



## Prefigurative politics

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*'Prefigurative politics' refers to how activists embody and enact, within their activism, the socialities and practices they foster for broader society. Inspired by anarchist principles, the core practices characterising prefiguration include participative democracy, horizontality, inclusiveness, and direct action. Gaining visibility with the social movements that blossomed after 1968, and again with the post-1999 movements opposing neoliberal globalisation, prefigurative politics involve deploying political practices that are in line with the activists' envisaged goals. These, in turn, tend to encompass the construction of a democratic and horizontal society, which must be enacted through egalitarian relationships between activists who refrain from resorting to authoritarian, sexist, and exclusionary means to reach political goals. Yet, what are the origins of this concept? What kind of politics are referred to as prefigurative? Since the concept's consolidation, anthropologists have been at the forefront of answering these questions, as both researchers and activists. They look at how prefigurative politics intersect with themes dear to the discipline, such as social organisation, globalisation, social change, community-building, and everyday ways of inhabiting the world. This entry explores how prefigurative politics as a concept and as a series of practices have become relevant among those who build horizontal political and social relations, oppose representative democracy, and embody alternative lifestyles. Exploring prefigurative politics leads scholars to question the seemingly straightforward divide between the New Left and 'old lefts'. Additionally, asking whether right-wing movements can also engage in prefigurative politics helps us better understand the pervasive practices that transform non-institutionalised activism into laboratories from where people foster change and experiment with new socialities.*

### Introduction

Prefigurative politics—and its cognate, prefiguration—is one of those concepts that appear to be rather abstruse, but whose meaning actually indicates something ordinary. It refers to the strategies and practices employed by political activists to build alternative futures in the present and to effect political change by not [reproducing](#) the social structures that activists oppose. Prefiguration has been widely associated with the *modus operandi* of the social movements that blossomed after the 1960s, drawing on anarchist-inspired principles, such as participative [democracy](#), horizontality, inclusiveness, and direct action. Via the motto 'another world is possible', prefiguration is often part of activist-led social experiments that, rather than serving clearly established goals, create open-ended ways of reimagining society and contesting the entanglements of representative democracy, [neoliberalism](#), social inequality, and globalisation.

Yet, before prefiguration gained prominence with the last decades' protests against neoliberal globalisation, how did this concept come into being? First used centuries ago to betoken a form of Christian salvation, how did prefiguration acquire a different meaning among political activists? What kind of politics

is referred to as prefigurative?

The 1960s witnessed the emergence of the so-called ‘new social movements’ and the ‘New Left’. These constituted movements that amplified causes which spoke not only to economic and class-related goals, but also to civil rights, [ethics](#), and alternative ways of inhabiting the world. Such causes include feminism, environmentalism, the movements for gay rights, animal rights, the American civil rights and other anti-racism movements worldwide, students’ movements and, since the 1990s, alterglobalisation movements (against neoliberal globalisation). Questioning Marxist and social-democratic forms of political action, the prefigurative forms of activism at the heart of these movements do not necessarily seek to mobilise every means available to achieve a pre-established, future-oriented goal. Instead, they aim to create a more [egalitarian](#) and inclusive society by equalling a movement’s means with a movement’s ends: reaching a horizontal society requires building horizontal relationships between activists in the present, which will, in turn, prefigure the envisaged end.

Such movements and tactics were labelled ‘new’ when measured against the paradigmatic ‘old’ of institutionalised activism carried out by political parties and trade unions since at least the Industrial Revolution. Thinking about political activism from the perspective of grand narratives and ideologies—as well as of communist theories of comprehensive social change—has stimulated social scientists to regard the success of a given mobilisation as dependent upon the attainment of certain predetermined goals (Maeckelbergh 2011), such as a [revolution](#) that will dismantle capitalism and implement a new mode of production. Yet, seeking a revolution as the ultimate goal often assumes that any means are valid to reach a more egalitarian and classless society. Unlike this paradigm, prefigurative politics refrain, for instance, from using authoritarianism to build a democratic society.

