Prefigurative Politics
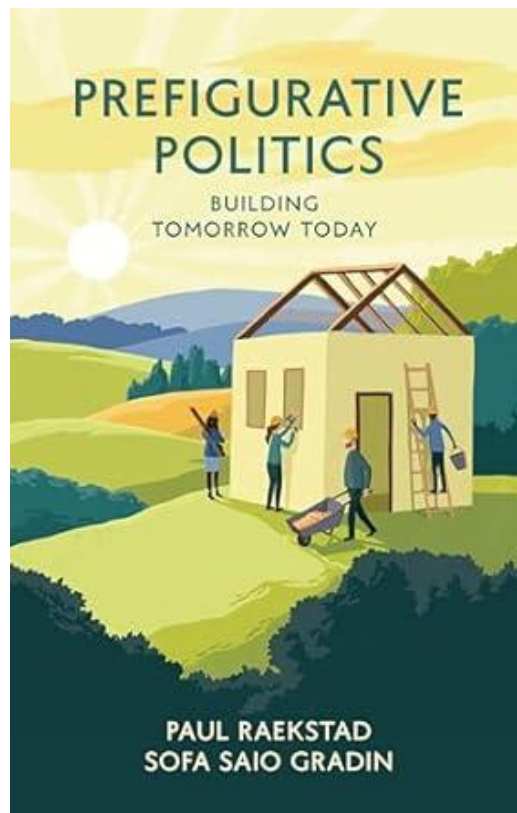
Building Tomorrow Today

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

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

At the same time, we're seeing the rebirth and rise of radical movements fighting for a better tomorrow. The best description that many liberal pundits and academics – from supporters of Hillary Clinton's presidential bid to philosophers and sociologists – can come up with when trying to make sense of these movements is 'resistance'. In fact, today's social movements go far beyond mere 'resistance'. 'Resistance' implies taking for granted the basic institutions that have led to our present problems. It offers no real alternative to the status quo. It implies a servile expression of the vain hope that making a fuss will convince the powers-that-be to go back to the way things were – to stop the current wave of welfare cuts and deregulation and return to the so-called golden age of welfare capitalism of the 1960s and '70s. But that's what gave us what we have now. The way things were was also deeply unfree, unequal, and undemocratic. The way things were was built on the back of worldwide imperial and colonial tyranny. The way things were also had major inequalities between rich and poor, a majority of the world impoverished and powerless, rampant racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and more. That's not something we should hope to get back to.

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

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

Every present grows from the struggles of the past, as every future will grow from the struggles of the present. Just like the things we enjoy now were won by the movements of yesteryear,

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[1] One kind of reconstruction is revolution, which we discuss in Chapter 3.

it's the movements of today that will give us a better tomorrow. We have recently seen a new wave of social movements from the Zapatistas, the Global Justice Movement, Occupy, the Movement of the Squares, the Indignados, and the Revolution in Rojava, to growing struggles around antiracism such as Black Lives Matter and anti-fascism, and a growth in radical unionism, often combining workplace and community organising. Despite their many different backgrounds and inspirations, these movements show a remarkable convergence. A major shift in how people are organising themselves and thinking about their lives, societies, and ways of mobilising appears to be taking place, which is not well understood or talked about as much as it should be.

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

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

After a brief historical overview, the book sets out the understanding of human beings and society that has informed prefigurative ideas for the past century and a half. Emphasising the importance of praxis, we argue that developing the right qualities through non-hierarchical formal organisations is necessary for reaching a free, equal, and democratic society. Formal organisational structures are not everything, however. As feminists, antiracists, and others have long pointed out, the personal is political. The political theories of revolutionary leaders are shaped by their personal experiences, even when they have professed themselves to be strictly scientific and objective. That is why we have to understand how different and intersecting social structures shape our experiences of the world in order to be able to change it. We show how this can work using practical examples. Finally, we look at the contested relationship between prefigurative politics and state power and at some common misconceptions and criticisms of prefigurative politics.

(a) Prefigurative Politics Before It Was Named

Since we emphasise the importance of praxis, there is no better way to begin to understand prefigurative politics than to look at some practical examples. People have been practising prefigurative politics for far longer than the term itself has existed. Prefigurative politics is today

particularly closely associated with certain strands of socialism, which we will look at in Chapter 2. It was to the politics of these movements that the term 'prefigurative politics' in its current sense was first applied in the 1970s. The practice of prefigurative politics, however, is likely as old as politics itself. To see why, we'll take a brief look at some examples of prefigurative politics that didn't employ the term.

In fact, we would argue that some of the most significant political movements of the last century have used prefigurative strategies, even if they didn't speak of them in those terms. One important example is the struggle against colonial occupation, exploitation, and racism. From the Pan-African movement in the Caribbean, North America, Africa and Europe, to the Indian independence movement, activists of the global South have run huge and successful projects to undo colonialism, often using prefigurative tactics. To name just a few examples, Pan-Africanist organisations such as UNIA (the Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in 1914 by the Jamaican-born organiser Marcus Garvey) have supported Black-owned businesses as a way for Black populations to become economically independent of white oppressors. Though they didn't use the term prefigurative, UNIA started implementing a society in which Black people had financial independence directly, by providing financial support to Black-owned 'cooperative grocery stores, restaurants, laundries, garment factories, dress shops' (Vincent 1972: 102, cited in Marshall 2018) and much more, and by encouraging Black people to Buy Black. The legacy of this approach lives on today. For example, Black Lives Matter in the US runs a website helping people to locate their nearest Black-owned small businesses as a way to help provide jobs and economic security for Black people as an alternative to systemic marginalisation (www.backingblackbusiness.com). In the 1920s, UNIA had such massive economic clout that it was able to address even the supply chains and transportation systems that Black businesses were reliant on, creating its own transatlantic shipping company, the Black Star Line, which operated three ships carrying cargo and passengers between the US, the Caribbean, Central America and the African continent.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, Indian liberation activists struggled against the long-standing and violent British colonial occupation by promoting prefigurative independence projects. The Swaraj ('self-rule') movement led by Mahatma Gandhi is most famous for this. Gandhi's alleged quote 'Be the change that you wish to see in the world' (which was most likely not uttered by Gandhi at all, see John 2011) has become something of a slogan of prefigurativism today. While Gandhi is not a good example of prefigurativism for several reasons,[2] many other Indian liberation activists have supported the creation of egalitarian schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods in resistance to colonial white supremacy and dispossession of indigenous Indians (Ramnath 2011: 177–87). For instance, Rabindranath Tagore was an independence activist who resisted the colonialism, racism and discrimination of the British Imperial education system in India by founding a college in Santiniketan in West Bengal. The college admitted indigenous Bengalis, taught them in their native language, offered generalist rather than specialist education, and involved students in some of its decision-making – none of which were done in British colonial colleges. Tagore also founded a nearby agricultural school (Sriniketan), which later grew

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[2] That Gandhi is seen by many as the quintessential prefigurativist is regrettable, since Gandhi's politics were in many respects deeply problematic and very different from those of most contemporary advocates of prefigurative politics. For example, Gandhi lobbied against the rights of Black people in South Africa, defended the Indian caste system, and was unapologetically a serial sexual abuser (Roy 2017). While we can't expect prefigurativists to be perfect or never make mistakes, these shortcomings are worth mentioning here due to Gandhi's status as a prefigurativist par excellence in the eyes of many.

into a whole village that provided both jobs and education for people who had otherwise been excluded from the British education system (Bhattacharya 2014: 5).

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

There were many sides to the Panthers' strategy, not all of them prefigurative – from patrolling the streets in resistance to police brutality, to educational projects, protests and running for office in local elections. While their Community Programmes are often cited as a quintessential example of prefigurative activism, the Panthers were also an explicitly vanguardist organisation – a term drawn from Marxist-Leninism that often implies a more capable elite leading the movement from above (Clemons and Jones 2001: 29). We should also point out that Huey Newton and other Party leaders were heavily influenced by Maoism, which differs on a number of points from the strands of socialism that are more commonly associated with prefigurative politics (Newton 1974), notably on questions of taking existing state power and the value of vanguard parties. This combination of approaches is a theme that will recur in this book, reflecting the fact that prefigurative politics need not exclude a range of other, non-prefigurative, tactics.

Feminist movements in the 1960s also played a pivotal role in the development of prefigurative politics, as currently understood. The famous slogan 'the personal is political' emerged in this era and, as we will see in Chapters 2 and 5, became an important part of prefigurative critiques of certain hierarchically organised social movements fixated on seizing control of the state.[3] Feminists highlighted hierarchies, inequalities, and exploitation that go beyond the reach of formal rules and laws. We will look more closely at the theory behind this in later chapters, but when it came to practical action, the personal being political meant that our personal lives and daily behaviours are and should be recognised as an important site of political struggle. This is why, for example, feminists started disobeying repressive gender norms in their daily lives, running skill-shares to teach each other important life skills such as house maintenance and car mechanics, and leaving a fair share of household and care work duties to men, among many other things. Large parts of the contemporary queer movement can be understood as a continuation of this. Many queer activists call for the abolition of patriarchal gender roles and other

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[3] The first official publication to mention the phrase 'the personal is political' was Carol Hanisch's 1970 article with that title, so named by the editors of the volume in which it appeared. It was, however, in use among feminist activists before then.

forms of patriarchal governance, while implementing queerness in their own lives and in their collective organising (for example by refusing to act, look, or identify as the gender they were assigned at birth, or any gender at all). On this radical conception of queerness, being queer is not (only) a personal choice but a commitment to collective resistance to patriarchy, expressed through the prefiguring of non-patriarchal relations, ways of organising, and ways of behaving in the here-and-now (see e.g. Gleeson 2017).

