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Chapter 1. Prefigurative politics within, despite and beyond contemporary capitalism¹

Lara Monticelli

Introduction

As Rahel Jaeggi (2013) has noted, the critical approaches to capitalism that emerged after the financial crisis of 2007–08 have, at times, had an inflationary character, as evidenced by hyperbolic newspaper articles on the forthcoming ‘end of capitalism’.¹ Nevertheless, this has provided a clearance of sorts for a vibrant discussion to emerge around alternatives to capitalism – a debate that has spread well beyond the walls of academic Political Philosophy, Critical Theory and Sociology departments. Indeed, the recent and simultaneous crises at the ecological, economic, social and sanitary levels seem to have brought about the realisation that

¹ This chapter is an adapted and revised version of the article “On the Necessity of Prefigurative Politics” published by Lara Monticelli in the journal *Thesis Eleven* Vol. 167, N. 1 (2021). The article is available in open access here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/07255136211056992>

capitalism is an unsustainable socioeconomic system and that, if we are to safeguard the continuation of life on this planet, it needs to be either reformed or completely transcended towards a postcapitalist future. Interestingly, this position – traditionally the slogan of the most progressive political and environmental activists – is starting to be shared by not only international institutions (such as the European Union and United Nations) but also multinational corporations' top managers, investment banks, think tanks and consultancy companies (Cacciari, 2020). *The Financial Times* recently launched a new column, titled 'Time for reset', and the 2021 World Economic Forum at Davos produced a new agenda that, in the words of business guru Klaus Schwab envisions "a global economy that works for progress, people and planet" (Schwab, 2021). Ironic as it may seem, critiquing contemporary capitalism as unsustainable is the new mainstream mantra.

As a consequence of this shared realisation, many governments are starting to call for the implementation of a Green New Deal; one able to foster the transition to a more ecological and sustainable economy. Following a similar trend, the energy sector's multinational corporations are claiming they will 'turn the switch' towards more sustainable ways of producing energy, investment banks are proposing new green assets and sustainability-linked loans, and consultancy companies are beginning to rate companies according to their impact on the environment, society and governance. Even the allocation of the European Recovery Fund, whose purpose is to relaunch the European economy during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, is linked to new taxonomies and climatic benchmarks. In reaction, then, it is legitimate to wonder whether we are witnessing a true 'awakening' or just another way to allow 'business as usual' to continue – what Immanuel Wallerstein has

labelled (recalling the closing sentence of the novel *Il Gattopardo* by Italian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa) the ‘changing everything so that nothing changes’ strategy (Wallerstein et al, 2013, p 34). Many historians of capitalism and social theorists claim that capitalism’s survival strategy is to evolve and adapt over time in the face of the crises it produces. Moreover, many critics claim that what is needed is not to reform or reimagine a more responsible, conscious or greener capitalism but rather to shift towards a totally new socioeconomic paradigm; one capable of overcoming the basic functioning assumptions of capitalism – growth, acceleration, profit and the exploitation of nature and humans. The term ‘postcapitalism’ has become increasingly popular in recent years in both academic circles and the media, perhaps the most popular example being Paul Mason’s book, *Post Capitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (2015).

Several proponents of postcapitalist alternatives, such as Mark Fisher (2009) and Paul Mason (2015), consider neoliberalism a specific ‘mode’ of capitalism; they therefore focus their critique and analyses on capitalism rather than neoliberalism. This necessitates broadening the Marxist definition, which reduces capitalism to economic production based on private property with the goal of accumulating capital and seeking profits. To achieve this, Nancy Fraser defines capitalism as an ‘institutionalized social order’ thriving along multiple boundary lines or separations: economic vs. social reproduction, supranational economy vs. national polity and human vs. nonhuman nature (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018, pp 52–3). Rahel Jaeggi goes a step further, overcoming the ‘economy vs. society’ dualism typical of Polanyi (2001) and arguing for a monistic social theory, in which the economy is not a separate sphere from society but rather a set of practices that constitute – together

with cultural, social and personal practices – a form of life (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018, p 51).