Anthropology has shown a long-standing interest in prefigurative politics since this concept’s first links with social movements. Mostly through the work of anthropologists-cum-activists, prefiguration has been approached alongside themes dear to the discipline, such as social organisation, globalisation, inequality, social change, community-building, and the ways in which everyday lives are lived. While political scientists and sociologists have mostly concentrated on political strategies by drawing parallels between several cognate social movements, anthropologists have employed participant observation to explore particular movements, collectives, and networks. In such manner, they have produced a nuanced understanding of how prefiguration takes place on the ground—without losing sight of its shortcomings.

Due to [ethnographers](#)’ particular attention to prefigurative politics in Europe and the United States, the existing body of literature may convey the idea that prefiguration thrives particularly in the Global North. Existing analyses have also tended to focus on disruptive, contentious politics. By contrast, fewer studies stress the pertinence of prefigurative practices in the everyday lives of people in the Global South, and of those who are not full-time protesters. Even fewer have considered how right-wing activists also mobilise

prefiguration. While scholars generally agree on what constitutes prefigurative politics, some highlight an apparent paradox when the anarchist-inspired principles underlying prefiguration are mobilised by activists who are, content-wise, anything but anarchists. Other scholars, in turn, accentuate prefiguration as a political strategy that can be similarly deployed by activists advancing progressive as much as conservative content. Lastly, as I will discuss, several researchers have used prefiguration as a rather problematic umbrella term to label which movements and forms of activism have a prefigurative character and which ones have not.

To explore the [historical](#) and current significance of prefigurative politics, as well as its limitations, this entry analyses how this concept and the practices it designates have come to bear relevance among those who oppose representative democracy, build small-scale politically organised entities as horizontal micropolities, and embody alternative lifestyles. Questioning the seeming straightforwardness of the divide between the new and old lefts and bringing right-wing movements to the discussion, this entry provides anthropologists and non-academics with a gateway to better understand the pervasive practices that aim to turn activism into laboratories from where people foster change by experimenting with new socialities.

### **Revolutions that dismiss the revolution**

The concept of prefiguration is often credited to Carl Boggs (1977) to describe the logics and practices of left-wing movements that, mostly since the 1960s, opposed Leninism and the working-class politics aimed at structural reform. Yet, little did Boggs know that the term had been previously used by Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE to explain a key tenet of Christianity. Examining the fall of lust-laden Rome, Augustine ([1470] 1998) pointed out that, to enjoy spiritual salvation and avoid collective perishing, people should resign their paganism and commit to [charity](#) and [moral](#) integrity. Only by prefiguring a divine beatitude could one near a state of holiness to be partially enjoyed in the present and fully realised in the future (Scholl 2016, 321; Buts 2019, 17).

Whereas Augustine heralded spiritual salvation via the earthly enactment of God's conduct, centuries later, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ([1848] 2015) would call for political salvation via overthrowing the bourgeoisie and bringing an end to class struggle. Moving away from prefiguration, the *Communist manifesto* (1848) urged proletarians to fight the monopoly of the means of production held by the few, in a form of political salvation that ousts reformisms and entails [revolutionary](#) macropolitical changes. Toppling all existing social conditions, according to Marx and Engels, makes the revolution the means to reach the ultimate end of inaugurating a communist, classless society. Yet, means and ends frequently clashed here: major streams of Marxism ended up reproducing the authoritarian state power and highly [bureaucratic](#) hierarchies characteristic of bourgeois society (Boggs 1977, 5). Thus, Marx's anti-statist theories often gained materiality via statist practices.

Contrasting with such statist orientations, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence of a new wave of radical politics. With the May 1968 uprisings in France and the civil rights movements in the US as their core symbols, the new social movements and New Left (Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002) reinforced the centrality of collective identity, civil rights, and lifestyles in activist agendas. In the French case, the emergence of youth mobilisations—initially associated with the fight against university funding policies—promptly gained the support of broader society. Via street barricades, occupation of universities, and France's largest wildcat strikes, protesters—factory [workers](#), students, and feminists, among others—built a communal agenda without having much in common. This implied replacing each group's specific claims with broader demands, thus turning May 1968 into an open-ended experiment of society-building. Through grassroots practices collectively decided and enacted on the go, May 1968 had a long-lasting effect, enabling environmentalist, anti-fascist, and feminist perspectives to enter into the mainstream.