This brief and incomplete retrospective[4] shows that prefigurative politics is not merely an invention of white European scholars in Western academia, but has been part of social movements in different places and settings for a long time.

(b) The Term and Idea

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

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

Syndicalism is a form of revolutionary trade unionism (Darlington 2013: 5), that seeks to use revolutionary union activities to replace capitalism with a society based (either partly or wholly) on union structures. Anarcho-syndicalism is a variety of syndicalism that explicitly aims for an

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[4] We have mentioned only a handful out of countless prefigurative projects. Our examples here focus on decolonial, antiracist and feminist movements since these were very influential and important before the term was first employed in its current meaning by Boggs, but are often neglected. The anti-nuclear and environmental movements became hugely influential on prefigurativism later, in the 1980s and '90s.

[5] Here we should perhaps again note one of the limitations of our work, which is that it focuses on English-language texts (including many in English translation) and on debates that occur in English-language political and academic contexts. However, we would also like to point out that many of the texts, thinkers, and ideas discussed here were not originally part of that context – i.e. they were not academic(s), not written or originally read in English, and in some cases knew no English at all.

anarchist society by employing anarchist means. They both focus on the union as an essential instrument of struggle because as an organisation it can implement key aspects of the desired future society in the here-and-now. Marxism, meanwhile, is a hugely diverse tradition – one that's simply too varied and heterogeneous to be defined adequately here. Different strands of Marxism tend to share a commitment to universal human emancipation through working-class self-emancipation, guided by the ideas of Karl Marx – though what this amounts to in practice varies tremendously. Carl Boggs looked at different kinds of relationship between various forms of anarchist and Marxist thought on the one hand, and the New Left's commitment to prefigurative politics on the other.

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

The Bolsheviks who led the Russian Revolution in 1917 did little to theorise how a better society might be built once the state had been seized (Boggs 1977a). Cultural and informal hierarchies were expected to crumble, and the state itself was expected to eventually 'wither away', though it was unclear how this would happen. Attempts to address this issue by organising masses of people in workers' and community councils independently of the state, attempting to construct free and democratic organs of worker self-management, were quashed.

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

The definition of prefigurative politics Boggs provided was a broad one: an organisation or movement embodying 'those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are [its] ultimate goal' (1977b: 100). Subsequent authors have defined prefigurative politics more narrowly; for example, some focus only on the use of horizontal organisational structures in social movement groups, and others on an apparent reluctance by social movements to organise strategically (see e.g. Breines 1980; Smucker 2017). Like Boggs, we prefer a broader definition of prefigurative politics, but we have our own exact formulation. We define prefigurative politics as *the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now*. We will use 'prefigurative politics' and 'prefigurativism'

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[6] Private property is a concept that is often misunderstood. It refers to the ownership of things that entail or garner significant social power, such as factory buildings, flats for rent, machinery, a brand name, raw materials, or a business as a whole with all of its possessions included. This is usually distinguished from personal property, or possessions which don't give someone power over others, such as clothes, toothbrushes, and so on. Being against private property does not mean advocating an end to all personal possessions or that everyone should share the same toothbrush or live in the same room.

synonymously to refer to this idea.[7] This definition captures a wide variety of things that get labelled prefigurative politics – from the organisational debates in the First International to the subversion of gendered norms in the contemporary feminist movement. Being committed to prefigurative politics means being committed to the idea that if we want to replace certain social structures, then we need to reflect some aspect(s) of the future structures we want in the movements and organisations we develop to fight for them. On this definition, prefigurative politics is a much more common phenomenon than is often thought. It is not an alternative to struggle against our society's oppression, exploitation, and injustice; it's a way of carrying that struggle out.

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

(c) About This Book

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

In recent years, prefigurative politics have been much discussed in connection with a wide range of contemporary social movements. They include bottom-up movements in Latin America, like the Zapatistas in Mexico, recuperated factory and neighbourhood movements in Argentina, and a host of other non-hierarchical movements.[9] Also often discussed is the so-called New Democracy Movement – which includes not only Occupy and the Movement of the Squares, but also 15M in Spain, Nuit Debout in France, and more[10] – as has a broad swathe of North American

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[7] This definition draws on a range of sources, but especially conversations with Mathijs van de Sande and van de Sande (2015), which have been invaluable during the process of writing this book and to which we especially owe the inclusion of 'experimental' in our definition.

[8] See Nietzsche 2006: 53.

[9] See Holloway 2010; Sitrin 2012; and Zibechi 2012.

[10] See Bray 2013; Graeber 2009 and 2013; Gould-Wartofsky 2015; Maeckelbergh 2011 and 2012; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; van de Sande 2015.

social movements.[11] Other important examples include 21st Century Socialism[12] and Democratic Confederalism,[13] which try to combine taking existing state power with certain forms of prefigurative politics. Finally, we would be remiss not to mention the resurgent syndicalist movements worldwide (Ness 2014).

On a theoretical level, different kinds of prefigurative politics are also being fiercely debated among thinkers drawing on classical anarchist[14] and Marxist ideas.[15] Most thinkers discuss only one or two kinds of prefiguration, limited themselves to only one or two cases, or they talk about prefiguration as part of, or in relation to, a whole host of other things. They do not provide an overview of the different major strands of prefigurative politics today and the different arguments for and against them. That's what this book sets out to do, offering a way into thinking about the theory and practices of prefigurative politics, with a particular focus on those parts of it that are important and contested today. Our book does not, however, try to be completely comprehensive or to provide a complete guide to everything that has been and might be labelled 'prefigurative politics'. To take just one example, we do not write very much about cooperatives, in part because there's not that much disagreement about their role in the transition to a better society.

One of the biggest challenges in writing about prefigurative politics is that you can't simply be told what it is. You can't properly understand it by simply reading or hearing about what it's like. You have to experience if for yourself. In fact, as we will see, one of the most prominent arguments for prefigurative politics is precisely that it can show you something that can't be properly explained through words alone: what free, equal, and democratic forms of social organisation might really be like.

We, the two authors, first met back in the early 2010s in the London chapter of the International Organisation for a Participatory Society, an organisation that centred on analysing, promoting and educating on a particular vision of a future society. We have both worked and lived in prefigurative organisations in the UK and the Nordic countries, including radical non-profit and cooperative cafes, student organisations, an anarcho-syndicalist organisation, a platformist organisation, parts of the Occupy movement, social centres, communal living spaces, and art collectives. For the past fifteen years we've been active in queer-feminist, environmental, antiracist, and anti-capitalist activist organisations in Western Europe. As professional (or in Saio's case, semi-professional) academics we have also dedicated part of our recent research to prefigurative politics. This book is therefore the result of our personal experiences as much as our academic research.

However, this also highlights one of the limitations of the book. Our views and arguments are significantly shaped by the strengths and weaknesses that our social and historical position brings with it. We are two white people with PhDs who work in Western European universities. Both of us grew up and went to school in Scandinavian countries in the 1990s and 2000s, when social welfare services were generous to those with citizenship, and when university studies were financially well-supported by the public purse. Further studies that would lead to an academic career seemed like a sensible choice for somebody who wanted to pursue radical theory and

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[11] See Bray 2013; Gould-Wartofsky 2015; Graeber 2009; and Dixon 2014.

[12] See Harnecker 2015; Mészáros 1995; and Lebowitz 2010, 2014, and 2015.

[13] See Biehl 1998; Bookchin 1993, 2005, and 2015; Dirik 2016; Dirik et al. 2016; Knapp et al. 2016; Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness 2015; Öcalan 2017.

[14] See Franks 2006; Gordon 2018; and Kinna 2016.

[15] See Monticelli 2018; Raekstad 2018b; Swain 2017; Yates 2015; and Wright 2010; see also note 12 for this chapter.

politics, but who was not from an affluent family. Our primary interest in this topic stems from a desire to see real social change – we don't only want to speak to other academics. We have therefore written this book in a language that is as readable as possible to a broader audience.

Our personal histories mean that our theoretical background is predominantly Western; our working language is English, and we largely address debates that have grown within the Western activist and academic discussions that we are part of. However, we take very seriously the imperative to learn from non-Western, non-male and non-white thought and practice, and have worked to bring in and highlight a number of examples that tend to be neglected in the literature. We also stress that this book is not the last word on the topic of prefigurative politics; if anything, it should barely be the beginning.

Before we summarise the chapters, here's some advice about reading this book. It's short and compact, but goes over a lot of ideas and arguments. If you've mainly trained by studying liberal politics and political ideas, there will be a lot of material here that you won't be very familiar with. One of the most challenging aspects of this can be understanding the process-based worldview that's often part of the movements and theory we discuss. We therefore recommend that you read it slowly, take your time, and feel free to go back to things that you don't quite remember or are confused about. (We often find this useful ourselves.) Chapters 2 and 3 are the heaviest of the book, because they set out the fundamental ideas and definitions you need to be aware of to understand many of the debates and arguments about prefigurative politics we discuss later on. If you find those chapters tough, it might be possible to skip to Chapter 4 onwards and revisit Chapters 2 and 3 a little later once you've familiarised yourself with some of the other main ideas and arguments. It would be impossible, however, to fully understand our central arguments without reading those two chapters – so skip them at your own peril!

