What is Prefigurative Politics?

How large scale social change happens

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This pamphlet is about how large-scale social change happens — that is, it's about revolution. Prefigurative Politics is not an alternative to revolution, it's about what a successful revolution requires. Let's see why.

Part 1: How does Social Change Happen?

How does social change happen? We're not talking about the odd new law or policy here, but the kind of far-reaching change to our basic institutions that we need if we're ever to survive and deal with global warming, much less reach a free, equal, and democratic society.

A brief look at history tells us the answer. Every present has grown from the past, as every future will grow from the present. European feudalism grew from the changing slave society of the crumbling Roman Empire. Capitalism emerged, first in England, from the changes in feudalism, and was then introduced to the rest of the world either as state-led projects trying to copy and adapt it to their own societies or forced upon people by their invaders and colonisers (Wood, 2005) (Wood, 2017). After the Bolsheviks came to power in the Soviet Union and secured rule against both the ruling elites and invasion by the major capitalist empires, they too constructed a new society out of the social and technological machinery they had at hand (Lebowitz, 2012).

In all these cases, the revolutions didn't so much invent new things from scratch. Rather, they further developed, generalised, and systematised certain things that had already emerged in the earlier form of society. In other words, the *figures* of the new societies they built were *prefigured* in those that came before.

Serf-like forms of bonded labour emerged within and out of the Roman slave society. Capitalist social relations already existed among merchants in major cities for centuries under feudalism. And centrally planned and organised industry existed in many capitalist societies long before central planning as on a societal scale was introduced to the Soviet Union. The soviets themselves, we should point out, were developed in cities long before the 1917 revolution, and in the countryside were often the products of the long-standing peasant communes that had — with all their contradictions — been organising rural life for ages.

What can we learn from this? If we want to reach a future society with different basic institutions than we have now, these institutions need to be developed – at least to some degree – before we get there. In other words, achieving fundamental social change requires us to prefigure that change in the here-and-now. *Prefigurative Politics* is the politics of doing that.

Part 2: The Paradox of Self-Emancipation

Some of the first explicit socialist discussions of prefigurative politics that we know of arose within the First International, before the split between Marxists and anarchists. We can think of it as a way of spelling out what Marx's slogan that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves" (Marx & Engels, 1955, p. 288) requires in practice.

In 1868, the Belgian section argued that the International itself 'carried within itself the institutions of the society of the future' (Graham, 2015, p. 92). This idea became important to subsequent debates about how the First International should be organised and later filtered into a

variety of Marxist and anarchist movements and thinkers. These include Anton Pannekoek (Pannekoek, 1975) (Pannekoek, 2003) and Antonio Gramsci's writings on praxis, workers' councils, and the party (Gramsci, 1994, pp. 96–197), and Mikhail Bakunin's (Bakunin, 1973) (Bakunin, 1990) (Bakunin, 2016), Errico Malatesta's (Malatesta, 2014), and Lucy Parsons' (Parsons, 2004) writings on radical unions. Typically, socialists talked about this in terms of the coherence between means and ends. The term 'prefigurative politics' only got slapped onto this idea later on, perhaps most famously by Charles Boggs in 1977 (Boggs, 1977a) (Boggs, 1977b).

Prefigurative Politics are the solution to a problem, sometimes called the Paradox of Self-Emancipation. If we want to introduce a free, equal, and democratic socialist society, we need people who already have the power or the ability to re-organise society in such a way. And we need enough people to be driven to do so and who have the consciousness needed to do so. But the basic institutions we have – capitalism, the state, and so on – don't develop these powers, drives, or consciousness. Capitalism and good revolutionary theory are certainly important for developing a socialist movement, but they alone cannot teach us how to live and organise in anti-capitalist, much less more comprehensively non-oppressive and non-dominating, ways. So how can we ever emancipate ourselves?

The answer is that we can do this by developing movements and organisations who themselves embody the kinds of social relations and practices we aim for in a future society. We can emancipate ourselves only if we start building the new society within the shell of the old one. We can begin to prefigure parts or aspects of the new society within the one we have. And the politics of doing this experimentally and deliberately is called prefigurative politics.

Part 3: Formal Decision-Making Structures

So, prefigurative politics is '*the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now*' (Raekstad & Gradin, 2019, p. 10). On the level of formal decision-making institutions, where most early socialists focused when they talked about means-ends coherence, this is usually cashed out in terms of the following institutional features.

- You make decisions on the lowest practical level by different kinds of majority voting.

- You use mandated delegates serving limited times. This means that the people you send as delegates have to vote and argue as you tell them to, within the bounds and with the freedom decided by the people they're supposed to represent.