Meanwhile, Italian autonomism was gaining ground since the 1950s. Starting on factories' shop floors, the worker's autonomy movement (*Autonomia Operaia*) in Italy came to involve university students, women, [artists](#), migrants, and other subaltern groups not traditionally conceived as 'proletarian' (Katsiaficas 2006). While occupying factories, universities, and abandoned buildings, autonomists sought to enact self-management and carry out everyday, small-scale revolutions by circumventing representative decision-making bodies (such as corporate boards, trade unions, governmental ministries, and political parties). On the other side of the Atlantic, the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in the US succeeded in connecting students and workers, Black Panthers and pacifists, upper-middle-class white people, feminists, church organisations, anti-nuclear activists, and war veterans. Initially an uprising against warmongering, this coalition orchestrated a display of generalised political dissatisfaction despite not having a single, unifying agenda.

Operating outside the institutional frameworks of the state, political parties, and trade unions, these new social movements took shape through autonomous activists who organised in a mostly non-hierarchical, network-like manner. They sought to break with hierarchical and institutionalised politics in two main ways. Firstly, they expanded the scope of politics by bringing to the table previously marginalised political agendas. Mobilising prefiguration as an activist strategy, the New Left underscored issues from feminism and structural [racism](#) to drug policy reforms and environmental issues. Conservative activists equally deployed prefiguration to increase the relevance of anti-abortion and anti-drug advocacy. Secondly, the new social movements gave visibility to principles according to which the political means to achieve an end had to be consistent with that end. To build a more [democratic](#) and [egalitarian](#) society, one had to deploy democratic and egalitarian forms of grassroots activism. Likewise, building a white supremacist society means enacting 'racially pure' small-scale communities (Futrell and Simi 2004). Such uses of the concept have brought prefiguration to the core of post-1960s social movements' political repertoire (Boggs 1977;

Calhoun 1993).

Despite the diversity of prefigurative practices and the fact that the movements analysed here do not constitute a homogeneous whole, these practices tend to have in common 'the embodiment, within the ongoing political practise of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (Boggs 1977, 6-7). Hence, prefiguration is a way for activists to anticipate the changes they seek. And while everyday micropolitical action may not trigger a revolution or herald political salvation, it may progressively transform our ways of thinking, behaving, and imagining what society should be like.

### **An activist and anthropological field of action take shape**

After its surge in the 1960s, prefigurative politics gained new momentum in the 1990s. With the dissolution of the USSR, social movements had to reinvent themselves beyond statism and rethink the capitalism versus communism divide. The 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico, for instance, gathered peasants, indigenous peoples, and marginalised urban groups in protest against the [neoliberalism](#) imposed by the Mexican state's land reforms and the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). However, the Zapatistas did not address the government or political parties in their political demands: they fought for autonomy to implement by themselves the local-level changes they envisaged (Stahler-Stolk 2010). Ultimately, the Zapatistas managed to establish autonomous zones in the Mexican state of Chiapas, with local communities having more say in shaping state policies and school curricula. Twenty-four years on, in 2018, the Zapatistas put forward Marichuy, an indigenous woman, to run for the presidency of Mexico. Aware of the unlikelihood of her victory, the Zapatistas aimed to use the presidential elections to highlight to the subalterns at the margins of Mexican society that their reality can be changed for the better, especially outside the framework of institutionalised, representative politics (Ansotegui 2018). Prefiguring alternatives to market-controlled globalisation and state politics since 1994, the Zapatista uprising inspired movements that would increasingly tackle global issues.

Prefigurative politics gained even wider visibility with a movement that placed neoliberal globalisation as its nemesis: the 1999 protests in Seattle against the austerity, deregulation, and large-scale privatisation measures laid down by the Washington Consensus and advanced by international bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). Following months of planning, the activists and collectives loosely gathered under the Direct Action Network formed a human barricade around the venue hosting the WTO ministerial conference. Contrasting with the WTO's hierarchies and formalities, protesters wore costumes, [danced](#), carried placards, and chanted anti-capitalist slogans, followed by marching bands performing in the blocked streets. Violence was also present, coming from police repression and from some protesters' tactics of fighting neoliberalism by damaging institutional buildings, banks, and multinational corporations. Such lack of a consensus between partisans of violent and non-violent forms of direct action evinces the

inherent diversity of activist tactics subsumed under the label 'prefiguration'.