Accepting Fraser and Jaeggi's invitation to 'de-orthodoxify' the understanding of capitalism implies first recognising that capitalism exists, and that it manages to reproduce itself over time so successfully precisely because of its 'background conditions of possibility' (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018, p 28); that is, the undervalued economy of care and social reproduction, the accumulation of resources through the exploitation of nature and the primacy of business over politics. Second, it means redefining capitalism as a form of life (Cole and Ferrarese, 2018): a set of practices that 'are configurations of human coexistence, and thus (are) continually reproduced' (Cole and Ferrarese, 2018, p 106). It is precisely the reproduction of capitalist practices over time, and the process of their sedimentation into shared habits, beliefs, organisations and institutions, that ends up creating what Fraser calls an 'institutionalized social order'. From this perspective, capitalism is an ossified configuration of human life, and its existence is made possible by expropriative and exploitative mechanisms. Thus, to transcend capitalism it is necessary to envision and embody alternative forms of life capable of 'breaking with the comfort of the familiar' (Cole and Ferrarese, 2018, p 106).

Given this context, this brief chapter aims to outline the role of prefigurative politics in transcending contemporary capitalism and the characteristics that render prefigurative politics – in my view – a necessary (but not sufficient) element of that endeavour. In the next section, I will develop this argument by emphasising that prefiguration entails an understanding of social change that is *holistic* and, as such,

different from any other form of political participation. This will allow me to engage with strands of the debate that depict prefigurative politics as concerning mere apolitical (or post-political) lifestyle changes – and, therefore, as incompatible with any sort of emancipatory strategy. To conclude, I will argue that prefigurative politics constitutes a fundamental component of any political strategy that aims to transcend contemporary capitalism, namely because it approaches progressive social change in a way that is both ontologically and epistemologically unique.

Understanding prefiguration: a holistic approach to progressive social change<3>

‘Prefiguration’ comes from the Latin *praefigurare*, a verb composed by the prefix *prae-* (meaning ‘before’) and *figurare* (‘to represent’, ‘to depict’). It means, literally, anticipating or representing something that will happen in the future. In its contemporary political meaning, the term prefiguration was first used by the American thinker Carl Boggs in a 1977 essay on workers’ control strategies in the United States. In the essay, the author underlines the need for democratic, local and collective structures able to ‘anticipate the future liberated society’ (Boggs, 1977). The idea that the means of change should not only be consistent with their ends but also strive to embody, in the present, the type of society envisioned for the future – without necessarily waiting for a revolutionary, disruptive event – has traditionally been a point of contention between anarchist and Marxist thinkers (see Raekstad, this volume; van de Sande, 2015, 2018). But it was not until the antiglobalisation protests in Seattle in 1999 and the subsequent wave of mobilisations, which began with Occupy Wall Street and were followed by the Arab Spring, that the term ‘prefigurative politics’ really returned to the fore, popularised by the late anthropologist David Graeber:

<q>When protesters in Seattle chanted ‘this is what democracy looks like,’ they meant to be taken literally. In the best tradition of direct action, they not only confronted a certain form of power, exposing its mechanisms and attempting literally to stop it in its tracks: they did it in a way which demonstrated why the kind of social relations on which it is based were unnecessary. ... The diversity was a function of the decentralized form of organization, and this organization was the movement’s ideology. (Graeber, 2004, p 84)</q>

This emphasis on decentralised self-organisation and the daily (re)production of activists’ collective subjectivities is guided by a ‘moral and political mandate to match means and ends’ (Hardt and Negri, 2017, p 275). In the case of Occupy Wall Street, this resulted in the creation of various encampments in Zuccotti Park – including public kitchens, libraries and facilities – that were meant to embody and actualise the movement’s ideology, and to materially sustain the mobilisation over time. Seen from a global perspective, however, it is evident that these ‘assembly movements’ represent only a small number of the movements deploying prefigurative practices. As Paul Raekstad (2018; Chapter 2, this volume) argues, many contemporary social movements around the world are ‘potentially prefigurative in nature’ (Raekstad, 2018, p 363); for example, the Zapatistas communities in Chiapas, the network of recuperated factories in Argentina and the ecological villages and intentional communities scattered across the world. Many of these movements – albeit differing in their political histories, goals and strategies – blend, to various degrees, contentious action with prefigurative practices.

