

PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

BUILDING
TOMORROW TODAY



PAUL RAEKSTAD
SOFA SAIO GRADIN

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Paul Raekstad
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polity

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1

Introduction

Ours is an age of crisis and struggle. After the 2008 financial crisis, the banks were bailed out while the people were sold out. Wealth and power are controlled by a tiny minority. The media, telling us things are OK, are in the hands of a tiny oligarchy serving the needs of their corporate advertisers. Real wages are falling while the richest of the world line their pockets. Unemployment and precarity rise along with the misery and desperation they cause. Most people can't even get an education without consigning themselves to a lifetime of debt. Far right movements aren't just organising, they're getting presidents elected to the applause of their corporate backers. Climate change is advancing at breakneck speed, and an estimated 150–200 species go extinct every 24 hours. Yet some people wonder why so many are rejecting capitalism...

At the same time, we're seeing the rebirth and rise of radical movements fighting for a better tomorrow. The best description that many liberal pundits and academics – from supporters of Hillary Clinton's presidential bid to philosophers and sociologists – can come up with when trying to make sense of these movements is 'resistance'. In fact, today's social movements go far beyond mere 'resistance'. 'Resistance' implies taking for granted the basic

institutions that have led to our present problems. It offers no real alternative to the status quo. It implies a servile expression of the vain hope that making a fuss will convince the powers-that-be to go back to the way things were – to stop the current wave of welfare cuts and deregulation and return to the so-called golden age of welfare capitalism of the 1960s and '70s. But that's what gave us what we have now. The way things were was also deeply unfree, unequal, and undemocratic. The way things were was built on the back of worldwide imperial and colonial tyranny. The way things were also had major inequalities between rich and poor, a majority of the world impoverished and powerless, rampant racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and more. That's not something we should hope to get back to.

Our societies don't need resistance; they need reconstruction.¹ This is a book about what that can and should be like.

From a longer-term perspective, things look a lot more hopeful. In the past hundred years alone, radical social movements have won civil rights for people of colour, women's rights, wage increases, and so much more. They have dramatically expanded basic rights and freedoms – such as freedoms of speech, press, conviction, and association. They won us the ten- and eight-hour working days, weekends, unemployment benefits, and sick leave. These achievements were the victories of activists and organisers who struggled against elite interests; people with jobs, kids, disabilities, caring duties, facing hate crime, and without many resources, taking on systemic hierarchies and exploitation – and winning. Just because that previous wave of movements has been receding doesn't mean that the tide isn't still coming in.

Every present grows from the struggles of the past, as every future will grow from the struggles of the present. Just like the things we enjoy now were won by the movements of yesteryear, it's the movements of today that will give us a better tomorrow. We have recently seen a new wave of social movements from the Zapatistas, the Global Justice Movement, Occupy, the Movement of the Squares, the Indignados, and the Revolution in Rojava, to growing struggles around antiracism such as Black Lives Matter and anti-fascism, and a growth in radical unionism, often

combining workplace and community organising. Despite their many different backgrounds and inspirations, these movements show a remarkable convergence. A major shift in how people are organising themselves and thinking about their lives, societies, and ways of mobilising appears to be taking place, which is not well understood or talked about as much as it should be.

Having learned much from both the practical experiences and the theoretical advances of the past hundred years, the politics these movements are developing converge on some important points. They have a better understanding of how power and social structures work and often emphasise non-hierarchical organising – having learned from the failures of more authoritarian approaches. They have learned as feminists and antiracists that class is not the only hierarchy worth addressing, and so tend to synthesise struggles focusing on class, gender, race, sexuality, and more, expressing a connected commitment to intersectionality. And they tend to show a preference for direct action. While few of these ideas are new, they are growing in influence and have given us better tools than ever with which to take on the forces of domination, oppression, and exploitation. These movements also tend to share a commitment to planting the seeds of the society of the future in the soil of today’s – the idea that today is called prefigurative politics.

Prefigurative politics has generated a lot of recent debate. Some activists and commentators are exceedingly positive, seeing prefigurative strategies as the solution to all of our problems. Others, equally mistaken, greet prefigurative politics with scepticism and scorn, implying it is naive and unable to seriously challenge existing powers. Despite the fact that prefigurativism frequently turns up in discussions among both theorists and activists, neither the idea of prefigurative politics nor the arguments for and against it are well-understood. This book seeks to remedy that.