(d) The Chapters of the Book

The following chapters unfold in a partly logical and partly chronological order, as the debate about prefigurative politics has developed. We start with some historical background on the concept and explain our own definition of it in Chapter 2. Here we explore the different kinds of political ideas and movements that the concept has been associated with (even where the term itself has not been used). These include utopian socialism, anarchism, certain strands of Marxism, and Black feminism. We also look at the term's development since Carl Boggs' two articles in 1977, elaborate on our definition of it, and explain why a broad understanding of it is more fruitful than a narrow one.

Following this, Chapter 3 looks at the understanding of human beings and society – the theory of praxis – that these arguments tend to build on, and at how this framework can be used to conceptualise social change, social movements, and revolution. In this and the following chapter, we try to show how certain anarchist and Marxist authors – perhaps surprisingly – converge on some important ideas with respect to both their theory of praxis and their arguments for prefigurative politics.[16]

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[16] This is part of the broader interest we have in drawing together the better parts of anarchist and Marxist theory and putting them into dialogue with each other. We think that for too long sectarian differences have hindered such dialogue, and that reaching a better future requires a much more careful discussion of these two important bodies of thought than has typically taken place. We are not trying to reduce one to the other, nor trying to salvage all the ideas

We then proceed to the two main interconnected arguments for why prefigurative politics is a necessary part of revolutionary strategy. Firstly, Chapter 4 examines the argument that we need to prefigure the formal decision-making structures of a free, equal, and democratic socialist society in order to build the powers, drives, and consciousness necessary for the transition to such a society. This emphasises that prefiguration is far from something that has been or should be restricted only to local, small-scale organisations – though it applies to those as well. We reconstruct these arguments for prefigurative politics – from the federalists of the First International to contemporary activists – and consider and respond to the most prominent criticisms of such organising. Finally, we consider the limitations of a narrow focus on formal decision-making structures and how it leads us to see the importance of broader understandings of and approaches to prefiguration.

Chapter 5 turns to our second main argument for prefigurative politics: the *personal is political* argument. Here we show why prefigurative politics should be understood in a broader sense, as something that goes far beyond (yet includes) an organisation's formal decision-making structures. This famous slogan of feminist movements of the late 1960s and '70s implies that our lives are affected by informal as well as formal social relations, and that all thinking is inevitably influenced by our contexts, experiences, and emotions. While many revolutionary leaders in the past have claimed their political analyses to be impersonal and universally applicable, they have often merely assumed that their own personal circumstances are universal – for example, that their interests as white male working-class people are the interests of the whole working class. An intersectional critique shows that different social structures combine to create different circumstances for different people, which has important implications for prefigurative theory and practice. This does not mean that class unity is impossible, but it does mean that our movements need to be diverse.

Having established the most important arguments for prefigurative politics, we turn to some common critiques and quandaries in Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 6 discusses debates about taking over the existing state, whether through election, coup, or conquest. Many critics have dismissed prefigurative politics because, they argue, it cannot confront existing power elites at their stronghold by seizing control of the existing state and so cannot carry out a revolution. On the contrary, many socialist supporters of prefigurative politics argue that taking over existing states is neither necessary nor sufficient to bring about socialism. It will shape those who take that power and cause them not to want to give it up, thereby preventing transition; it prevents building the institutions required for a better future society; and its means (in particular economic nationalisation) pave the way for dictatorship. We consider some responses to these concerns, and finish the chapter by looking at two models that have attempted to combine taking state power with prefigurative politics: 21st Century Socialism and Democratic Confederalism. This further shows how prefigurative politics is more multi-faceted and has a broader applicability than some might think.

Chapter 7 deals with three common interconnected critiques of prefigurative politics. Many critics worry that it is too similar to liberal individualism, that it lacks a serious political analysis and instead unwittingly relies on mainstream liberal assumptions. Many also argue that prefigurativism is too navel-gazing, leading activists to obsess over their own personal behaviours,

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associated with either of the two. What we try to do here is explore some surprising common ground, and see how that can help us to better understand many of their views on, and arguments about, prefigurative politics.

rather than addressing greater societal concerns. And others claim that intersectional prefigurative politics amounts to a denial of the need to pose a united front against oppressive structures, such as working-class struggle against capitalism. This chapter shows which elements of these criticisms are accurate and useful, and which are based on misunderstandings.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes by drawing together the main elements of our central argument. While we believe that prefigurativism is necessary, we're not arguing that it's everything. Prefigurative politics is far from being the only kind of (valuable) strategy out there and it certainly cannot solve all of our problems, much less do so on its own. But if we want a meaningfully more free, equal, and democratic world, then we have to have it. We need to both resist that which harms us *and* construct that which helps us flourish. We need to build the emancipation of tomorrow within the struggles against the oppression of today.

Contemporary society presents us with a contradiction. It is generating a tendency towards greater oligarchy and authoritarianism on the one hand, and a tendency towards greater freedom, equality, and democracy on the other. The future of our species and many others hangs on the question: which way will we go? This book presents arguments for prefigurative politics and shows how it can best be implemented in practice. Whether enough people with the capacity to actively take a stance for a more free, equal, and democratic society will do so, however, is up to each of us. We can't tell you how it is going to end, but we can tell you that it's already begun.

2 What Prefigurative Politics Is and Is Not

To gain a deeper understanding of what prefigurative politics is, this chapter looks at how the concept has developed and how it should be defined. As we have seen, the first use of 'prefigurative politics' in its current sense is no older than 1977, when the US scholar Carl Boggs published two articles criticising the authoritarianism of Leninist revolutionary theory and critically examining the alternative approaches provided by different strands of anarchism, syndicalism, and Marxism. Boggs was hardly the first to realise that prefiguration was a promising strategy for achieving radical social change, nor the last. In the previous chapter, we illustrated that prefigurative practices have existed for far longer than the concept has. In this chapter, we take a closer look at the concept and the contexts it has emerged from and developed in. Section (a) begins by delving a little deeper into the ideas and debates that have preceded and succeeded Boggs' articles. Section (b) discusses prefigurative politics in the narrower sense of the term, as relating to formal organisational structures, while section (c) explains why we favour a broader understanding of the concept. Finally, section (d) shows that, while our definition of prefigurative politics is broad, it cannot be applied to just about anything.

(a) Prefigurative Politics Gains its Current Meaning

Many works before 1977 expressed thinking that is similar to Boggs' in various respects, but did so without using the term prefigurative politics. This section will attempt to summarise the most significant examples. Before we do so, however, it is also important to note that there have been many works that have used the word 'prefigurative' in a different sense. For example, early Christian traditions used the term to refer to a 'phenomenal prophecy', as something 'real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical' (Auerbach 1984: 29). Old Testament figures such as Joshua could arguably be seen as prefiguring Jesus by enacting Jesus' spirit long before the latter's birth (Gordon 2018: 524). Although the word later came to be used to denote the kinds of political organisations aiming to institute some aspects of what they aspire to in a future society within the present, there are major differences.[1] The contemporary understanding of what today is called 'prefigurative politics' developed in the nineteenth century without reference to 'prefiguration' in this religious sense at all, and only over a century later did Boggs begin to label such politics with this term (Raekstad 2018b).

The term prefiguration was also used by the anarchist Daniel Guérin (1965) to refer to the Italian factory councils in the early twentieth century, but it's not clear that it's used in the sense that we're concerned with here, nor is it defined or explicitly related to the concept that later

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[1] First, to prefigure something in this sense is not actually to do it or to try to do it. For Joshua to prefigure Christ is not necessarily for Joshua to aspire to the same kinds of goals as Christ, or for Joshua to consciously and deliberately work towards what Christ achieves. Secondly, whether something is prefigurative in this first sense is determined only retrospectively. We are only able to imagine that Joshua prefigures Christ after both have come and gone (see Raekstad 2018b).

gets labelled prefigurative politics.[2] Another example of the word being used, this time with a different meaning, comes from Marxist writing of the 1960s and '70s (see Gorz 1968 and Magri 1970, discussed in Gordon 2018). For these authors, prefiguration did refer to revolutionary social movement activities, but did not imply a rejection of hierarchical and authoritarian approaches to social change – which is a key characteristic of what today is called prefigurative politics. It was also unrelated to the specific traditions of prefigurative politics that Boggs was talking about, especially anarchism and syndicalism.

Let us now turn to the theoretical origins of prefigurative politics in Boggs' sense of the term. The first thing to note is that they're as difficult to trace as the origins of prefigurative *practices* – there is no clear point when this idea started. Since most modern debates about it usually begin with the 1800s, though, it seems fair to start there.