At this point, it is useful to reflect further on the difference between means and ends – on ideals and visions for the future, and the strategies through which we pursue them. When it comes to means (that is, repertoires of action), prefigurative politics can be found either alone or in combination with other types of actions, whether in the realm of representative democracy (for example, voting, parliamentary and legal opposition, referendums) or extra-parliamentary politics (for example, blockades, riots, strikes, demonstrations). Turning to political ends, prefiguration largely aims to challenge and transcend the culture and structures of contemporary capitalism, the capitalist state and representative democracy by embodying a different type of society within the old one. Among the most notable prefigurative movements in recent memory is the Kurdish project of democratic confederalism, to be ‘implemented through communes, academies, councils, and cooperatives’, which intends to go beyond ‘the conventional idea of democracy as representative politics to form a stateless democracy (Dirik, 2018, pp 222–3; Piccardi, this volume). Another notable movement comprises ecological villages and intentional communities focused on self-sufficiency and unwilling to engage in any type of confrontational activity with the state. Prefigurative politics, in sum, can be deployed to *defend* subjects and spaces from capitalist expropriation and exploitation, to *restore* spaces of former capitalist (re)production or to *create*, from scratch, new collective subjects and spaces through experimentation (Monticelli, 2018, p 510).

Discussions on the usefulness of prefigurative politics are usually held within well-defined disciplinary fields, notably Social Movement Studies and, more recently, Organisational Studies (for example, see Yates and de Moor, this volume;

Laamanen, this volume). In these fields, prefiguration has mostly been described as an important part of social movements and alternative organisations reproduction, coordination and mobilisation strategies (Yates, 2020), or as playing an important developmental and pedagogical role in social movements' experimentations and internal learning processes (Swain, 2019; De Vita and Vittori, this volume). More rarely, social theorists have deployed the concept of prefiguration in relation to the study of contemporary capitalism and its future. One important exception is the formation of a new collective, *Women on the Verge*,² comprised of scholar-activists from the United States, Italy, Mexico, Australia and the Netherlands and coordinated by Ana Cecilia Dinerstein. Dinerstein belongs to the intellectual tradition of Open Marxism, a current of thought encouraging a greater focus on praxis and a departure from the strictly deterministic, positivist views of history typical of Marxism's more orthodox strands.³ Alongside developing new ways of conceiving and doing research, the collective sets out to engage in another kind of critique – one that explores unexplored territories with respect to the mainstream Social Sciences. As Dinerstein puts it: 'The realm of possibility refers to things that are not-yet, things whose becoming lurk in the darkness of the present, ready to be activated, enacted, anticipated, made real'.⁴ In the volume *Social Sciences for an Other Politics*, Dinerstein (2016) articulates these 'things that are not-yet' as concrete utopias and shows that, by exploring these utopias as a method (Levitas, 2013), 'capitalist-colonial' society becomes 'denaturalized' – from being the only possible society to being one of many possible societies (Dinerstein, 2016, p 50). In this sense, Dinerstein thinks of prefiguration as entailing both a *negation* of the status quo and an *affirmation* of what is possible. Concrete utopias, however, are never detached from the dominance of capitalism and the capitalist state; on the contrary, they

develop 'within, against and beyond' capitalism (see also Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). As a result, concrete utopias are always under the threat of being 'translated'; that is, circumscribed, coopted, appropriated and subsumed (Dinerstein, 2016, p 53; see also Dinerstein, this volume).