After a brief historical overview, the book sets out the understanding of human beings and society that has informed prefigurative ideas for the past century and a half. Emphasising the importance of praxis, we argue that developing the right qualities through non-hierarchical formal organisations is necessary for

reaching a free, equal, and democratic society. Formal organisational structures are not everything, however. As feminists, antiracists, and others have long pointed out, the personal is political. The political theories of revolutionary leaders are shaped by their personal experiences, even when they have professed themselves to be strictly scientific and objective. That is why we have to understand how different and intersecting social structures shape our experiences of the world in order to be able to change it. We show how this can work using practical examples. Finally, we look at the contested relationship between prefigurative politics and state power and at some common misconceptions and criticisms of prefigurative politics.

(a) Prefigurative Politics Before It Was Named

Since we emphasise the importance of praxis, there is no better way to begin to understand prefigurative politics than to look at some practical examples. People have been practising prefigurative politics for far longer than the term itself has existed. Prefigurative politics is today particularly closely associated with certain strands of socialism, which we will look at in Chapter 2. It was to the politics of these movements that the term ‘prefigurative politics’ in its current sense was first applied in the 1970s. The practice of prefigurative politics, however, is likely as old as politics itself. To see why, we’ll take a brief look at some examples of prefigurative politics that didn’t employ the term.

In fact, we would argue that some of the most significant political movements of the last century have used prefigurative strategies, even if they didn’t speak of them in those terms. One important example is the struggle against colonial occupation, exploitation, and racism. From the Pan-African movement in the Caribbean, North America, Africa and Europe, to the Indian independence movement, activists of the global South have run huge and successful projects to undo colonialism, often using

prefigurative tactics. To name just a few examples, Pan-Africanist organisations such as UNIA (the Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in 1914 by the Jamaican-born organiser Marcus Garvey) have supported Black-owned businesses as a way for Black populations to become economically independent of white oppressors. Though they didn't use the term prefigurative, UNIA started implementing a society in which Black people had financial independence directly, by providing financial support to Black-owned 'cooperative grocery stores, restaurants, laundries, garment factories, dress shops' (Vincent 1972: 102, cited in Marshall 2018) and much more, and by encouraging Black people to Buy Black. The legacy of this approach lives on today. For example, Black Lives Matter in the US runs a website helping people to locate their nearest Black-owned small businesses as a way to help provide jobs and economic security for Black people as an alternative to systemic marginalisation (www.backingblack-business.com). In the 1920s, UNIA had such massive economic clout that it was able to address even the supply chains and transportation systems that Black businesses were reliant on, creating its own transatlantic shipping company, the Black Star Line, which operated three ships carrying cargo and passengers between the US, the Caribbean, Central America and the African continent.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, Indian liberation activists struggled against the long-standing and violent British colonial occupation by promoting prefigurative independence projects. The Swaraj ('self-rule') movement led by Mahatma Gandhi is most famous for this. Gandhi's alleged quote 'Be the change that you wish to see in the world' (which was most likely not uttered by Gandhi at all, see John 2011) has become something of a slogan of prefigurativism today. While Gandhi is not a good example of prefigurativism for several reasons,² many other Indian liberation activists have supported the creation of egalitarian schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods in resistance to colonial white supremacy and dispossession of indigenous Indians (Ramnath 2011: 177–87). For instance, Rabindranath Tagore was an independence activist who resisted the colonialism, racism and discrimination of the British Imperial education system

in India by founding a college in Santiniketan in West Bengal. The college admitted indigenous Bengalis, taught them in their native language, offered generalist rather than specialist education, and involved students in some of its decision-making – none of which were done in British colonial colleges. Tagore also founded a nearby agricultural school (Sriniketan), which later grew into a whole village that provided both jobs and education for people who had otherwise been excluded from the British education system (Bhattacharya 2014: 5).

From the 1960s onwards, US- and Europe-based liberation movements were often influenced by these practices. The Black Panther Party is one oft-mentioned example, and rightly so. They ran a series of Community Programmes in the 1960s and '70s, the most famous being the large and successful breakfast programme, which at its high point provided free cooked breakfasts for 10,000 children every morning before school across several cities (Bloom and Martin 2013: ch. 7). While the kids ate their breakfasts cooked by volunteers using ingredients that local supermarkets had been persuaded to donate, the Panthers gave Black History lessons and read out Party messages. These breakfasts were a preview of the kind of society the Panthers were fighting for: a communist society where nobody went hungry, where Black people's history was not forgotten or marginalised, and where neighbours came together to help each other and socialise, for free. Other Community Programmes included free health clinics, free food and clothing programmes, and a sickle cell anaemia research project. These implemented parts of the vision set out in the Panthers' ten-point programme: 'We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society ... We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace' (Black Panther Party 1966).