While the protesters prevented the WTO delegates from reaching the conference venue, activist crowds turned into a commons—a free space where people developed, at least for a limited number of days, an alternative sphere of [social \(re\)production](#) involving [care](#), education, food, and housing (Varvarousis, Asara and Akbulut 2021). Through general assemblies, workshops, and encampments, they sought to prefigure locally the kind of relationships they envisaged for the world. In bonding with each other through solidarity, informality, horizontality, and inclusiveness, the activists sought to oppose, through their practices, the formality, authoritarianism, and exclusionary character of neoliberal organisations. The commons also created opportunities for radical learning: in a dialogical process of horizontal education (Backer et al. 2017), activists co-produced knowledge, learned from each other's prior political experiences, and materialised alternative socialities. Keeping the movement constantly open to dialogue was their way to give justice to and make real their motto 'another world is possible'.

Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers (2011) aptly illustrate the significance of open-endedness for prefigurative politics. Inspired by the writings of [Gilles Deleuze](#) and Félix Guattari (1987), the authors argue that capitalism operates through apparatuses of capture by creating boundaries to autonomous thinking and paralysing collective action. In remaining open to multiple ways of imagining and rebuilding society, the Seattle protests had a 'rhizomatic' character: for being non-institutionalised, spontaneous, and made up of activists supporting diverse causes, viewpoints, and activist strategies, these kinds of protests are meant to be more resistant to capture by institutional politics. An open letter, petition, or even a march against the WTO conference would have constituted a more easily recognisable repertoire for politicians and the police. It would have enabled them to enact standard protocols to either repress or ignore such expressions of dissatisfaction. A carnivalesque demonstration, on the other hand, shows how [resistance](#) can also be aestheticised, making it difficult for politicians, business people, and the police to curb the protest.

In this fashion, Seattle sought to depict neoliberal globalisation not as an abstract, unstoppable process, but as a set of concrete austerity and deregulation measures that can be challenged and mocked by ordinary people. This power of the crowds was later underscored by the motto 'we are the 99%', made famous by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, via the argument according to which the majority of the world's population cannot pay for the mistakes of the upper-class minority.

The Seattle protests also consolidated prefigurative politics not as an 'anything goes' way of showing dissatisfaction, but as a strategy in itself (Maeckelbergh 2011). In opposing summits of the G8, NATO, and the World Bank (Graeber 2009), the New Left draws its political action on grassroots [democracy](#), direct action, and the creation of alternative micropolitical relations of power (Yates 2015a). Holding voluntary working groups to set up tents in occupied squares, serving food to participants, protecting them from police action, and keeping spaces of protest clean work to turn hierarchical power [relations](#) into inclusive

and participatory practices.

In anthropology, the prefiguration debate gained popularity mostly through the work of David Graeber. Actively participating in alterglobalisation movements and demonstrations mainly in the US, Graeber (2002; 2009, xvii) asserts that political activism in the twenty-first century will be increasingly influenced by anarchist imperatives and practices. What Graeber refers to as 'anarchism' emerges directly from the left-libertarian tradition that fosters social equality alongside individual freedom. Expressed via direct action, this conception of anarchism is grounded on prefigurative practices that turn activist settings into concrete examples of what 'real democracy is like' and how society can take alternative forms—even though such forms do not necessarily reflect left-wing contents. Social scientists who document how such strategies unfold in real life placed prefiguration at the heart of their analyses of mobilisations such as the Occupy movement (Graeber 2009; Razsa and Kurnik 2012), feminist movements (Polletta 2002; Ishkanian and Saavedra 2019; Carmo 2019), France's *Nuit debout* protests (Kokoreff 2016), the 15M movement in Spain (Flesher Fominaya 2020), and the World Social Forums held mostly in the Global South (Juris 2005; Teivainen 2016). Going beyond Western urban spaces, some authors have brought anti-state forms of activism for self-determination among Aboriginal peoples in Australia and Amazonian indigenous peoples to this discussion (Petray and Gertz 2018).