- These Delegates are subject to immediate recall, so they can be replaced if and as soon as they don't do what people want.

- Delegates are frequently rotated to ensure that as many people as possible participate in the actual running of the organisation, and you don't end up with a small minority of leaders basically running things continuously

As you'd expect from a rich and diverse history of social movements, there's a bunch of variation and disagreement, for instance about the uses of consensus. Most advocates of prefigurative politics, whether anarchists, Marxists, syndicalists, or some mix, have not advocated consensus. Rather, like Marx, the Paris Commune, and the international anarchist movement, they've favoured a delegation system similar to what we just outlined.

There are three main arguments for this sort of prefigurative politics. The first is that developing revolutionaries with the right powers or capacities to organise society in free, equal, and democratic ways is only possible by lots of people learning to do so through practice in institutions that are organised in such ways. The idea here is that people must 'prepare themselves for revolution' and build a new society 'by participating in activities and practices that are themselves egalitarian, empowering, and therefore transformative' (Ackelsberg, 2005, pp. 53–4). For this to succeed, 'it is essential to build those institutions through which people are able to develop their capacities and make themselves fit to create a new world' (Lebowitz, 2012, p. 88).

The second argument is that if we want people to really be driven towards – to need – a free, equal, and democratic socialist society, the best way of achieving it is by giving them real experiences of what such institutions can be like. To "see oneself as an actor, when historically one has been a silent observer, is a fundamental break from the past" (Sitrin, 2012, p. 84).

This idea is far from new. Already in his early works, Marx noticed these processes among French communist workers. He saw that:

> When communist *workmen* gather together, their immediate aim is instruction, propaganda, etc. But at the same time they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means has become an end. (...) Smoking, eating, drinking, etc., are no longer means for creating links between people. Company, association, conversation, which in turn has society as its goal, is enough for them. The brotherhood of man is not a hollow phrase, it is a reality, and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their work-worn figures. (Marx, 1992, p. 365)

People don't just join socialist movements because they've experienced domination, oppression, and exploitation; but also because they think a better world is possible. Prefigurative politics comes in here, because people might join, say, a union, to fight for things like better wages and conditions. But in becoming part of the union they experience new kinds of social relations, and these experiences in turn causes them to change their needs, goals, and desires. They join to fight *against* certain bad things, and as a result they start to fight *for* positive, revolutionary social change, for universal human emancipation.

The third argument is based on the idea that a successful socialist revolution requires the development of the right sort of consciousness. For both Marxists and anarchists, consciousness isn't something that's magically 'elevated above the this-worldly realm of human practice' (Cox & Nielsen, 2014, p. 32). Rather, it's always situated within and arises within and through particular human praxis, determined by their social and historical context. If we're right about this, we need to seriously consider how we can create forms of praxis that generate the kinds of consciousness we need to transition to a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. David Graeber has talked how this was employed in Global Justice Movement and Occupy:

> We all knew it was practically impossible to convince the average American that a truly democratic society was possible through rhetoric. But it was possible to show them. The experience of a thousand, or two thousand, people making collective decisions without a leadership structure, motivated only by principle and solidarity, can change one's most fundamental assumptions about what politics, or for that matter, human life, could actually be like. (Graeber, 2013, p. 89)

The idea here is similar to our point about developing revolutionary drives. By practising and experiencing a fundamentally different form of social organisation – one much more free, equal, democratic, and so on – this will in turn confront people with hard evidence not only that such different forms of social organisation are possible, but also with the lived experiences of them working and how much more fulfilling and enjoyable they are. Once you've seen these things for yourself, it's hard to sustain ideas that they're impossible, that they cannot work, that they'll inevitably be terrible to be part of, and so on. And this in turn will inevitably change your views about that and how we can change or replace our society. We can compare this to what Bernard Williams once called 'the intellectual irreversibility of the Enlightenment': once this 'question has been raised, there is no respectable route back from confronting it' (Williams, 2002, p. 254).

Part 4: Informal Hierarchies and the Necessity of Intersectionality

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, lots of anarchist and Marxist groups did things like create their own emancipatory counter-culture, re-constructed their daily lives in various ways, took care to include and organise marginalised people like women, people of colour, indigenous people, and so on. But they often didn't talk about this explicitly in terms of prefigurative politics, and their attempts at addressing different informal hierarchies in e.g. a deeply sexist and racist society often fell far short of what we think is necessary and what we'd expect today.