There were many sides to the Panthers' strategy, not all of them prefigurative – from patrolling the streets in resistance to police brutality, to educational projects, protests and running for office in local elections. While their Community Programmes are often cited as a quintessential example of prefigurative activism, the Panthers were also an explicitly vanguardist organisation – a term

drawn from Marxist-Leninism that often implies a more capable elite leading the movement from above (Clemons and Jones 2001: 29). We should also point out that Huey Newton and other Party leaders were heavily influenced by Maoism, which differs on a number of points from the strands of socialism that are more commonly associated with prefigurative politics (Newton 1974), notably on questions of taking existing state power and the value of vanguard parties. This combination of approaches is a theme that will recur in this book, reflecting the fact that prefigurative politics need not exclude a range of other, non-prefigurative, tactics.

Feminist movements in the 1960s also played a pivotal role in the development of prefigurative politics, as currently understood. The famous slogan ‘the personal is political’ emerged in this era and, as we will see in Chapters 2 and 5, became an important part of prefigurative critiques of certain hierarchically organised social movements fixated on seizing control of the state.³ Feminists highlighted hierarchies, inequalities, and exploitation that go beyond the reach of formal rules and laws. We will look more closely at the theory behind this in later chapters, but when it came to practical action, the personal being political meant that our personal lives and daily behaviours are and should be recognised as an important site of political struggle. This is why, for example, feminists started disobeying repressive gender norms in their daily lives, running skill-shares to teach each other important life skills such as house maintenance and car mechanics, and leaving a fair share of household and care work duties to men, among many other things. Large parts of the contemporary queer movement can be understood as a continuation of this. Many queer activists call for the abolition of patriarchal gender roles and other forms of patriarchal governance, while implementing queerness in their own lives and in their collective organising (for example by refusing to act, look, or identify as the gender they were assigned at birth, or any gender at all). On this radical conception of queerness, being queer is not (only) a personal choice but a commitment to collective resistance to patriarchy, expressed through the prefiguring of non-patriarchal relations, ways of organising, and ways of behaving in the here-and-now (see e.g. Gleeson 2017).

This brief and incomplete retrospective⁴ shows that prefigurative politics is not merely an invention of white European scholars in Western academia, but has been part of social movements in different places and settings for a long time.

(b) The Term and the Idea

The term ‘prefigurative politics’ in its current sense, however, did emerge in Western academia in the late 1970s, when Carl Boggs (1977a, 1977b), and later Wini Breines (1980) and others, applied it to their discussions of New Left movements of the 1960s and ’70s.⁵ The New Left saw a widening of socialist concerns and strategies, increasingly turning to questions of civil rights, feminism, gay rights, and other so-called ‘cultural’ issues. Boggs especially was interested in how these New Left movements related to different strands of anarchism, syndicalism, and Marxism. As we will see in Chapter 2, Boggs was right to trace the origins of that concept of prefigurative politics to these strands of socialism, so we will briefly define them here to explain what they are (although we also argue in later chapters that Boggs and other authors have underestimated the importance of feminist, and especially Black feminist, theory and practice to prefigurative politics). To start with anarchism, there’s no generally agreed-upon definition of the term, but the historical anarchist movement that Boggs and Breines refer to generally shares a commitment to the following:

Fiercely opposed to all forms of social and economic inequality and oppression, anarchism rejected capitalism, the state and hierarchy in general. A revolutionary and libertarian doctrine, anarchism sought the establishment of individual freedom through the creation of a cooperative, democratic, egalitarian and stateless socialist order. This would be established through the direct action of the working class and peasantry, waging an international and internationalist social revolution against capitalism, landlordism and the state. (van der Walt and Hirsch 2010: xxxvi–xxxvii)

Syndicalism is a form of revolutionary trade unionism (Darlington 2013: 5), that seeks to use revolutionary union activities to replace capitalism with a society based (either partly or wholly) on union structures. Anarcho-syndicalism is a variety of syndicalism that explicitly aims for an anarchist society by employing anarchist means. They both focus on the union as an essential instrument of struggle because as an organisation it can implement key aspects of the desired future society in the here-and-now. Marxism, meanwhile, is a hugely diverse tradition – one that's simply too varied and heterogeneous to be defined adequately here. Different strands of Marxism tend to share a commitment to universal human emancipation through working-class self-emancipation, guided by the ideas of Karl Marx – though what this amounts to in practice varies tremendously. Carl Boggs looked at different kinds of relationship between various forms of anarchist and Marxist thought on the one hand, and the New Left's commitment to prefigurative politics on the other.