One of the most obvious precursors to prefigurative politics is utopian socialism, a school of thought that hasn't regained its popularity since the nineteenth century, but was very influential at the time. It was a strand of socialism that developed quite elaborate models and images of what a socialist society might look and feel like. One famous utopian socialist was Flora Tristan, a French-Peruvian author and activist who offered not only a vision of how a socialist community might work, but a detailed plan for how to achieve it (Tristan 2007 [1843]). Tristan even developed a fully costed budget with proposals for how money could be raised, and wrote templates for letters that workers could send to their bosses and other rich people to demand contributions. Tristan's thoughts on workers' self-organising and self-management were influential among other early socialists, including Karl Marx. Tristan argued that workers could collect enough resources to start intentional communities that would contain workplaces, living spaces and everything else needed in society, run according to non-profit and communitarian principles through democratic decision-making. Other detailed plans for future societies, and some thoughts about how to reach them, can be found in the work of Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, and Henri de Saint-Simon. Some of these authors also enacted their ideas in practice, or at least attempted to, with varying degrees of success.

Around the same time that utopian socialism was flourishing, the anarchist strand of socialism was developing. There's a long-standing debate about how best to define it, and we don't want to take a decisive stand on its definition here. However, we will point out that the kind of anarchism that we're concerned with here is that of the historical anarchist movement which arose within the hugely influential International Workingmen's Association, more commonly known as the First International. Formed in 1864, the First International was a collection of left-wing groups and workers' unions that united across borders. It was an ideological melting pot which profoundly influenced the development of most future strands of socialism, including anarchism. We will discuss the First International in much greater detail in Chapter 4.

The kind of anarchism that developed in that organisation went on to spread worldwide, and emphasised values of freedom, equality, and mutual aid. It rejected all forms of hierarchy, including capitalism, feudalism, sexism, racism, imperialism, colonialism, and the state. Finally, it sought to establish a bottom-up democratic form of society through the international revolutionary self-emancipation of the working classes. This self-emancipation, they thought, could only come about through direct action and prefigurative politics – usually talked about in terms of the correspondence between means and ends. To this day, anarchists often speak of prefigura-

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[2] We'd like to thank Mathijs van de Sande for pointing this out to us.

tion in terms of the correspondence between ends and means. This builds on a certain idea of path-dependency, i.e. the idea that our past decisions come to limit the future decisions that are available to us (Gordon 2018). Anarchists have long pointed out that the kinds of organising we practise will tend to be reflected in the institutions we create; in other words, we cannot use hierarchical organisations to achieve a non-hierarchical society. This idea is analysed further in Chapter 4, where we present three interconnected arguments for prefigurativism that draw on anarchist, syndicalist, and Marxist thought: that prefigurative politics is necessary to develop the right 1) powers, 2) drives, and 3) consciousness. If we don't develop these three things, the argument goes, we will never be able to introduce a free, equal, and democratic socialist society.

One writer who was very influential on anarchism (however one defines it), as well as on early cooperative and mutualist movements, was the French thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, although people disagree on whether Proudhon should be classed as an anarchist. Writing from the 1930s onwards, Proudhon's most famous idea was arguably the slogan 'property is theft', which implied that private property was illegitimate and should be abolished. Proudhon was also a very early advocate of federalism, i.e. the idea that governing units should be organised through layers of local, regional, and global councils with bottom-up decision-making and a great degree of local autonomy.[3] Federalism is a very influential idea within prefigurative politics, and is one that will recur throughout this book. Proudhon rejected not only the idea that the transition from capitalism would have to be controlled by the state, but also any other form of centralised economic control. Instead of a nationalised economy, Proudhon advocated mutualism, a model where independent workers and associations such as cooperatives would control the means of production. Workers would receive remuneration according to how much labour they have put in, and goods would be exchanged in a free market, with collectively owned mutual credit banks lending at minimal rates. Rejecting class struggle, Proudhon advocated peaceful revolution through the growth of cooperatives and mutual banks, which would gradually grow into the new society, replacing capitalism. In other words, Proudhon offered an early version of the idea that social change happens through establishing desired practices in the here-and-now, rather than taking place through a state-led revolution.

Anarchism continued to develop in the second half of the nineteenth century, shaped by an important debate between anarchists and other types of socialists that took place within the First International. The latter will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4, but it is worth noting here that several important texts were published by its factions in a dispute over how the organisation should be run. The first explicit advocacy of prefiguration within the First International came from its Belgian section at its Brussels congress in 1868. This section went on, in February 1869, to publish 'The Present Institutions of the International in Relation to the Future', in which the activist and author César de Paepe argued that 'societies of resistance', or trade unions, were to be the 'embryo' of 'the great companies of workers' that would take production from the capitalists, replacing capitalism with 'a universal system of work and exchange' (quoted in Graham 2015: 92). As we will see in Chapter 4, not all factions of the First International agreed.

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[3] Notably, however, Proudhon was not an advocate of gender equality but argued aggressively against feminism and for patriarchal gender roles. Proudhon also expressed other bigoted views on sexuality and race. In this he contrasts with many of the other thinkers who called themselves anarchists, and who we think are more deserving of the name, such as Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, Parsons, and many others, who more comprehensively opposed all forms of hierarchy.

The Belgian section continued to publish texts arguing that the First International should organise in what we now call prefigurative ways. Later in 1869 they argued that 'the International carried within itself the institutions of the society of the future' (Graham 2015: 91). The "'societies of resistance", which functioned like trade unions, organizing and funding resistance to the employers – including strikes – ... would be responsible for organizing production in the future society' (Graham 2015: 92). As well as arguing for a more democratic form of governance within the First International, the Belgian faction also argued that its structure should be prefigurative, where 'local sections, being geographically based, would establish consumer cooperatives for selling at a fair price the goods produced by the workers' cooperatives', as well as 'organise integral education' (Graham 2015: 92). This would all be combined with mutual aid societies providing for the sick, elderly, and disabled, etc. In this way, the institutions of struggle within capitalism were also to be the institutions of transition beyond it.

Prefigurative politics appeared again in the famous Sonvillier Circular of 1871, where the Jura Federation – another faction of the First International, which today is generally labelled anarchist – argued that:

> The society of the future should be nothing other than the universalization of the organisation with which the international will have endowed itself. We must, therefore, have to care to ensure that that organisation comes as close as we may to our ideal. How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organisation? Impossible. The international, as the embryo of the human society of the future, is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle learning towards authority and dictatorship. (Quoted in Graham 2015: 97–8)

At the same time, the famous anarchist Michael Bakunin independently developed ideas along the same lines, publishing criticisms of the Jura Federation's competing Swiss pro-authoritarian and pro-parliamentary faction of the First International (Bakunin 2016: 113–41). Bakunin was pleasantly surprised to discover that the Jura Federation's Sonvillier Circular expressed similar ideas when later made aware of its contents (Eckhardt 2016: 109).

As time went on and anarchism became one of the strongest influences on the international radical labour movement, anarchists continued to advocate what we now call prefigurative politics, and to criticise hierarchical and vanguardist organising (vanguardism here being the idea that a more capable elite should lead the socialist movement from above). Emma Goldman is another influential and noteworthy anarchist who expressed these kinds of ideas long ago. Like Boggs, Goldman directed the criticism specifically at the Bolsheviks' actions in Russia. Goldman lived in Russia for roughly two years after the 1917 revolution, having been deported there by the US government for engaging in anarchist political activities. In a series of essays, Goldman scathingly criticised the Bolshevik government's repression and authoritarianism, arguing that the Bolsheviks' belief that the ends would justify their authoritarian means had led to the core vision of socialism getting lost (Goldman 1924). In Goldman's words: 'There is no greater fallacy than the belief that aims and purposes are one thing, while methods and tactics are another. ... To-day is the parent of to-morrow. The present casts its shadow far into the future' (2014: 403).

Not all long-standing advocates of ideas we'd now call prefigurative, however, are anarchists or utopian socialists. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) is the most important syndicalist union in the history of the United States, and has long advocated prefigurative ideas. The IWW

includes not only anarchists, but many Marxist and other socialists as well, and has long seen itself as 'forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old' (Industrial Workers of the World 2014: 4). The preamble to the IWW Constitution from 1905, which this quote is taken from, has become a brief yet influential piece of theory in this tradition. Contemporary anarcho-syndicalist unions often reference this quote, one example being the British Solidarity Federation, which insists on 'building a new society within the shell of the old' (Solidarity Federation 2014).

Many strands of Marxism have also contributed to this tradition, especially anti-authoritarian ones. For example, reflecting on the rise of workers' councils in Italy 1919, the famous Marxist thinker and agitator Antonio Gramsci argued for a prefigurative party structure connected to the workers' councils (1994: 96–197). Strands of Left Marxism, including the work of Rosa Luxemburg, council communists (Gorter et al. 2007; Pannekoek 1975, 2003; Bourrinet 2016), and autonomist Marxists (Holloway 2010; Wright 2002), have advocated prefigurative politics in various forms, often along with rejecting state participation. This legacy continues today, and a number of contemporary writers are drawing on various strands of Marxism to think about and advocate prefigurative politics (Raekstad 2018b; Swain 2017; Wright 2010). Related ideas continue to be important in both Democratic Confederalism and 21ˢᵗ Century Socialism, both of which advocate a mix of taking some kind of capitalist state power with the development of prefigurative institutions (and which we discuss further in Chapter 6).

