



PREFIGURATION

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WHEN FACED WITH QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE ultimate goal of their encampments, many Occupy activists responded with variations on what is by now an established truism: “*We are the change!*” This answer symptomatically expresses the prefigurative orientation embraced by contemporary activists. For many Occupy activists, social change was *immanent to the process* unfolding in the encampments. By locating the goal within the action itself, means and ends melted together.

1. This entry is highly indebted to ongoing exchange with AK Thompson—so much so that, at the end of writing, I am no longer sure whether the words are his or mine.

As in other contemporary radical movements, this focus on “process” coincided with an inclination toward participatory democracy. Drawing on elements from previous waves of protest (including standardized procedures for “horizontal” and “inclusive” decision-making), Occupy Wall Street’s General Assembly became the central image suggesting that Occupy was a prefiguration of “real democracy.” In order to understand how this situation arose, it is necessary to contextualize the bifurcated historical development of “prefiguration” as both political concept and practice.

As a concept elaborated to guide activist practice, “prefiguration” emerged in the 1960s along with the North American New Left. Among the concept’s various and sometimes-vague deployments since then, two distinct inflections can be distinguished (Yates 2015). The first sees prefigurative politics as an ethical approach to conducting protest. Here means must be consistent with and inherently reflect the desired end (Honeywell 2007). In the second iteration, “prefiguration” implies the active creation of counter-institutions designed to foster individuals’ and communities’ power (Murray 2014). Whereas the first conception prioritizes the symbolic value of exemplary gestures, the second sees prefigurative politics as an additional aspect of social movement activity focused on self-organization. Despite their equivalent strategic importance, however, the first conception is currently prevalent within radical scenes in the global North.

Although the codification of prefigurative politics is strongly associated with the radicalism of the ’60s, it is hard to determine the historical roots of this approach. Throughout the nearly two thousand years leading up to the rise of the New Left, heretical religious movements formed exemplary communities to enact belief outside of established doctrine. Although contemporary activist accounts often obscure the religious origins of “prefiguration,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* raises them implicitly through its indication that the concept refers to the “foreshadowing of a person or thing.” Such foreshadowing can be seen in John’s millenarian vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelations, where the revelation of Jesus Christ is foreshadowed to John of Patmos through prophetic

visions. Later, in *City of God*, Saint Augustine (1962) proposed that Christianity involved an awareness that two worlds—distinct but overlapping—existed within this one. Although Christians could not remain aloof to earthly affairs, it was necessary for them to stay alert to the work of providence that animated them. Whereas the actualization of the divine was projected into the future, some glimpses could—through devotion—be lived in the present. In this way, Augustine bound the conception of prefiguration to the messianic promise.

Later, without ever advancing the term “prefigurative politics” themselves, early-nineteenth-century socialist and anarchist thinkers like Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Proudhon advocated the creation of alternative institutions as a means of overcoming existing social relations. Mostly stripped of religious content, these proposals were nevertheless inflected with messianism. As intentional communities established to prefigure a society based on cooperation and striving toward harmony, the Fourier-inspired Phalansteries are a case in point. Social movements of these times were determined to contribute to the moral renewal of industrial society. The implicit assumption underlying these prefigurative experiments was that the good example would lead. According to Michael P. Young (2006), the moral underpinnings of early-nineteenth-century social movements in the United States was directly attributable to their evangelical character and their emphasis on personal responsibility.

Criticizing the “purely utopian character” of these early socialist experiments, which he thought were “necessarily doomed to failure” (Marx and Engels 2012, 74), Marx proposed in a letter to Arnold Ruge (1843) that the task was not to create a new, alternate content but rather to actualize the content of the existing world through conscious engagement so that it might accord with revolutionary desires. This dialectical approach encouraged a strategic orientation to the contradictions of capitalism. Conventional ethics in the present became superfluous in the face of an unswervingly instrumental orientation toward the future. The inevitable subsequent conflict between Marxist and anarchist tendencies within

the International Workingmen's Association seems in retrospect to foreshadow the tensions between "prefigurative" and "strategic" approaches that would emerge in social movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, anarchist and anarcho-communist thinkers like Voltairine de Cleyre, Rudolf Rocker, and Gustav Landauer strongly influenced the prefigurative approach devoted to the formation of counter-institutions. As the autonomous action of workers became increasingly opposed to hierarchical, centralized, and statist socialist organizations, anarchists and other libertarian communists encouraged decentralized forms of self-organization, including production and consumption cooperatives (Azzellini 2015; Cleaver 2000). In their preamble, the Industrial Workers of the World refer to this process as "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." Radical communists picked up this prefigurative practice and carried out important experiments in council communism.

In contrast to prefiguration's ethical inflection, the focus on alternative institutions is viewed less as a pedagogically conceived exodus than as a direct part of the challenge to existing power relations. Although process still matters, it is seen less as an aim in itself (a signature of the ethical) than as a means of organizing movements for justice. Considering Occupy's orientation toward immanence, such a prefigurative orientation forces us to ask: how does consensus-based decision-making in General Assemblies concretely serve the goal toward which it aspires?