The idea of transcending capitalism by developing prefigurative alternatives within its cracks is also evident in the work of the late sociologist Erik Olin Wright and his seminal book *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010). In the book, Wright outlines three mechanisms of change: the *ruptural* system change (revolution), the *symbiotic* system change (carried out through the compromise between the spheres of exchange, production and politics – typical of social democracy) and the *interstitial* system change (occurring in the 'interstices' of capitalism through the social and solidarity economy, collectives and cooperatives – this is the mechanism most aligned with prefigurative politics).ⁱ Wright dismisses the first mechanism as undesirable (in light of past attempts), the second as ending up reinforcing capitalism and the third as lacking the force to bring about radical change. In the last book he published before his death, Wright (2019) elaborates on his scepticism regarding the 'erosion' of capitalism from within, and embraces a more open, encompassing view whereby 'a new strategic idea may be emerging that combines the bottom-up, civil-society-centered initiatives of resisting and escaping capitalism with the top-down, state centered strategy of taming and dismantling capitalism' (Wright, 2019, p 58). He labels this new 'strategic configuration' as 'eroding capitalism'. Nonetheless, he describes this strategy as simultaneously 'enticing and far-fetched': enticing because it gives hope that change can happen, and far-fetched because it underestimates the power of capitalism to incorporate or crush any alternative economic system capable

of becoming big enough to threaten it (Wright, 2019, p 58). Following his reasoning, the only realistic option would be the formation of a 'sufficiently homogeneous subject of history' – necessarily unified around the values of democracy, equality and solidarity, not just class – to strive for a 'democratization of democracy' (Santos, 2007).

At first glance, Dinerstein's concrete utopias and Wright's real utopias seem to be similar concepts. Looking more closely, though, it becomes clear that their visions are slightly different. The first discernible distinction concerns the role of the state. For Dinerstein, the state 'translates' concrete utopias realised at the grassroots level by either coopting or appropriating them, while for Wright, the state is functional in enabling alternatives (which focus on the economic sector) to emerge and thrive within the dominant capitalist system. But the differences between Dinerstein's concrete utopias and Wright's real utopias are also noticeable at a deeper, epistemological level. In Dinerstein's view, striving to create more spaces in the economy to implement alternatives is not enough to transcend capitalism; it is equally (if not more) important to focus on the patterns of social reproduction underlying capitalism – in other words, to 'denaturalise' capitalist society through prefiguration. Such a denaturalising entails reconfiguring needs, shifting values and – in the words of the late founding father of ecosocialism, Joel Kovel – 'offsetting the belief-system' to generate a collective, shared intention 'that can withstand the power of capital's force' (Kovel, 2007, p 211). Indeed, this is why many prefigurative communities around the world call themselves *intentional* communities: they are organised and structured around shared intentions, which are often markedly different from dominant sets of values and beliefs (Kovel, 2007). In his book *Enemy*

of Nature (2007), Kovel proposes leaving behind a system in which the economy is driven by the exchange value of things and to focus, instead, on use value and the post-economic, 'intrinsic' value of things, in a 'transformative and receptive relation to nature' (Kovel, 2007, p 213). This demands a 'struggle for the qualitative side of things' that simultaneously incorporates control over work and its product with 'subjectivity, beauty, pleasure, and the spiritual' (Kovel, 2007, p 213).

Looking at many prefigurative social movements and practices, such as the aforementioned confederalist women's movement in Rojava and intentional communities across the world, it is clear that the struggle for change goes well beyond the political and economic spheres. While these movements share some characteristics with the past generation of so-called 'new social movements', they are best understood when compared with the alterglobalisation movement of the late 1990s and Occupy, which both targeted global social injustices at the macro level, acted at the micro/local level and were highly interconnected, transnationally, through organisational networks and digital platforms (Monticelli, 2018). Moreover, unlike single-issue movements (such as the environmental or gay rights movements), prefigurative social movements emphasise the need to tackle – simultaneously – economic, social and environmental issues, which are seen as deeply interrelated (for a recent depiction of capitalism as a 'world-system', see Patel and Moore, 2020). When it comes to their action repertoire, it is possible to recognise the presence of a strong affirmative tendency, which outplays the contentious aspect; the focus is on embodying, creating and enacting alternatives, rather than on the act of protesting.