So far, we have outlined important influences on prefigurative politics in different types of socialist literature, which have tended to centre on class domination, oppression, and exploitation. Feminist, antiracist, and decolonial practices and ideas around prefigurativism have of course also been thriving – as we saw in the previous chapter – but thinkers of colour, women and gender nonconforming thinkers have often had more limited influence on the *theories* of prefigurative politics. It is important to be clear that socialism, and especially anarchism, syndicalism, and left Marxism, have been the main intellectual influences on the development of the concept of prefigurative politics as it is used by most authors today. However, we want to contribute to elevating feminist and antiracist ideas and practices that didn't make it into much of today's European and North American academia.

As feminists and antiracist struggles gained ground in the 1960s and '70s, marginalised groups started gaining more influence in European and North American academic theorising. As we mentioned earlier and will explore in detail in Chapter 5, the feminist idea that the personal is political has become especially influential. Feminists were critiquing vanguardist organising a decade or two before Boggs' articles came out, and often did so with a focus on its underlying white and patriarchal assumptions. Thinkers and activists such as Angela Davis (1969), Mary Ann Weathers (1969), and the authors of the Combahee River Collective statement (1977) – Florynce Kennedy, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith – all criticised the false distinction between rational thought and strategy on the one hand and personal experience and emotions on the other, which vanguardist theory (i.e. theory advocating top-down elite leadership) often took for granted.

The assumption that purely 'rational' thought can be neatly separated from personal experiences, emotions, and other aspects of one's social and historical context is a key idea that is often used to prop up white supremacist, colonial, and patriarchal ways of looking at the world. Somewhat simplified, it's no coincidence that Western society stereotypes men as rational and women/others as emotional, and white or Western people as rational or scientific and people of the global South as superstitious (or, connected with this, that emotional and superstitious are

treated as lesser things to be). These stereotypes are not random or accidental, but are part of a narrative that attempts to justify racial, colonial, and patriarchal oppression.

Though not all vanguardists are white or male, vanguardism tends to be built on the belief that the production of knowledge can be disconnected from raced, gendered, and other kinds of power struggles. This belief, in turn, is often built on the assumption that the political can be disconnected from the personal in important ways. That is, theorists are believed to be capable of rising above their own personal context and their lived experiences to create perfectly 'objective' theories of how social change is best orchestrated, which can then be enacted by anybody. Feminists and antiracists, on the other hand, have argued that nobody is actually capable of understanding the world from a purely impersonal perspective. Political analyses are not created through rational thought alone. Rather, our emotions, experiences, psychologies, and other bodily processes cannot be completely detached from how we think about and theorise things.

This does not mean that humans are incapable of clear-headed thinking, but it does mean that no single individual can create universally applicable theory that equally represents everybody's contexts and experiences. That is, a vanguard of leaders cannot bestow a perfectly free, equal, and democratic society on the masses guided by their disconnected powers of 'reason' alone. As a result, collective emancipation requires that those who are to be emancipated themselves participate fully in the process of their emancipation. In this book we call this the personal-is-political argument for prefigurative politics, which is one of our main justifications for the necessity of prefigurativism, discussed further in Chapter 5.

Decolonial and antiracist thinking outside of feminism has long expressed similar or inter-related ideas. A noteworthy author writing before Boggs was Paulo Freire, a Marxist and anti-colonial educator, whose book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* came out in 1968. Drawing on extensive experience as an educator working with marginalised people in Brazil, Freire argues that knowledge – like freedom more generally – cannot simply be transmitted from one person to another but must be fought for by anyone who wishes to gain it. Knowledge is not merely a bank of information that a student can download; and freedom, similarly, is more than a collection of formal regulations to be implemented. Rather, struggles for knowledge and freedom are themselves transformative processes and experiences. Freire writes: '[The oppressed] will not gain [their] liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it' (2000: 45). This rejection of the idea that knowledge can be completely detached from the knower's context and experience, and that 'reason' can be completely and artificially separated from 'emotion', runs as a common thread through decolonial literatures more broadly (see also Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2007). As we argue in this book, these ideas have influenced the development of prefigurative politics in very important ways.

We also want to mention Black revolutionary approaches to Marxism and socialism, especially Boggs and Boggs (1974). James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs (a married couple who through sheer coincidence share Carl Boggs' surname) published their book *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* only three years before Carl Boggs' articles came out. James and Grace Lee's book does not use the term prefigurative politics but does employ some (though far from all) of the key ideas behind it. They argued that free, equal, and democratic social relations must be developed deliberately – we cannot assume that they will appear spontaneously on the eve of revolution. Revolution, they argued, requires 'a projection of [humanity] into the future. It begins with projecting the notion of a more human human being, i.e., a human being who is more

advanced in … creativity, consciousness and self-consciousness, a sense of political and social responsibility' (1974: 19).

We have now surveyed some of the influences on prefigurative politics and the concept thereof. We have seen that the (pre-)history of prefigurativism is both long and complex. We could never hope to cover all of it here, but we hope we've given an idea of the kinds of literatures and political driving forces that have fed into it. Next, we turn to the question of how narrow or broad the definition of prefigurative politics should be, which is a debate that followed Boggs' introduction of the term in its current sense.

(b) Prefigurative Politics as Organisational Structure

Wini Breines was one of the first thinkers to follow Boggs in the usage of the term prefigurative politics.[4] Writing only a couple of years after Boggs, Breines focused on a tension within US New Left movements of the 1960s, characterised as a disagreement between 'serious, national political [strategic] organization' on the one hand, and 'local, utopian and spontaneous [prefigurative] politics' on the other (1980: 421). Breines' article thus contrasted prefigurative politics with strategic organising. Whereas strategic organising tended to be instrumental, goal-oriented, and centralised, prefigurativism in this description was more concerned with allowing everybody to express their voices and avoiding a formal organisational order. While strategic groups were often organised hierarchically, the prefigurative New Left, Breines argued, tended towards participatory democracy as it had an aversion to 'bureaucracy, hierarchy and leadership, and … large-scale centralized and inhuman institutions' (1980: 422).

One aim of prefigurativism, Breines argued, was to 'unite the public and private spheres of life' (1980: 421). This comment can be understood (among other things) as hinting at the feminist discourse of acknowledging the political nature of our personal lives, which had become influential on parts of the New Left. In our view, the implications of this idea go far beyond questions of organisational form since social structures of power are expressed in informal as well as formal ways. Breines, however, focused more narrowly on questions of organisational form, because they were a clear point of tension and distinction between different tendencies at the time. The central argument of Breines' article was that prefigurative movements had wrongly been portrayed by commentators as lacking in knowledge about how to organise properly. On the contrary, Breines argued, these movements had deliberately chosen to organise horizontally and without formal leadership, 'not because they were ignorant, unconcerned or unaware of organizational issues', but because their political aims – to change widely held moral views about family, gender roles, racial segregation, or sexuality; ending the Vietnam war; disrupting political norms and assumptions – were not served by centralised or hierarchical organising (1980: 423). Although many prefigurative organisations of the 1960s were ultimately unsuccessful, Breines suggested that their anti-organisational approach 'may well prove to have been the new left's most valuable legacy' (1980: 419).

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[4] Notably, however, Proudhon was not an advocate of gender equality but argued aggressively against feminism and for patriarchal gender roles. Proudhon also expressed other bigoted views on sexuality and race. In this he contrasts with many of the other thinkers who called themselves anarchists, and who we think are more deserving of the name, such as Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, Parsons, and many others, who more comprehensively opposed all forms of hierarchy.

Breines' work reflects a strand of the literature on prefigurative politics that focuses more specifically on formal organisational structure. By contrast, Boggs and many other thinkers discuss prefigurative politics in a broader way, including not only forms of decision-making but also 'social relations …, culture, and human experience' (Boggs 1977b: 100). On the narrower understanding, a prefigurative organisation is typically one that is governed from the bottom up in a participatory way, reflecting a future society that will be similarly organised. Many authors have elaborated on what future decision-making structures might look like. One example is Murray Bookchin's Democratic Confederalism, which posits a model of federated participatory democratic councils, currently implemented by Kurds in Rojava in Northern Syria. Another is Michael Albert's ParEcon, which outlines an entire alternative economic system, which Steve Shalom's ParPolity builds on in other areas of politics and legal systems. There are also many others (see Spannos 2008).

The narrower focus on formal decision-making mechanisms in mass organisations has a long history in socialist thought, as we saw in the previous section. The discussions within the First International concerned primarily how the formal decision-making structure of that organisation should be modelled. As time went on, and as anarchist social movements were marginalised, their concept of prefigurative politics shifted in two main ways. First, it *expanded* to include a range of other factors, such as the broader culture of movements, experiences, and so on. Second, the *focus* often *shifted* to these latter kinds of concerns within anarchist thought.[5] This is one of the reasons why there is so much confusion about prefigurative politics.

Many contemporary authors have continued to focus on the narrower understanding. One example is the literature analysing protest movements such as Occupy and demonstrations at WTO, G7, COP and other international summits. Many influential commentators have argued that these movements are best understood as movements for democracy (Klein 2002; Holloway 2002; Bray 2013; Graeber 2002, 2009, 2013; Kingsnorth 2003). These movements have seen millions of people turning out on the streets to protest elite meetings on trade, foreign policy, and climate change, and to camp out in squares and parks across the world in objection to inequality and financial crisis. What commentators have argued is that these movements, and especially Occupy, have been wrongly understood as lacking a coherent ideology or message. The key to understanding these movements lies in their democratic decision-making structures. As Graeber puts it: 'It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization *are* its ideology' (2002: 70).