During the 1960s, with the rise of the counterculture, a broader "cultural turn" in the social sciences, and the emergence of the New Left, the ethical dimensions of prefiguration were rediscovered, and the idea (if not yet the term) became implanted in the radical imagination. Already in 1962, members of SDS could lament that American society had become witness to a "democracy apathetic and manipulated when it should be dynamic and participative." Recounted in *The Port Huron Statement*, this perspective heralded the rise of what Christopher Lasch (1979) would later decry as a "cult of participation," in which the *experience* of protesting was

tantamount to protest itself. For their part, although the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) did not make mention of "prefiguration," they did invoke "beloved community" to "define both how we related to one another within the organization and what we sought to build 'out there' in the world we sought to transform" (Miller 2014).

Carl Boggs (1977) coined the term "prefigurative politics" in the context of his work on revolutionary movements in Russia, Italy, and Spain, as well as on the New Left in the United States. The sociologist Wini Breines (1980; 1988; 1989) later popularized the term through her writing on the US New Left. For Boggs (1977, 100), such politics were "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal." Conceptually, prefiguration marked a rejection of both centrism and vanguardism. For her part, Breines (1989, 6–7) distinguished between "strategic politics" aimed at structural changes, and "prefigurative politics" aimed at creating communal embodiments of the desired society. In this view, "prefigurative politics" offered a means of moving beyond a demand-based politics focused primarily on socio-economic issues.

Inspired by these discussions, radicals began adopting "prefigurative politics" to describe their own practices and mark their distance from the bureaucratic and hierarchical "old" left. Strong critiques of both technocratic liberal democracy and of Soviet state bureaucracy resulted in a widespread preference for horizontal forms of organizing. Meanwhile, the cultural turn in social movements created more space for identity as well as for emotional and personal issues—what has been called "the democratization of everyday life" (Melucci 1989). Finally, the politicization of subjectivity and interpersonal relations has politicized integrity: people are now called upon to have their daily practice fully reflect their political values.

This politicization of personal experience became especially prominent in the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s. Organizational hierarchies were decried not solely as part of an

“old” bureaucratic left, but also as expressions of a “male left” with its “perpetuation of patriarchal, and . . . capitalist values” (Cathy Levine 2002). In her famous essay “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” feminist organizer Jo Freeman (2002) criticized this position for having fostered informal hierarchies that were even harder to address. Prefiguration began to be critiqued as a sub-cultural tendency as the New Left’s commitment to the “beloved community” began erring toward self-marginalization. As Engler and Engler (2014a) put it, “If the project of building alternative community totally eclipses attempts to communicate with the wider public and win broad support, it risks becoming a very limiting type of self-isolation.”

By the late 1970s, the US antinuclear movement had adopted a number of Quaker principles to advocate for participatory democracy, decentralized affinity groups, and planned violations of legal boundaries. These groups added a propositional dimension to the oppositional direct action approach deployed by late-nineteenth-century anarchists. According to Epstein, what was new about these groups was that “the opportunity to act out a vision and build community was at least as important as the immediate objective of stopping nuclear power” (1991, 123). The combination of opposition and proposition through “nonviolent direct action” subsequently influenced many counter-globalization groups during the late 1990s (see Graeber 2009).

The rise of the counter-globalization movement triggered renewed interest in prefiguration. Several activist scholars consider the counter-globalization movement to be the ultimate movement-based expression of prefigurative politics (Graeber 2002). Picking up on the heritage of the antinuclear Clamshell Alliance and supported by anarchist writers like David Graeber, Paul Goodman, and Colin Ward, activist collectives like the Direct Action Network (DAN) aimed to make their non-violent direct action a perfect reflection of the prefigurative ethics. Reflecting on the 1999 anti-WTO blockade in Seattle, Rebecca Solnit (2007, 8) summarized prefiguration when she insisted that “you can and perhaps ought to embody what you avow.”

Today the context for discussions about prefiguration has changed. Global capitalism rather than the Old Left is now the reference point. As Farber (2014) points out, “The contemporary supporters of this perspective are no longer reacting to an Old Left but to . . . the rituals of a political democracy increasingly devoid of content.” In *Beautiful Trouble*, we learn that “the goal of a prefigurative intervention is twofold: to offer a compelling glimpse of a possible, and better, future, and also—slyly or baldly—to point up the poverty of imagination of the world we actually do live in” (Boyd 2012).

The ethical reading of prefiguration emphasizes immanence and immediate experience. In this way, it echoes Hakim Bey’s (2004) account of the “temporary autonomous zone,” where “we concentrate our force on temporary ‘power surges’, avoiding all entanglements ‘with permanent solutions.’” At its threshold, this orientation declares the present to be the future; however, if our organization *is* our strategy, then strategy and organization become blurred, and instrumental reckoning about objectives becomes impossible.

Surely, where it designates an experimental approach to the creation of counter-institutions while organizing with explicit goals, there is nothing wrong with prefiguration. However, if it comes to mean experiments without goals, it may deprive radical movements of one of their most powerful weapons—the idea that current acts have future consequences. If “prefiguration” as experimentation with counter-institutions is to maintain its teleological focus, it is necessary for radicals to determine whether a division between community-builders and strategy-builders is actually possible.

SEE ALSO: Demand; Democracy; Domination; Friend; Future; Hegemony; Hope; Politics; Utopia