It is an integral, holistic (from the Greek *holos*: 'whole') type of approach that seeks to oppose capitalism – understood as the dominant form of life, not as a mere economic form of production and consumption (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018) – through experimental practices that simultaneously allow for autonomy, playfulness and interconnectedness between (and within) other human and nonhuman beings (see Table 1.1). Change is sought at both the individual/subjective/psychological and collective/objective/performative levels, which are understood as inseparable, interconnected and mutually influential, albeit not without tensions or conflicts (Cornish et al, 2016). Similarly to Alain Badiou's 'break' (2005), Kovel's 'value off-setting' (2007) and Dinerstein's 'denaturalization of capitalism' (2016), Tom Moylan – a prominent scholar within the field of Utopian Studies – claims that change happens first at the 'socio-psychological level', thus allowing for a 'radical reconfiguration' of the person who breaks with her ideological formation and 'becomes a utopian subject' (Moylan, 2021, p 8).

Table 1.1 Prefigurative social movements: a holistic approach to change

| Who | What | When | Where | Why |
|---|---|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Subjects experiencing and enacting change | Fields in which change is sought | Time in which change is enacted | Interstitial spaces in which change is enacted | Motivation |
| Individual (Subjective and psychological level) ↕ Collective (Group and performative level) | Psychology Economy Politics Environment Culture Spirituality | Present | Existing spaces (squatted buildings, public spaces/ squares) New spaces (newly formed/built intentional communities/ecovillages) Restored/recuperated spaces (transition towns, recuperated factories) | Creation, diffusion and reproduction of alternatives |

Source: Author's elaboration, also based on Monticelli (2018).

Prefigurative politics: ontologically and epistemologically different<3>

The growing interest in prefigurative politics, and the widespread use of the term 'prefiguration' among scholars and activists, have been accompanied by critiques on the supposed futility of prefigurative politics in bringing about progressive social change. Among the most recent sceptical voices, Blühdorn and Deflorian (2021) have discussed prefigurative politics and its transformative capacity in new forms of environmental activism. The authors emphasise that prefigurative initiatives can either be coopted by the market or represent 'short-term articulations of otherness', during which the subject temporary suspends its conventional mode of living and

simulates alternative, noncapitalist forms of life (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021, p 266). Deflorian continues by describing how ‘collective everyday practices’ – a broadly defined category that includes alternative modes of consumption mostly diffused in the Global North, such as recycling, swapping clothing and recycling cafés – are ‘volatile modes of participation’ (Deflorian, 2021, p 348): attempts by the late-modern subject to (re)consolidate and refigure her identity. In the same special issue, Luigi Pellizzoni takes a strong position by highlighting the limits of affirmative thinking and emphasising instead the ‘subtractive element’ in prefiguration (Pellizzoni, 2021, p 374). Such a stance is reminiscent of both Paolo Virno’s exodus strategy (Virno, 2002) and Erik Olin Wright’s ‘escaping capitalism’ strategy, in which individualistic micro-alternatives are often built and dependent on accumulated capitalist wealth (Wright, 2019, p 52). Wright’s example of the banker who decides to ‘give up the rat race’, move to Vermont and live off his trust fund illustrates this. Sherilyn MacGregor takes a more nuanced position, stressing the importance of differentiating between ‘lifestyle’ and ‘everyday activism’ and not underestimating the transformative potential of what she calls – again, following Wright – ‘interstitial environmental politics’ (MacGregor, 2021, p 334).

But scepticism of prefigurative politics dates back to the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007–08 – and, in particular, of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Some critics, including Occupy activist Jonathan M. Smucker (2014), describe the prefigurative tendency within the movement as an expression of its middle-class status. According to Smucker, it is exactly the socioeconomic background and privileged material circumstances of many activists in advanced capitalist nations that pushes them towards less contentious types of actions, focusing more on what

he defines 'a project of private liberation' than on 'the larger common realm of power and politics' (Smucker, 2014). In other words, prefigurative practices within Occupy have been criticised for not only being an obstacle to the movement achieving its external political goals but also their inherently exclusionary character. Imaginative self-organising and radical everyday practices are accused of being a luxury that only people with enough time, health, energy and wealth can afford.