### **Materialising participatory democracy**

Prefigurative politics does not just refer to specific forms of protests in which the very process of planning, carrying out, and embodying political action becomes part of the message activists aim to convey (Flesher Fominaya 2014). It also denotes direct ways of living [democracy](#). One of the most closely examined enactments of prefigurative politics are therefore the general assemblies, which are consensual decision-making spaces within occupied squares. As part of a 'generalised revolt against representation' (Tormey 2012, 136), participatory democracy carried out by the activists/individuals themselves has become a mechanism to counter representative democracy, which is epitomised by political parties and elections. In general assemblies, participants are placed in a circle to hear those at the centre. No one must block the view of others, so that those who are hard of hearing or far away can understand the speaker through lip reading and body language. When the circle is too wide, participants employ a technique known as 'the people's microphone': people gathered immediately around the speaker repeat everything they say in unison, to make the speaker's [voice](#) reach those at the edges without the need for amplification devices (Deseriis 2014).

General assemblies are expected to give voice to potentially everyone: once joining the speaking queue, participants should speak for themselves, not as spokespersons of any collective or institution (Teivanen 2016; Razsa and Kurnik 2012). Interestingly, giving voice to the 99% starts with empowering activists individually, by placing autonomy at the core of ideal-typical prefigurative politics. General assemblies and

decentralised workshops make room for direct action and convergence of thought and action. For instance, middle-class environmentalists may ask manual [labourers](#) for guidance on preparing posters on veganism that could find broader appeal, and feminists may advise anarchist students on how to convey their agendas in neutral language. Workshops also propose self-reflection on the commons, raising awareness of issues like [racism](#) or ableism among activists, as in this 2011 Occupy Boston workshop:

The facilitator, a white male, began the activity by asking for 20 diverse volunteers to line up side by side at the front of the crowd assembled at the Occupy Boston encampment at Dewey Square. He then issued a series of declarations: 'If your ancestors lost land by the conquest of the U.S. government, step back; Step forward if your ancestors gained assets through the slave trade; Step back if your ancestors were brought here in chains to be slaves; Step back if you or your ancestors arrived as immigrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa, or the Caribbean'. These and other statements produced a visible line of stratification, with mostly white participants at the front and people of color toward the back (Juris et al. 2012, 434-5).

Opening the microphone and refusing fixed leadership invite activists to enact horizontality and to develop a do-it-yourself attitude. In not belonging to any institutionalised group or political party, such activist spaces are meant to become potentially everyone's. Joining these spaces involves showing a willingness to leave aside a world driven by discrimination, authoritarianism, and [neoliberal](#) practices and setting a 'frame' (Bateson 1972, 177-93) wherein hierarchies are temporarily suspended. This frame encourages each participant to act and express oneself not as a representative of given political agendas, social status, or cultural backgrounds, but as individuals who autonomously question, for instance, oppressive, sexist, and [colonialist](#) regimes of truth.

Yet, building a new society from the ashes of the old entails carrying with it some of the vicissitudes that activists try to purge from their settings—which evinces the shortcomings of prefigurative politics. Firstly, however globally-oriented and inclusive such movements attempt to be, at times they [reproduce](#) gender, racial, and class segregation, as white, richer, better-connected, and male [citizens](#) from the Global North (Tarrow 2006: 44; Juris et al. 2012) tend to have more resources and possibilities to afford the time to activism. Regarding horizontality, the assemblies' open microphone is counterbalanced by how more experienced and articulate activists often dominate these spaces. Sometimes this may entail that marginalised and less educated people will be less prone to talk—and, as open as the microphone might be, less often heard (Beeman et al. 2009; Wengronowitz 2013). Ultimately, horizontal forms of activism may thus lean towards authoritarianism, especially on occasions when more charismatic activists become seen as quasi-'leaders' or spokespersons of entire movements.

