really achieve this reduction of inequalities and injustices...

***Anis:*** Oh, and my perspective is very similar to Isis's. It's...Um I think it's important to understand that... It's not enough to say now that we are not racist or that... or that, or that... we organise horizontally and so on... when you are setting up any form of organisation, you can't just say we are this and that's it. It's necessary to organise ourselves very consciously to avoid exactly this. It's a bit like the story of 'it's not enough to not be racist, we need to be anti-racist'. It's not enough [for us] to organise horizontally, we have to organise ourselves in an anti-hierarchical way [this should be done] in a certain manner. Hmm, because otherwise things end up not being feasible because... again there are major differences in society and these things arise. It's not like now, now we create a totally perfect, utopian community. That doesn't exist, does it? Some inequality will emerge, and we can't now say 'okay... no. We've solved everyone's problems now, let's not address them'. No. I think a society, the society I want to live in, is a society that actively fights against these problems. It's not a passive struggle, it's not a struggle... um... it's not like once we do this, it's done. No, it's a constant and active process of identifying these problems and trying to solve them.

(Focus Group 2-Student Climate Strike)

Isis begins her description of utopia by emphasising the need to reorganise power dynamics and adopt more participatory politics. Again, these activists demonstrate strong and comprehensive understandings of the systems and structures most impacting the climate. Isis also highlights that for new ways of organisation to emerge, people must stop being 'alienated from what both their work and life cause or require'. The imagined independent communities, organised in webs of exchange, would be connected to natural cycles and acutely aware of human impact on the planet. Isis asserts that engaging with ecological dynamics should not imply 'having soil under your nails', minimising a representation of ecology as a 'back to basics' lifestyle. She expresses *hope*, using a language of contingency (Creasap 2021) and emotion (Kleres and Wettergren 2017), that her imagined future is vegan. Her later remark, 'we'll see', hints at the uncertainty surrounding the concrete path to reach such goals. However, she stresses that creating small enough communities to facilitate participatory processes is a prerequisite, believing that 'the rest builds itself'.

Anis intervenes to challenge the assumption that this process would be smooth or straightforward. Acknowledging that 'there are major differences in society' and that struggles will always



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arise, Anis argues that utopias are imaginative exercises rather than achievable realities. They work as wishful frameworks for creatively thinking emancipatory strategies and transformations (Thaler, 2018). By vividly stating through reported speech that 'we can't now say 'okay… no. We've solved everyone's problems now let's not address them', she critiques the idea of a perfect and harmonious utopia as just as problematic as the present dystopia. In her vision of a 'realistic utopia', power imbalances persist but society will be willing to address them continuously. In this perspective, paths to utopia are plural, requiring ongoing exploration of cleavages, emotional tensions, and negotiations.

## 6 | Discussion

This study examines how youth climate activists discuss and mobilise dystopian and utopian scenarios, as well as their discursive-affective practices to make sense of the present and navigate the contingencies of the future. We used a critical discourse analysis to explore how hegemonic and alternative discourses on climate change interact, combined with the concept of affective-discursive practices. These practices encompass 'patterns of activity of a shifting range: embodied psychophysiological processes, subjective feelings, memories, perceptions and appraisals, contexts, institutions, spaces, histories and relationships' (Wetherell et al. 2015, 60).