Along similar critical lines, Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi (2018) discuss the extent to which social movements that deploy prefigurative practices can foster progressive social change and be 'truly' emancipatory. To do so, they apply three normative evaluative criteria: nondomination (of one group over the other), functional sustainability (over time) and democracy (of decisional processes). Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) specify that it is when these practices constitute the core of a political programme, rather than a mere organisational mode, that they fail to comply with these three criteria. As early as 2013, Fraser expressed some critical positions regarding anarchism and anarchist practices, which, she argued, ignore the necessity of a 'two-track' political system; that is, a political system in which civil society raises grievances and requests on the one hand, and public institutions or governing bodies addressing these grievances – and, ideally, being held accountable by the public – on the other. To Fraser (2013), anarchist and prefigurative practices instead aim to reduce politics to a 'single-track' system in which these two layers overlap. To her, this is problematic, because it inevitably ends up replicating the very system these practices aim to overcome. As she so eloquently puts it, a one-track system:

<q>presupposes that everyone can always act collectively on everything that concerns them ... In what way and to what extent are a council's actions accountable to non-participants who are affected by or subjected to its decisions? These 'others' are, in effect, the council's public(s). (Fraser, 2013)</q>

This interpretation of prefigurative practices and the other 'assembly movements' derives, in part, from the inability of dominant academic frameworks to understand and provide fitting interpretive lenses for the concept (Brisette, 2016). Indeed, these frameworks usually describe social movements as 'demanding' and 'grieving' with respect to the separate and reified entity of the state, and as engaging in confrontational, contentious politics whenever these grievances are not taken into account or met. This, in Emily Brisette's (2016, p 114) view, creates a dangerous conceptual bifurcation between the state and civil society, which resembles Fraser's 'two-track' political system. I would add that, in the case of Blühdorn and Deflorian (2021), the understanding of prefigurative politics is confined to the realm of economic production and consumption, underestimating the holistic approach to change typical of prefiguration. Focusing on recycling, repair cafés and clothes swapping, moreover, does not include what feminist scholar Sara Motta calls 'multiple knowledges, multiple subjects of knowing and multiple practices of creating knowledge' (Motta, 2016, pp 44–5). Many scholars and critics of prefiguration almost unconsciously focus on knowledges, subjects and practices that stem from the Global North. A greater awareness of this situation must lead, on the one hand, to the examination of different 'knowledges' (as Motta calls them) and, on the other, to a better acknowledgement of the different prefigurative practices from a decolonial perspective (see Dinerstein, this volume).

Prefigurative politics aims to imagine, produce and reproduce – materially – new collective subjects and subjectivities, new democratic modes of participation and new decision-making processes – in other words, new forms of life. In this way, ‘the discussion is raised up to the question of being’ (Hardt and Negri, 2017, p 245). The creation of these new subjectivities is intrinsically a reaction to not only the ideology backed by dominant institutions but also their functioning and organising principles. It is the result of a critique addressing both their form and their substantive nature, as exemplified by the case of Kurdish confederalism (Piccardi, this volume). In this sense, our understanding of what is ‘political’ must be broadened beyond those activities that *directly* aim to overthrow and overtake a position of hegemony. Prefigurative movements, instead, envisage change in an *ontologically* and *epistemologically* different way from political parties and traditional protest movements. Nonetheless, the type of change they envisage remains fundamentally and intrinsically ‘political’. To understand the ontological and epistemological nature of progressive social change as it is conceived in prefigurative politics, one must reflect on three interrelated features: the mechanism of change, the relationship to (state) power, and the temporality of change.