In addition, while the assembly format implies participatory democracy and gives everybody a say, it means ideas will often be repeated, frequently slowing down the pace of decisions and actions. Paradoxically,

processes aimed at consensual decision-making often result neither in decisions nor in consensus, which either hampers the political action or leaves the final decision to the most active and influential activists, thus reproducing the centralised power that prefigurative politics oppose. In a number of movements, the open-endedness and inclusiveness that prevail in prefigurative politics also result in the absence of a coherent overall agenda (Chomsky 2012; Graeber 2013). Although being a feature, rather than a flaw, of these movements, this is read by some as activists being clueless about how to reach their goals (Lipset and Altbach 1966), resulting in movements that may be more expressive than instrumental, privileging spectacle over substance (Polletta 2002: 1-2).

These critiques and seeming flaws stress that creating a democratic culture and experimenting politics differently are forcefully long-term processes. Yet as the commons offer people solidarity and mutual support, they may well emerge as the first steps for people to collectively challenge the mainstream while prefiguring the new.

### **Rebuilding communication and the media**

As the previous discussion on the open microphone suggests, communication technologies and the media play a crucial role in gathering people around political agendas. Just as the screening of the Vietnam War boosted pacifist movements worldwide in the late 1960s (Mandelbaum 1982), recent years have seen the rise of [digital](#) media as major networking arenas triggering contentious politics.

Several [ethnographies](#) have analysed the emergence of activism on digital media, particularly revolving around hashtags (mostly on Twitter) such as #Ferguson (Bonilla and Rosa 2015), #MeToo (Pipyrou 2018), and #BlackLivesMatter (Yang 2016). While indexing information online, hashtags also create mediatised spaces of peer support and solidarity when people share about their struggles with [racism](#), sexism, and state violence. Due to the heightened temporality in digital media, hashtags mimic the dynamics of face-to-face activism, enabling users to engage almost in real-time with what happens in in-person protests. Thus, the occupation of New York's Zuccotti Park, Madrid's Puerta del Sol, Athens' Syntagma Square, Paris' Place de la République, and Cairo's Tahrir Square have been supplemented by the 'occupation' of Facebook timelines, YouTube channels, and Twitter feeds with global calls for action and constant updates from the streets (Postill 2014; Castells 2015).

The Arab Spring (2010-2012, beginning in Tunisia) and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution offer a prime illustration of how digital media enable the prefiguration of a more [egalitarian](#) society. Bringing together Christians who used to socialise primarily in church and [Muslims](#) who tended to gather in and around mosques, the internet helped these groups find commonalities and recognise their shared dissatisfaction with state violence and the Egyptian government. Learning via digital media about protests taking place in neighbouring countries in North Africa and the Middle East, a great number of Egyptians saw their outrage

matched by the hope conveyed by activists abroad (Castells 2015). Thus, territorial activism in city squares fed and was fed by deterritorialised activism online, amplifying activists' [voices](#) and the reach of their support. While digital media may usually serve mainstream purposes, they emerge in prefigurative politics as platforms to both build activist networks and critically rebuild communication. In this sense, digital media empower anyone to communicate their own narratives and challenge mainstream regimes of truth by sidestepping the mediation of journalists and the one-to-many functioning of mass media (Castells 2008, 90).

Thinking of the [arts](#) and [citizen](#) media as prime examples of what John Downing (2001) calls 'radical media' enables us to highlight the media's potential to report state violence in protests and violation of [human rights](#) in war-laden countries, as well as to give voice to those who are systematically excluded from mainstream sources of news. In this vein, the 1999-born Independent Media Center (IMC) was a landmark in covering the Seattle protests in real time (Downing 2003). Through its call for arms—'Don't hate the media, become the media!'—the IMC became the forerunner of analogous grassroots initiatives producing content online without links to corporate news outlets.

Bypassing mainstream mass media does, of course, not always correspond to left-wing forms of prefigurative politics. Aside from bolstering the Arab Spring, digital media also provided the mechanisms that granted the electoral victory to far-right presidential candidates such as the US's Donald Trump in 2016 (Tufekci 2018) and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 (Cesarino 2020). The same can be said about the COVID-19 anti-vaccine campaigns. On the one hand, presidential campaigns do not concern prefigurative politics entirely as they resort to institutionalised politics and the state in people's quest for change. On the other hand, online campaigning does retain some of the core traits of prefiguration: it empowers the individual as a key campaigner, who is outside the scope of mass media and is capable of being heard upon producing and [sharing](#) content on digital media with relatively little mediation. Campaigners supporting political candidates also enact alternative communities—taking the shape of an online commons—whose members feel safe and welcome to share their political agendas, be they left-leaning or conservative, in line or out of step with a [scientific](#) consensus.