For one, a broad range of anti-racist, decolonial, and feminist thinkers and activists have argued that social movements – explicitly prefigurative or not – need to address racism, colonialism, sexism, and so on within their movements and organisations if they want to eliminate these things long-term. After all, creating free, equal and democratic social relations requires changing not just formal institutions, but also how our social norms, values, divisions of labour, and other social practices affect our powers and what our organisations are really like. Suppose that you want a meaningfully free, equal, and democratic organisation. If some people are systematically ignored and belittled no matter what they do or say; or some people are always expected to do much more certain kinds of work like cooking, cleaning, child-care and so on; if some people constantly have to deal with derogatory comments, harassment, assault, and so on, they're not going to be able to participate in running the organisation in a meaningful way, they won't be being treated particularly freely or equally. No matter how perfect the formal decision-making structures are, if you leave these kinds of informal hierarchies in place you're not going to be able to have a really democratic organisation, or one that gives all its members the practice or experience of real freedom and equality.

There's a general point here: If we don't address both formal and informal hierarchies within organisations and movements, we're not going to be able to prefigure the kinds of decision-making, much less the broader social relations and practices, that we want in a free, equal, and democratic future society.

How do people address these informal hierarchies? Many ways. By having distinct caucuses within organizations for different marginalised groups, for instance distinct caucuses for women or people of color within unions. By constructing organisations, events, materials, etc. that don't exclude certain groups. By empowering marginalised people to participate more effectively,

through things like workshops, skillshares, and so on[1]. By making members aware of these informal hierarchies and how they operate to help them unlearn them. And many more. There's no single on-size-fits-all solution to these things, and at the end of the day any movement and organisation will have to figure out what works best for them.

Part of this involves challenging the ideological distinction between the personal and the political. On this view, things like what happens in parliaments and governments count as political, while things that especially privileged people don't really want to think and talk about – like how house-work and child-rearing is organised, widespread racist practices and attitudes, and so on – are labelled merely 'personal'. The familiar function of insisting that something is 'personal' rather than 'political' is to effectively exclude things from critical scrutiny, debate, and deliberate change. The effect of this is often to silence marginalised voices, like women speaking out against marital rape, because this is seen as something personal rather than something political that deserves critical scrutiny and deliberate change. It also ignores the ways in which states have already been intervening in the personal lives of oppressed people in many ways already, from the beginnings of European colonialism to slavery, police harassment, and much more. It's also based on a deeply liberal and anti-socialist view that underestimates how interconnected humans are. We are profoundly shaped by our personal experiences, from how we grow up to our romantic relationships and how we treat each other day-to-day. And there's no good reason to arbitrarily rule much of this out as things worth critically thinking about and changing if we find them lacking.

One of the implications of this is that we need to challenge the common – sometimes explicit, often implicit – idea that we can cleanly separate rational analysis from the messiness of our various motivations and the contexts that shape them. We need to recognise that the world people are faced with, how they live in it through different practices, and their experiences of them, shape their background assumptions, which ideas they come up with, what they take to be good justifications, and so on. Your understanding of the world will be shaped by your position in a matrix of intersecting structures.

Finally, recognising the things we've talked about so far should lead us to an intersectional analysis of the problems we're trying to address and the solutions needed to do so. Although we can find similar ideas in earlier thinkers, the term intersectionality first arose within queer black feminism (Combahee River Collective, 1977) (Harris, 2001) (Hill Collins, 1990) (Hill Collins, 2016). The basic idea is that the different kinds of oppression that people face as a result of being a woman, a person of colour, a working-class person, a disabled person, an LGBT+ person, and so on always intertwine and interact in different ways.

A result of this is that you can't actually do only class politics or feminist politics on its own. Even if you say and think that you're going to work just on class, your organisation itself will inevitably have a practical politics of race, gender, and so on – it just won't be a very conscious or deliberate one, and it likely won't be a very good one as a result. Something like Lean In might think of itself as just a feminist campaign, but a brief look at them makes it obvious that they have a race, ability, and class politics as well, and that they're not very good.

If we want large and powerful socialist organisations, one thing we should be doing is trying to include as many working-class people as possible, and that means developing politics that empower working class people of different genders, races, abilities, sexual orientations, and so

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[1] For much more on this, see (Raekstad & Gradin, 2019, p. Ch. 5)

on. There are a number of examples of this working in practice. Even in the far past when organisations were far worse at this than we want now, syndicalist unions like the Argentinian FORA and the American IWW made sure to organise women, workers of colour, migrants, and others who were excluded by other unions. The IWW fought actively – and illegally – for women's reproductive rights. And we should remember that in virtually every single seizure of power by a Marxist party a number of measures have been implemented to improve things like women's rights and opportunities.

Understanding the world is great, but the point, as Marx put it, is to change it. If we know what prefigurative politics is, why it's important, and how people have tried to do it in the past, the really important question for us is: how should we do it now? We don't have all the answers, but we hope that this helps us to start thinking about them.

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