(c) A Broader Conception

Analyses that emphasise the political nature of organisational forms, and that propose and evaluate different democratic models, are both necessary and useful. Our argument in this book, however, is that the concept of prefigurative politics can and should be understood in a broader sense. It is not only organisations that can be prefigurative; so too can broader organisational culture, social relations, and everyday practices. In taking a broader understanding of the concept, we are following Boggs' original definition, as well as a great deal of subsequent usage among activists and theorists.

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[5] Breines went on to write a book expanding on these arguments; see Breines 1982.

Another very early discussion of Boggs' concept of prefigurative politics, which was in fact published before Breines', can be found in Sheila Rowbotham's chapter in the 1979 book *Beyond the Fragments*. Even though Rowbotham was not explicitly concerned with how to define the concept, the chapter offers a persuasive case for a broader conception. Rowbotham's chapter sets out a feminist critique of the British (Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist) Socialist Workers Party, condemning not only their paternalistic and hierarchical decision-making structures but also their broader assumptions and ways of thinking. The chapter offers a case for a broader definition, but also a very useful account of the lessons that contemporary advocates of prefigurative politics can learn from feminism.

Rowbotham presents an in-depth explanation of what we in this book call the personal-is-political argument for prefigurative politics, arguing that Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist organisations at the time – and this is still accurate in many cases today – mistakenly saw political analysis and revolution as a kind of pristine 'objective science' that could neatly be detached from people's social context and experiences. Rowbotham argues that the leaders of these organisations assumed that if they correctly understood the way capitalism worked, then they could set in motion a series of events that would topple it and replace it with the socialist promised land. Political analysis, in this view, is a kind of technical skill that is not necessarily affected by the social context, experiences, or emotions of the person who is doing it; it is simply a matter of pure rational thought. To Rowbotham, this particular kind of scientism fuels existing inequalities since it serves to legitimise certain people's concerns, in this case white men's, as the most 'real' or 'correct' ones, while marginalising those of others.

This argument could perhaps be understood as an elaboration on Boggs' critique of vanguardism. Vanguardism is usually based on the idea that power is predominantly centralised in key institutions such as the state and large corporations, or in key logics such as the capitalist logic of domination, oppression, and exploitation. In this view, what political movements need to do is to devise an effective strategy to attack those key institutions and logics – for example, by seizing control of the state or by outlawing capitalist exploitation in the workplace – as a result of which all other forms of oppression will eventually fall away. Advocates of prefigurative politics challenge this. They tend to employ an interpretation of the world that sees power as located everywhere in society (even if it is highly unequally distributed between different groups and members thereof). While there are places and relationships in society where power is particularly concentrated, simply wiping them out or having the right leaders seize control of them is not sufficient for all-round human emancipation. Other forms of oppression and hierarchy will still remain; and those who take over these institutions will be likely to create new hierarchies. Rather than experts or leaders coming up with political decisions for groups as a whole, then, everyone must participate in decision-making, and our more free, equal, and democratic politics must be practised in real life to whatever extent that is possible.

Feminists have long argued that the personal is never separate from the political – but claiming that they are separate is an often-used technology of rule. Even Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Rowbotham writes, got their political analysis from 'their own lives and times. So personal and historical factors creep into scientific understanding' (2013 [1979]: 203). By 'prefigurative politics', then, Rowbotham means not only paying attention to organisational forms, but also to our political analysis, our broader practices, language, ideas and assumptions, physical spaces, food, social relationships – in short, *everything*. In this book, we link this to a broad conception of human beings, society, and social change that underlies a great deal of thinking about prefigu-

rativism. It is difficult to justify a narrow focus on organisational structures once we take such a view of the world, which sees power as dispersed throughout society in many different forms, both formal and informal.

This broader understanding of prefigurative politics has seen continued and increasing use, especially since the 2000s. A recent prominent example is Richard J. F. Day's 2005 book *Gramsci is Dead*,[6] which presents a poststructural and anarchist case for prefigurativism. Day criticises the idea that marginalised and oppressed groups should seek to establish a new hegemony where they are in charge, for example by seizing control of the state. As long as we seek to take power in existing key hierarchical institutions, we will remain stuck in a logic of domination and will not be able to establish a genuinely equal, and democratic society. Rather, we need to transform those institutions, and broader society, so that the state, large corporations, and so on, no longer fulfil a domineering function. Day also argues that prefigurative activism that creates alternative institutions and relations gives more power to social movement activists than mere protest does. The latter amounts to a submission to a higher authority (for example, asking the government to stop welfare cuts), whereas the former means taking matters into one's own hands (for example, creating community welfare projects).

Chris Dixon is another influential author, whose 2014 book *Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements* sees democratic decision-making as only one of four main aspects of prefigurative politics. The others are the growing and spreading of the movement through inclusive organising; the creation of alternative institutions such as cooperatively owned and democratically run businesses, housing, health care, etc; and everyday behaviours or 'lifestyles' that enact our ideals. Dixon's book offers a comprehensive discussion of these different aspects of prefigurative politics, which includes a wealth of examples, input from activists, and indispensable advice for waging genuinely inclusive and egalitarian politics.

Marianne Maeckelbergh (2009) focuses on questions of formal decision-making structure, but also considers a broader range of issues, such as DIY culture, counter-institutions and alternative lifestyles. Maeckelbergh (2011) argues that Wini Breines' opposition of prefigurative vs strategic approaches, albeit a useful intervention at the time, is no longer informative. Too many authors, in Maeckelbergh's view, have seen prefigurativism as 'either astrategic or complementary to strategy, but certainly not itself strategic' (2011: 4). This opposition is based on a vanguardist bias, which has prevented authors from recognising that prefigurativism is in fact equally strategic, just differently so. The key to understanding this is to appreciate that prefigurative approaches tend to be based on an understanding of social structures that sees them as dispersed rather than predominantly concentrated in centralised institutions such as the state (which we discuss in Chapter 3). It's also important to understand that prefigurative approaches take into account the interests and perspectives of a much more diverse collection of people – differently racialised and gendered people for example. The presence of a diverse set of interests makes the meaning of 'strategic' much more complex since different members of the movement have different needs. Another factor that complicates what 'strategy' means is that the present and future goals of prefigurative movements are not completely predefined but are always open to renegotiation and revision. Taken together, for groups with diverse members, when goals are open for negotiation, and power is understood as dispersed, the distinction between strategic and prefigurative politics collapses.

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[6] See also an essential follow-up discussion to this book in the journal Upping the Anti: uppingtheanti.org.

Benjamin Franks (2006) also takes a broader understanding of prefigurativism in analysing the moral philosophy that underpins it. Franks argues that neither of the two most common moral approaches in Western thought accurately capture its underlying assumptions. These two approaches are consequentialism (which holds that the outcomes of an action are what determines its moral status) and a Kantian deontological approach (which holds that whether an action is right or wrong according to certain rules is what determines its moral status). Both approaches, Franks argues, are typically based on a strict separation of means and ends, whereas prefigurative politics is based on the idea that means and ends cannot be distinguished from each other. Rather than seeking abstract moral principles or rules, prefigurativism means acting in moral situations that arise in *particular* contexts. The feminist and antiracist rejection of idealised abstract reason thus runs through Franks' understanding of prefigurative politics.

Many authors explicitly point out that prefigurative politics should be understood not only in a broad sense, but also as a strategy that works best when combined with other strategies. Andrew Cornell's book *Oppose and Propose* (2011) is perhaps the most influential expression of this idea. If prefigurative actions 'propose' by creating alternatives to the status quo and by implementing desired future relations, then 'oppose'-based actions focus their energies on objecting to the current way of doing things (for example, by protesting against the state, pulling media stunts that criticise inequalities, sabotaging military equipment, and so on). Cornell argues that a prefigurative movement that does not also actively work to prevent the things it opposes runs the risk of becoming insular and irrelevant, or, even worse, being co-opted and watered down (2011: 165). Emphasising that prefigurative approaches are compatible with (or perhaps even include) 'oppose'-based approaches is also important to Dixon (2014), Maeckelbergh (2011), and many others.

(d) Is Everything Prefigurative?

We have now seen how the focus of discussions of prefigurative politics has expanded from a narrower to a much broader one. A potential problem with broad conceptions, however, is that they become so inclusive that they lose their meaning.

That prefigurativism should be understood in a broad sense is one of the most fundamental contentions of this book. Our argument is not that political means and ends *should* be linked in important ways, but that they *already are*. As we argue later on, any revolution builds upon, expands, and generalises certain social relations, institutions, practices, and so on, that already exist. In this sense, therefore, all human behaviour that at some point becomes widespread was at some point being prefigured by those who innovated it and adopted it early. (Naturally, this does not deny that structures shape and limit us – nor does it argue that humans are some sort of magically autonomous agents who can pull themselves out of their social context to make decisions. Nor that all such innovation and early adoption counts as 'prefigurative politics' on our definition.)

This does not, however, mean that our definition of prefigurative politics is 'too' broad. The attentive reader may have noticed the inclusion of the words 'deliberate' and 'desired' in the definition that we are offering in this book: the *deliberate* experimental implementation of *desired* future social relations and practices in the here-and-now. While any general development and spread of future social relations grows out of ones that have been begun earlier, this rarely hap-

pens deliberately. Those who begin to develop new social relations rarely expect or plan for them to become the social organisation of the future. Early merchant capitalists did not, for example, expect or plan that their social relations would become the locus of a new social formation called capitalism.