Just as media is deconstructed and rebuilt, languages are equally repoliticised in attempts to foster horizontal and inclusive communicative practices. Across the world, translators-activists gather in transnational collectives such as Translator Brigades and Tlaxcala to translate politically engaged articles and subtitle activists' videos. Translating from hegemonic languages (such as English and French) into non-hegemonic and minority languages, such collectives make multilingual content available online and update activists on the fringe on what is happening elsewhere. Similarly, translating from non-hegemonic languages ensures that language minorities can be heard in activist spaces (Baker 2013, 2016). Relatedly, to fight linguistic discrimination in a different manner, an international collective of left-wing activists resorts to Esperanto—a non-national, easy-to-learn language—to materialise anti-national and anti-

imperialist activist spaces. Through face-to-face meetings, mailing lists, and zines, this collective raises people's awareness of how activism can only be effectively horizontal if everyone has the linguistic and technological means to be equally included in consensual decision-making processes (Fians 2021). Hence, prefigurative politics involve the creation of non-hegemonic communicative and media practices, giving voice and ears to potential participants.

### **Beyond occupied squares: communities, lifestyles, and the old left**

As the aforementioned scholarship illustrates, social scientists have systematically associated prefigurative politics with the 'movement of the squares'. This invites us to address David Snow's call to 'broaden our conceptualisation of social movements beyond contentious politics' (2004, 19). One way to do so is by exploring prefigurative aspects of community-building, alternative lifestyles, and forms of activism that do not quite fit the New Left label.

First of all, the results of social experiments become more long-lasting when prefiguration meets community-building. This is the case, for instance, of eco-villages, whose participants prefigure their sought-after ecological imaginaries on a daily basis. Eco-villages enable their participants to bridge a consumerist wider society and more eco-friendly forms of sociality by collectively enacting [sustainable](#) lifestyles through organic [farming](#) and self-sufficiency (Casey et al. 2020). Along analogous lines, other forms of intentional communities—such as ashrams in India and Catholic communities in the UK (Firth 2019, 497)—gather people willing to live according to their spiritual and religious beliefs. This is largely in line with the aforementioned use of prefiguration by Augustine ([1470] 1998), as prefiguring links between spirituality and social justice relates to enacting a spiritually exemplary behaviour that would bring people closer to God and desired forms of spirituality.

A further remarkable illustration of prefiguration in community-building is the celebratory arts community Burning Man. Taking place once a year in the Black Rock Desert, in the US, Burning Man advertises itself as an 'invitation to the future'. Starting in 1986, it progressively came to gather more than 60,000 participants who spend a week per year living in tents, joining concerts, and co-organising arts projects. While working together to prepare this festival with community-building ambitions, participants fight the perception of [labour](#) as alienating. By partly replacing commodification with 'communification' through their community-building practice, they infuse mundane labour with a meaning that emphasises one's connection with the larger Burning Man collective of participants. This altered approach to labour bears long-lasting significance: after having experienced human [relations](#) otherwise, participants return to wider society with a renewed perception of how things can work, which eventually encourages them to try and reproduce some aspects of this short-lived experience over their year-long everyday lives (Chen 2016).

While eco-villages, ashrams, arts communities, and even kibbutzim (Simons and Ingram 2003) may be read

as escapism, the building of intentional communities does not necessarily mean evading mainstream society. Even within urban settings, community forms such as [cooperatives](#), social centres (Yates 2015b), free schools (Swidler 1979), and communes (Kanter 1972) provide people with the opportunity to temporarily step out of their hierarchical surroundings and join in more horizontal and participatory spaces. These, in turn, do not need to be face-to-face: on the internet, hackers jointly develop free and open-source software as a way of opposing proprietary intellectual property. Through online communities, like-minded activist-developers prefigure the ownership relations, work ethics, and creative aesthetics they envisage by exchanging programming expertise and the source codes they develop (Coleman 2013; Kelty 2008).