Boggs published two articles in 1977 that, in a way, introduced the term prefigurative politics in its current sense. We say 'in a way' because the term 'prefigurative' had existed previously and been used in political contexts before, which we'll explain in Chapter 2. However, in those earlier uses it had not had the same meaning and connotations. Boggs set out his argument as a critique of Marxism-Leninism, which according to him holds that elite-led political parties can carry out the transition from capitalism to a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. Marxist-Leninists therefore advocate centralised social movements that focus on *seizing control of the existing state* and using it to nationalise the economy, abolish private property,⁶ and transition to socialism. In time, this is supposed to lead to a free and stateless society traditionally called communism.

The Bolsheviks who led the Russian Revolution in 1917 did little to theorise how a better society might be built once the state had been seized (Boggs 1977a). Cultural and informal hierarchies were expected to crumble, and the state itself was expected to eventually 'wither away', though it was unclear how this would happen. Attempts to address this issue by organising masses of

people in workers' and community councils independently of the state, attempting to construct free and democratic organs of worker self-management, were quashed.

Boggs was not surprised that this approach to socialist revolution has led, not to free, equal, and democratic utopias, but to regimes that have often reproduced the very hierarchies they were intended to oppose. Boggs' two articles touch on several key issues that we will expand on in this book: the tension between prefigurative approaches to revolution and the seizure of the state; an attention to informal as well as formal power relations; and a focus on hierarchies that stem from other relations than class relations, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and ableism.

The definition of prefigurative politics Boggs provided was a broad one: an organisation or movement embodying 'those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are [its] ultimate goal' (1977b: 100). Subsequent authors have defined prefigurative politics more narrowly; for example, some focus only on the use of horizontal organisational structures in social movement groups, and others on an apparent reluctance by social movements to organise strategically (see e.g. Breines 1980; Smucker 2017). Like Boggs, we prefer a broader definition of prefigurative politics, but we have our own exact formulation. We define prefigurative politics as *the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now*. We will use 'prefigurative politics' and 'prefigurativism' synonymously to refer to this idea.⁷ This definition captures a wide variety of things that get labelled prefigurative politics – from the organisational debates in the First International to the subversion of gendered norms in the contemporary feminist movement. Being committed to prefigurative politics means being committed to the idea that if we want to replace certain social structures, then we need to reflect some aspect(s) of the future structures we want in the movements and organisations we develop to fight for them. On this definition, prefigurative politics is a much more common phenomenon than is often thought. It is not an alternative to struggle against our society's oppression, exploitation, and injustice; it's a way of carrying that struggle out.

Defining political concepts and making sense of the politics they are part of is a tricky endeavour. Only something without a history can be rigorously defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions in a way that captures all of its usages.⁸ Whenever you define, say, a term, you end up having to do so in ways that are incompatible with the way at least some people have been, are, and/or will use that term. But definitions are often vital to knowing what we are talking about. To make sense of the large, and at times complicated and contradictory literature on prefigurative politics, we take an approach that can be described as *rational reconstruction*. That is, we take an ongoing body of ideas and practices as our point of departure. This will inevitably be varied, contradictory, and sometimes confused. We draw from our experiences and observations of these practices, our readings about previous movements and organisations, and the writings of those who relate to them as participants and opponents, supporters and critics. On this basis, we make the best sense we can of what prefigurative politics is and of the arguments for and against it. As such, our definition isn't intended to capture *all* uses and abuses of 'prefigurative politics'. Instead, it's intended to clarify the core features that the practices talked about as 'prefigurative politics' have in common, in order to be able to make sense of and use it as a political concept. This should help to make the concept a useful tool both for understanding the world and for changing it.

(c) About This Book

This is the first dedicated book on prefigurative politics as a concept and idea. Much has been written about examples of social movements that practise prefigurative politics, but usually without a rigorous investigation of the theory and assumptions that are associated with the concept.

In recent years, prefigurative politics have been much discussed in connection with a wide range of contemporary social movements. They include bottom-up movements in Latin