Our definition of prefigurative politics is what Uri Gordon (2018: 527) calls a formal one: we do not place any restrictions on the substantive ideological content of a group or project in order for it to qualify as prefigurative. That means that potentially even right-wing groups could in principle engage in prefigurative politics. However, since they typically have very fixed ideas about what they want society to be like (e.g. an idealised vision of the 1950s), they are unlikely to satisfy the 'experimental' part of our definition.7 Just as it would be strange to call only socialist protest 'protest', we acknowledge that activists of all political ideologies can, in principle, prefigure. As we have seen in this chapter, though, the concept of prefigurative politics and its associated practices have generally emerged out of the radical left tradition. In this book, we are uninterested in what conservative, fascist, or liberal prefigurativism might look like, so we will not discuss them.

It is also worth mentioning something about the words 'future' and 'here-and-now' that are included in our definition. The intention is not to limit prefigurativism to forms of activism that want to see a desirable society only at some point in the future. Prefigurativism does not chase some ideal society that is permanently deferred and unachievable. On the contrary, as the examples discussed in this book attest, a free, equal, and democratic socialist society is highly achievable and necessary – many of us are living aspects of it already. The 'here-and-now' part of the definition, meanwhile, refers to our current period of time, i.e. before the omnipresence of free, equal, and democratic relations. It means that prefigurativists do not defer radical change to the future, as for example Stalinists tend to do when they argue that various other steps must be taken first, such as seizing control of the state and nationalising the economy.

Our definition also includes the word 'experimental'. In practice, it is impossible to know for sure in advance what we will deem a free, equal, and democratic society in the future. What we today believe to be necessary will likely change over time – it certainly has so far. We cannot create a final and complete blueprint of a free, equal, and democratic society simply by applying some clear-cut reasoning procedure or scientific method, at least not yet. We need to experiment and experience to see what works. On the other hand, since it is difficult to work towards a better world without having some conception of what that world might look like, we cannot do away with visions of the future altogether. Rather, we must treat them as temporary, tentative, and subject to revision (see also van de Sande 2015).

Our definition, therefore, is not too broad. As further evidence of this, we can safely use it to distinguish prefigurative politics from a range of other revolutionary approaches and tactics. For example, alternatives to prefigurativism include protest marches and demonstrations, at least in their traditional forms; parliamentarism (i.e. gaining elected or appointed positions of power to seek to change problematic institutions from the inside); winning legal battles in court; subversion and parody (such as most forms of drag performance and subvertising); many forms of separatism; and armed uprisings. These do not necessarily involve implementing desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now, but rather tend to be measures that are considered necessary in the current context to enable or promote social progress. If at any point they begin deliberately and experimentally to implement desired future social relations and practices, then they would be classified as prefigurative to the extent to which they do so.

While these various approaches and practices are distinct from prefigurative politics, they are not necessarily off-limits to its supporters. Being committed to prefiguration does not entail that everything that is not itself prefigurative is wrong. There are many situations in which we are prevented from implementing our desired social relations, usually because some other group – such as the state – is submitting us to some kind of violence, whether military or legal. Our argument, as should hopefully already be clear, is not that all of our actions and practices must be deliberately prefiguring the future all of the time, but that we must be very careful to make sure we do not *only* engage in activism that is non-prefigurative since we'll never be able to build our desired society that way. This is why most prominent contemporary theorists of prefigurativism advocate, to borrow a term from the Black Panthers, a diversity of tactics: Andrew Cornell calls it 'opposing *and* proposing'; John Holloway calls it 'against-and-beyond'. Prefigurative politics is one tool for social change, one aspect of strategy; it is not and never has been the only one.

This chapter has looked at some of the main theoretical debates that preceded, influenced and succeeded Carl Boggs' (re)introduction of the term in 1977. We've looked at socialist literatures, such as utopian socialism, anarchism and various strands of Marxism, feminism, and antiracism. We showed how the ideas and practices that Boggs labelled prefigurative politics are actually very widespread – we cannot come close to overviewing them all. After this, we looked at how prefigurative politics can be understood in narrower or broader ways, and argued for a broader understanding influenced by the idea that the personal is political. Finally, we showed that this definition is not so broad as to be meaningless.

In the next chapter we overview the underlying assumptions about the world and human beings that prefigurative politics is founded upon. This will lay the foundation for explaining why prefigurative politics is often taken to be necessary for achieving a fully free, equal, and democratic society.

3. Praxis and Social Change

Prefigurative politics is often based on a certain way of thinking about human beings and society, i.e. a theory of 'praxis'.[1] This theory sees the goals or ends of activity as emerging through our lived practices, not as external to them. It sees social creations – especially social relations and institutions – in terms of the activities which produce and reproduce them. And it sees the processes of production (of goods and services) and reproduction (of human life more broadly) as simultaneously developing the consciousness of those who partake in them. The development of people's powers and capacities, of their drives, wants, and needs, and of their consciousness, can only be made sense of through an understanding of the forms of praxis that they are part of and emerge through.

To get a fuller grasp of this picture, the first three sections of this chapter discuss (a) powers, (b) drives, and (c) consciousness, respectively. We pay particular attention to how these intertwine and interrelate with one another in and through human activity and how and why developing them in the right ways is important for social change. Section (d) draws these concepts together to show how they give us a unified way of thinking about human beings and society adequate for making sense of both social stability and social change. We go on to set out how we think about social power in a capillary way, and why this is important for radicals today; how we define social movements; and how we think about revolution.

(a) Powers

Let's begin with the concept of powers. Here we should *not* understand 'power' in the sense of power-over. Power-over is the ability to get someone to do something they wouldn't otherwise do, not do something they otherwise would do, or alter their preferences in ways contrary to their interests (Lukes 2004). This includes both more hierarchical (monarchs over subjects, CEOs over employees) and less hierarchical (convincing someone with a sound argument) variants. The more hierarchical variants assume a division between rulers and ruled, those who wield power over others and those over whom that power is wielded. This is *not* the kind of 'power' that we are concerned with here.

The concept of power we will be using is instead power-to. Here, a power is defined as a real possibility to do and/or to be. Beings include conditions and states-of-affairs like being physically healthy, being adequately clothed, being warm, being safe, etc. Doings include things like listen-

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[1] In discussions of Marx, it is not unusual to talk about 'praxis' in a more technical sense (more on which below), contrasted with a looser and more everyday use of 'practice' as opposed to 'theory'. It's worth noting that in Marx's original German, there is only one word, as a result of which much of the literature introduces a distinction foreign to Marx's original texts. Having noted this, since it has become commonplace to use 'praxis' and 'theories of praxis' in the sorts of debates we're concerned with here, we will stick to the common use of 'praxis' as a technical term and 'practice' in its more common, everyday sense.

ing to and appreciating music, eating, drinking, sleeping, playing computer games, watching a film, etc.

Powers-to include both possibilities to affect the external world (e.g. kicking a football) and possibilities to be affected by it, such as producing certain experiences in response to external stimuli (e.g. the experience of hearing 'All the Single Ladies' in response to certain sound waves hitting your ears). This will be important later on, because our powers to be affected by and to appreciate different things – from different kinds of music to different social relations – affect what we are driven to do and experience.

Every instance of power-over is also an instance of power-to, but not vice versa. If you manage to cause someone to do something they wouldn't otherwise do, you're exercising your real possibility of influencing them in this way. George W. Bush's order to the military to invade Iraq entailed causing a large number of troops to do something they wouldn't otherwise do, which in turn entailed that Bush already had the power to do this. By contrast, having the power to brush your teeth, pick a flower, or dance amazingly does not imply or entail that you have any particular power to cause anyone to do something they otherwise wouldn't, or not do something they otherwise would.

So, on our view, a power is a real possibility to do and/or to be. Having a power in this sense consists in having the right combination of both external and internal things. First, you need the right *external* conditions. Having the power of completing the game Skyrim requires living in a time and place in which Skyrim exists, being able to get hold of it, having a device you can play it on, the electricity that device needs to function, etc. Secondly, the power of completing Skyrim also consists of one or more *internal* powers that are required to take advantage of those external conditions. Having Skyrim and a computer isn't going to help you if you don't know how a computer works or can't figure out how to connect the computer to the electrical socket.

Similarly, being able to seize the means of production naturally requires you to have certain internal powers of your own – like the capacity to communicate with others and to know how certain machines work. But no matter how great your internal powers are, you also require the right external contexts or conditions, such as an organised anarcho-syndicalist union, a bunch of other workers who are also set on taking over their workplace, a wider political climate in which you're likely to be able to keep control over it, etc. Only once you have the right combination of internal and external powers can you seize control of the means of production.

This brings us to an important point about power in the sense of power-to, namely its relational and processual nature. Your power to complete Skyrim requires access to certain things – e.g. the game and a device to play it on. Getting these things in turn requires you to partake in relations which enable you to acquire them – e.g. capitalist property relations. These are a result of the continued production and reproduction of a complex network of social relations and institutions which you must participate in to function in current society. The same is true of your power to seize the means of production. To do this you need the help and cooperation of many other people – especially your colleagues. This is possible only because you stand in certain social relations with them. Moreover, you are only even able to be colleagues because you are part of wider network of social relations – the social structure of your workplace, its interaction with buyers and sellers in a capitalist marketplace, and so on. We can thus see how the external contexts and conditions for important human powers are inherently relational.