Apart from building communities, prefigurative practices can also aim at personal change as the primary means to foster social change. This is the case in lifestyle movements, made up of individuals who seek change by cultivating everyday behaviour in line with their political agendas. These include being vegetarian, reducing one's carbon footprint, practising ethical consumption (Haenfler et al. 2012), or embracing alternative therapies. Popular psychology, self-help, new-age spiritualities, and mindfulness are recurrently regarded as depoliticising forces that promote conformism. Nevertheless, embodying [values](#) that make life meaningful otherwise can also be a political act; one that gives its practitioners a sense of [agency](#) amidst disillusionment with collective and institutional ways of fostering social change (Salmenniemi 2019).

Lastly, even though social movement scholarship often associates prefiguration with the post-1960s New Left, prefigurative practices are also present in left-wing parties, trade unions, and hierarchical pre-1960 labour movements. Seeking to explore how anarchist-inspired prefigurative practices have been adopted by a wide range of activists, Graeber (2002, 72; 2010) outlines what he calls 'capital-A' and 'small-a' anarchists. While the former tend to act within anarchist groups, the latter mobilise characteristically prefigurative practices despite not conceiving of themselves as anarchists—or even as activists.

Despite such practices not being limited to strictly anarchist groups and New Left movements, prefiguration continues being largely conceived of as a marker dividing the New Left from other forms of activism. Why, instead, do not we approach prefiguration as a perspective that highlights the self-exemplification and horizontality inherent in several social movements and forms of activism?

Partly addressing this point, Craig Calhoun (1993) argues that the novelty researchers often associate with the new social movements is analytically misleading, since the issues, strategies, and constituencies that distinguish the New Left and the 'old lefts' have been in place for at least two centuries. Ultimately, this leads to a critique of the concept of 'new social movements' itself. Cooperativism and the 1871 Paris Commune, for instance, involved activists that, when fighting for their causes, also prioritised the establishment of non-hierarchical relationships. Similarly, issues related to sexuality, lifestyles, women's

rights, and child labour may have become increasingly visible after 1968, but have run alongside class-based demands for centuries. Lastly, exceeding the left versus right divide, conservative movements also deploy prefiguration as a core strategy. This is the case of anti-abortion and white power activists in the US, many of whom are involved in the establishment of Aryan settlements whose residents and visitors receive paramilitary training and cherish white supremacist music and books (Futrell and Simi 2004).

These three forms of prefigurative politics—as a feature of intentional communities, a means to shift individual behaviour, and a building block of New Left, old left, and right-wing movements alike—foreground how pervasive such practices can be, and, therefore, how important it is to understand them.

### **Coming to a close—but not to conclude**

Prefigurative politics—as well as anthropological approaches to it—invite us to rethink social life and its foundations. In placing participation, horizontality, inclusiveness, and direct action at the heart of the social [values](#) and practices to be addressed, prefiguration works by changing the world on a small scale. While [revolutions](#) foster macropolitical changes, prefigurative politics dwell on micropolitics. Reimagining society locally may not bring about immediate large-scale changes, but it models the society one seeks to build, thus informing its participants' practices and ways of thinking beyond local activist settings. This work of imagination is not to be underestimated: as [climate change](#), structural [racism](#), and a global [pandemic](#) require shifts of mentality and behaviour, practices involving open dialogue, solidarity, and mutual support can provide us with alternative answers to issues that appear not to be sufficiently addressed by institutional politics.

Since most scholars exploring prefigurative politics seem sympathetic to it, there is a lack of studies on prefiguration's antagonists, such as the police and mass media who frequently link anarchism with chaos and direct action with violence detached from clear political agendas. For similar reasons, few studies analyse prefiguration among old left and right-wing activists, which culminates in the aforementioned misapprehension of prefiguration as a strictly New Left strategy. Aside from helping us to better understand the present-oriented efforts to build alternative societies, learning about prefigurative politics also provides us with tools to experiment with grassroots initiatives in our everyday lives and in our academic discipline. Ultimately, would not action anthropology (Smith 2010) be in line with such horizontal and inclusive practices? Remaining true to prefiguration, it is better to just leave this and other questions open.

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