Prefigurative politics strives to embody alternative forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, belief systems and direct experience. Looking at prefigurative politics through the lens of feminist political philosopher Rosi Braidotti’s ‘radical materialism’ (or ‘neomaterialism’) is fruitful, in that it allows us to grasp the core of its episteme: the ‘political’ is affirmative and immanent, and develops within and despite capitalism (Braidotti, 2019). Progressive social change is thus achieved through a

karst-like mechanism of erosion (à la Wright) and, simultaneously, affirmation from within. Prefigurative politics grounds change in material reality and experimentalism (Martell, 2018, p 442) – indeed, experimentalism is a central feature of prefigurative politics. Long after Marxist critiques of utopian socialism dismissed the importance of experimentalism, scholars such as Axel Honneth (2018, p 53) resuscitated it in critical theory. Similar to Wright’s aforementioned argument, however, its use is too often limited to the realm of economic production and exchange. In contrast, the ontological and epistemological nature of prefiguration digs its roots into radical feminist and ecological thought, in that its focus extends beyond production to centre on alternative modes of social reproduction and the preservation of life. Prefiguration shares this perspective with the feminist and autonomist theories on the commons, for which everyday life, the personal sphere and the body are arenas of political struggle, and commoning is a means of reclaiming and ‘re enchanting the world’ (Federici, 2019).

Turning to the relationship with power, political parties and protest movements mostly focus on taking state power whereas, in prefiguration, power is understood as a possibility; one that takes place through ‘micro-instances that are embodied and interrelated’ (Braidotti, 2019, p 87). Following Foucault and Deleuze, power is defined as empowering and creative ‘potentia’ – from the Latin ‘ability’ or ‘capacity to do something’ – rather than coercive ‘potestas’ – which, in Roman law, referred to the power of promulgating edicts or initiating military actions (Braidotti, 2019, pp 110–11). Prefigurative politics is embodied by a multiplicity of communities within different social and political contexts worldwide, each of which is organised and networked differently and holds a distinct belief regarding whether, and how, to relate

to the state and capitalism. For example, indigenous populations, refugees and migrants, LGBTQ activists and dismissed workers have created some of the most enduring prefigurative movements and communities. Through prefiguration, these communities do not demand recognition or redistribution (as Nancy Fraser would put it); rather, they affirm their identities and strive to create the material conditions for a more equitable, democratic and cooperative way of living – essentially, they endeavour for self-determination, emancipation and empowerment.

Understanding how prefigurative politics interacts with (and reacts to) power brings me to the third feature of prefiguration: temporality. The focus of prefigurative politics is undeniably the *immanence* of the present moment. This does not imply, however, that the change happens abruptly (Maeckelbergh, 2017, pp 121–34); on the contrary, the material creation of infrastructures that enable alternative modes of production and forms of social reproduction requires time, energy and resources. For this reason, prefigurative politics entails a change that happens in the present but develops processually, immanently and slowly; again, because of its karst-like nature, it may require time to produce visible changes on a large scale. If we compare this with the change the accelerationists envisage, for instance, it is clear that prefiguration involves a different kind of temporality: accelerationism aims to develop after capitalism has exhausted its energies, and to utilise and reconvert capitalism's infrastructures. This is why accelerationists call their envisioned society 'post-capitalist' (Snircek and Williams, 2015).

Having sketched these constitutive features – the mechanism of karst-like erosion from within; focus on self-determination, emancipation and empowerment; and

processual temporality – it is evident that prefigurative politics’ understanding of progressive social change is ontologically and epistemologically different from how change is conceived in both representative and contentious politics. As such, any comparison of prefigurative politics, representative politics and contentious politics does not hold (see Table 1.2). This does not mean, though, that prefigurative politics and other forms of political participation are incompatible; on the contrary, they can mutually reinforce each other. There are ways of taking the best of both worlds. The key is to accept that prefigurative politics *cannot* bring the type of change sought by political parties or protest movements, but *can* complement their actions with its holistic perspective and focus on experimentation and materiality. Even the relationship with the state can – under some circumstances – be constructive, and prefiguration can – in some cases – positively feed into representative politics.