Contrary to most research on collective action (Badaan et al. 2020; Jost et al. 2022; Basso and Krpan, 2022), we showed how dystopian scenarios, seemingly devoid of emotions like hope, are important for mobilisation, despite being presented as dilemmatic in our data. The dilemmatic aspect lies in the awareness that these scenarios do not foster collective action universally. By alternating between apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios or adopting ambivalent stances, activists can view certain catastrophes as either imminent or inevitable, while others are deemed preventable (De Moor et al. 2021). This disjunction or overlap of different temporal landscapes is discursively and rhetorically constructed, enabling young climate activists to negotiate and contest mainstream discourses that perpetuate deeply depoliticising representations of technological proposals, which do not address the systemic changes necessary for transformation (Machin 2022). However, amidst narratives of panic and emergency, hope emerges from the anger and despair that promote collective organisation and togetherness (Clot-Garrell 2023; Friberg 2022; Ransan-Cooper et al. 2018). Hope derives from the ability to grieve collectively and find support in that process (Tschakert et al. 2023). The ambiguity that stems from multiple futures can be seen as resulting from and/or perpetuating the emotional discomfort generated by the present (Clot-Garrell 2023). Within a discourse of varying levels and timelines of catastrophe, hope emerges in the cracks and incongruencies of such narratives.

Utopias, for our participants, represent more than wishful thinking (Thaler, 2018). They serve as pathways of imagination and action towards emancipation, navigating the interplay between the feasible and the unfeasible (Cross 2023). Compared to dystopian landscapes, utopias were less elaborated. There were, nevertheless, references to ideal societies where capitalism would not have a place. A language of contingency was associated with these descriptions (Creasap 2021; Habersang 2022). In the interaction between participants, any attempt at delimiting such utopias was met with attempts to open them, accommodating conflict, contingency, and intersectionality. The political nature of such utopias mitigates any risk of them becoming depoliticised forms of imagination, where politics and conflict are expected to disappear (Cross 2023). These tentative utopias are collective efforts to disrupt the present systems. Functioning as containers of hope, young climate activists imagine communal ways of dealing with diversity and transformation. This disposition is important in the face of catastrophes, including the loss of biodiversity and of human lives. We argue that these negotiated utopias constitute ways to affectively understand the world (Haraway 2016).

Overall, this study contributes to literature on collective action by emphasising how imaginaries, which constitute complex webs of meaning-making connected to affect, produce nonlinear and not clearly defined relationships of cause and effect. This challenges the suggestions from previous studies on positive and negative imaginaries of the future (Daysh et al. 2024) and the literature that looks at hope as a discrete variable predicting action (e.g., Geiger et al. 2023), without consideration of the broader affective-discursive frameworks in which they are inserted. Instead, this study builds on the argument that hope (and its cognitive formations, such as utopias) needs to be contextualised and understood in relation to an axis of function and valence: what it 'does' and how it makes people 'feel' (Cohen-Chen and Pliskin 2024). Primarily, we stress the ambiguous state of hope in collective action and the thin line, as recognised by activists, between hope as a motivator for action, linked to a glimpse of a better future, and its role as an emotion-focused coping mechanism to reduce the stress of a (present day) scenario hindering the urgency to act. We elaborate further on this and discuss how future scenarios are orienting action in plural ways. Indeed, the ways in which activists discuss mitigation measures and acknowledge the depth of the problem presuppose different emotional states. There can be hope in discussing adaptation and amidst the emotional distress of facing future (and present) loss of lives and biodiversity. Acknowledging the societal transformations needed and the environmental changes that we are witnessing—with greater intensity expected in the future—is scary and fear-inducing. Yet, their willingness for experimentation, driven by the idea that future-making is plural and complex, equips young climate activists to deal with the conflictual challenges of creating a 'real' utopia (Thaler 2018).

One of the most significant limitations that future research should address is the embodied aspect of affect, which, without a video recording of social interaction, such as focus groups, is challenging to analyse. Ethnographic work can also offer insight into the embodied affect as a transhuman experience (Thrift 2004). Participant observation of activists in their activities can pay special attention to body movement and facial expressions, incorporating these considerations in field notes to be part of the analysis. Importantly, the ethnographer can let the affective dimension resonate and reflect on how their own emotional dispositions are implicated in their positionality. Nevertheless, this study offers valuable theoretical insight into how dystopias and



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utopias shape the political imaginaries of what young climate activists consider feasible and desirable for building alternative futures through collective action.

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**Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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