Table 1.2. Ontology and epistemology in representative, contentious and prefigurative politics

| | Mechanism of change | Relationship to state power | Temporality |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Representative politics | Delegation | Legitimising | Future |
| Contentious politics | Rupture | Conflictual | Present |
| Prefigurative politics | Interstitial erosion and embodiment | Avoiding | Processual |

Source: Author’s elaboration, also drawing from Wright (2010) and Maeckelberg (2017; this volume).

As discussed, the translation of prefigurative politics often coincides with co-option, simulation or repression. But translation could also entail a positive diffusion and democratisation of transformative niche practices, with the support of political forces that are willing to offer it. One illustrative example is the resurgence of radical municipalism. Despite the presence of similar initiatives in many European countries during the first half of the twentieth century, radical municipalism has undergone a renaissance in reaction to the implementation of austerity policies in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007–08. Radical municipalism promotes the deployment of participatory democracy in decision-making processes at the municipal level. The ideology of the movement is strongly influenced by the concepts of ‘libertarian municipalism’ and ‘eco-Communalism’ coined by American social theorist Murray Bookchin (Biehl, 2015). Programmes vary from city to city, but the overall aim is to ‘defend human rights and the common good, to feminize politics and to fight the rise of the far right’ (Fearless Cities, 2018). Radical municipalism gained prominence after Ada Colau was elected Mayor of Barcelona in 2015, and is now constituted by a global network of cities and towns across the world. The movement is growing internationally, as demonstrated by the almost 700 municipalities that participated in the 2017 summit, Fearless Cities, in Barcelona. These ongoing experimentations, driven by prefigurative imaginaries of what alternative ‘governing political formations’ could look like (Cooper, 2016), show that prefigurative politics has the potential to ignite progressive social change in an inclusive, democratic and scalable manner (Russell, 2019).

Conclusion<3>

The financial crisis of 2007–08 reinvigorated critical analyses of capitalism and interest in alternatives. Some groups on the Left have emphasised the need to oppose capitalism by striving to enact more localised, ecological and decelerated alternatives in the present – within, and despite, capitalism. For the latter and the concrete utopias they have inspired across the world – such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, indigenous communities in Latin America and the global network of ecovillages and intentional communities – prefiguration is a foundational principle because it conceives progressive social change *holistically*, in a way that is *ontologically* and *epistemologically* different from representative and contentious politics. If contemporary capitalism is conceived as an encompassing form of life, rather than a mere system of economic production, then the only way to transcend it is by embodying alternative forms of life. Thus, change has to be sought on multiple, interconnected levels – economic, political, cultural, personal and even spiritual. And this is exactly what prefigurative politics does: experiment with alternative practices of production and social reproduction, with alternative values and beliefs in a constant process of trial and error. As such, prefiguration cannot be dismissed as a mere project of private liberation or a withdrawal from society.

The multiple crises we are facing on the economic, social and ecological levels require the combination of what I have argued are two *mutually reinforcing* types of politics: prefigurative politics (to imagine and experiment with embodied alternatives) and representative politics (to counteract hegemonic and regressive forces, such as right-wing populism). This synergetic interplay, which is not only possible but necessary, can lead to the diffusion of transformative niche practices, such as radical

municipalism. Indeed, some of the most recent social movements – such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and the Sunrise Movement – recognise the interconnectedness of socioeconomic, racial, reproductive and ecological struggles, and are blending prefigurative practices with more conventional counterhegemonic tactics. Exploring the interactions and potential alliances between prefigurative, representative and contentious politics constitutes one of the most promising pathways for achieving progressive social change in the years to come.

Notes<3>

1. See, for instance, Paul Mason in *The Guardian*:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/17/postcapitalism-end-of-capitalism-begun>.

2. See: <https://www.anaceciliadinerstein.com/women-on-the-verge/>.

3. Other distinguished thinkers belonging to the current of Open Marxism are John Holloway and Henry Lefebvre.

4. See: <https://www.anaceciliadinerstein.com/new-page-2/>.

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