Secondly, a power also requires the right internal powers to take advantage of external conditions. Completing Skyrim requires you to know how a computer works, and effectively seiz-

ing the means of production requires knowing something about how they work. These internal powers are constituted by and through an ongoing process in which your body (including your brain) continually reproduces itself in interaction with its environment through eating, drinking, breathing, etc., in a way that manages to maintain those powers over time. Failure to interact with your environment in the right sort of way – either because you don't do the right things (e.g. not drinking) or the environment changes (say, oxygen disappears) – may reduce, change, or destroy internal powers altogether.

Thirdly, all the internal powers you presently possess have grown out of a wider process of maturation and development, of which the present is a part. Your internal powers to understand how computers work or how certain means of production work are the outcome of the interplay between your powers and drives in interaction with their wider environments at previous moments of development.

Thus, powers are inherently processual and relational things in at least three distinct but interconnected ways. A full power consists of the right combination of external conditions and internal powers, and the external conditions include social relations. One's internal powers are themselves constituted by a relational and processual unity between one's body and environment through which they are constituted and maintained. These currently constituted internal powers are also the result of a prior process of the body's interaction with its environment through which they have developed, and this process is one that goes all the way down.

We therefore shouldn't think of powers as abstract possibilities. We should think of them as a range of options open to an organism, by virtue of its current constitution in continuous interaction with its environment. Human beings are organisms continually interacting with their natural, social, and historical environments in and through their life-activity, and the nature of that activity in turn shapes both sides of the equation.

Since human powers are continuously determined through life-activity, and since different societies and historical periods structure this life-activity differently, people's powers vary across natural, social, and historical contexts. People who live in hunter-gatherer societies almost always become very competent hunters and/or gatherers, while the average contemporary city-dweller does not. There's a simple reason for this: hunter-gathers (unsurprisingly) spend a good amount of time hunting and/or gathering with other competent people; your average contemporary city-dweller does not. By contrast, an experienced London taxi driver may not know how to (competently) spear and skin a rabbit, but is likely to have an incredible knowledge of London's roadmap – which is really impressive if you know anything about how completely irrational that roadmap is.

The relational aspect of human powers suggests that our relations with others are really important for determining our individual and collective powers. Who and what we connect and relate to, and how we do so, profoundly affects what we can do and become. This has important political implications which we will discuss in detail later on. In particular, it indicates why large-scale movements and organisations are essential for bringing about many kinds of lasting social change. Only they have the power to wage certain kinds of collective struggle against the concerted resistance of capitalism and the state. This is a question about the *size* of movements or organisations.

However, the relational aspect of human powers also suggests something important about why the *structure* of movements and organisations matters. Different ways of structuring organisations and movements affect the powers that their participants *have* and that they *develop* as

a result of being members thereof. In an absolute monarchy, the monarch has a wide range of powers which their subjects lack – powers of legislation, to judge court cases, declare war, etc. Their subjects lack all of these powers, along with any real powers of meaningful political participation. Compare this to an organisation like that of ancient Athens, where citizens would be drawn by lots for important offices, could vote directly on all major issues in the assembly, and participate as jury members in court cases. Citizens in such a society will have a range of powers that are ruled out in an absolute monarchy, including the power of real participation in political deliberation and decision-making, the power of executing the political office(s), the power to judge court cases, and so on. (Note, however, that in Athens these powers were restricted to adult male citizens, excluding women, resident foreigners, and slaves – i.e. the vast majority of people there.) This is an example of how the structure of an organisation affects the powers you have merely by being part of it.

The structure of movements and organisations also determine the kinds of powers that participants develop. For example, if an organisation operates such that the positions of facilitator and secretary are continuously rotated, then every lasting member of that organisation will develop their powers to do those things. Minimally, this is because they have to do them, but they will also get a bunch of good advice and guidance from other members, all of whom will have had to do the same thing. Developing these powers will in turn affect members' ability to introduce such forms of organisation in other movements and organisations and in different contexts – a key argument for prefigurative mass organisations, discussed in Chapter 4.

Human beings are driven to exercise their individual and collective powers and in so doing continuously develop these in different ways. Having discussed how we think about human powers, we now turn to human drives.

(b) Drives

If human powers are continually determined in and through their life-activity, the same is true for human drives. We use the term 'drives' expansively to cover the full range of springs to action. These include all forms of wishes, desires, goals, values, or concerns, whether conscious, rational, reasonable, or not, as well as the objective and/or unconscious motivations or tendencies of individuals, social institutions, and even systems of thought.

It's worth noting that this concept derives from an expansive concept of 'needs' common to anarchist and Marxist thinkers. Peter Kropotkin, for example, uses 'needs' in just such a broad sense to include wants and desires of all sorts, writing that as soon as people's 'material wants are satisfied, other needs, which, generally speaking may be described as of an artistic character, will thrust themselves forward', and that 'the more society is civilised, the more will individuality be developed, and the more will desires be varied' (1995: 94). Kropotkin goes on to talk of the 'higher delights' of artistic and scientific creation, and of the 'need' for a telescope for those wanting to study the heavens (1995: 95). For Marx, similarly, 'needs' are construed broadly to include all forms of drives and strivings, 'whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination' (1990: 125).[2]

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[2] This also draws heavily on Ollman 1971; Raekstad 2018a, 2018b. There's a competing interpretation of Marx's analysis of 'needs' according to which a need is something obeying the general formula 'X needs Y in order to Z', where Z is typically spelled out in terms of full or sufficient human development or flourishing (Hamilton 2003; Leopold 2007;

On this view, new relations, actions, and experiences can develop new drives. A famous example of this can be found in Marx's reflections on groups of communist workers in the 1840s:

> 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 and drinking, etc., are no longer means for creating links between people. Company, association, conversation, which in its 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. (1992: 365)[3]

There's a pattern here that's important for thinking about prefigurative politics. The process Marx describes is one where a group of people initially gather together and organise in order to achieve certain extrinsic ends – say, better wages and working conditions. As a result of doing this, they acquire a new drive. Although initially social activities like communal eating and drinking were a means for creating the necessary links between members so that they could work better together and achieve certain extrinsic ends, they have become an end in themselves – something the members are now driven to do for its own sake.

Like powers, drives are channelled through the natural, social, and historical contexts within and through which they develop; they therefore vary across these contexts, in different ways and to different degrees. However, this doesn't mean that there is no common basis to many drives, and here's it's useful to distinguish between *kinds of drives* and *drives* themselves. For example, all human beings (barring pathology) feel hunger under certain conditions – typically when not having eaten in a while. However, the thing that they feel hungry for when they're hungry varies tremendously: 'Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth' (Marx 1992: 92). Although two people feeling these different kinds of hunger are feeling the same kind of drive, their *concrete drives* are different because they are driven to (are hungry for) different things.

We can now begin to understand how drives are bound up with powers. As we saw above, human potentials develop through ongoing interaction with their natural, social, and historical environment. This is easy to see in the context of playing sports, computer games, or painting.

Soper 1981; Springborg 1981). We don't want to labour this point, but basically there are five reasons why we think our reading of Marx's concept of needs is the correct one. First, in every instance where Marx talks about 'needs', it can unproblematically be interpreted as 'drives' in the sense we've just discussed. Second, Marx's usage of the concept of 'need' collapses any distinction between ends and their means of satisfaction – a distinction the alternative reading needs if it were to work. Third, this usage of 'need' is extremely broad, covering everything from eating and drinking to exercise, sex, dancing, fencing, the theatre, good reading, and community. Many of these don't really fit the demand of being required for human development and flourishing, but fit nicely as things that people are driven to do. Fourth, Marx never distinguishes between 'true' and 'false' needs of any kind, but affirms each instance of a drive or desire as an instance of a need, regardless of origin. This fits nicely with reading 'needs' as 'drives', but not on the competing readings. Finally, Marx sometimes talks in terms of, e.g., theoretical needs (the needs of a political theory) having to become practical (i.e. real people's) needs, which only really makes sense on our motivational reading of 'needs'. This is further discussed in Raekstad 2018a.

[3] As you may have noticed, we have refrained from using gendered pronouns in this book altogether, let alone using the word 'man' or 'men' to refer to all of humanity. This is one small way of prefiguring a world free from patriarchal gender norms and roles (which requires a lot more work than merely freeing ourselves from gendered pronouns). The only, and necessary, exception is in quotations from other authors.

Many sports, games, and painting techniques simply don't exist in many societies and periods, they all require practice to get good at, and the kinds of instruction, training, and level of expertise of those around a person have profound effects on how their powers to do these things develop. This is also fairly straightforward to understand in cases of social and political movements. Just as agricultural techniques depend on the crops and soil they work with, so do organisations and movements depend on the social institutions they're dealing with. It's probably not coincidental that strikes and labour unions as we know them first arose under capitalism, and that as capitalism spread, they did too.

This general picture applies to other internal powers as well, such as the human senses. Since this is perhaps less obvious and harder to understand, we will focus on it here. If we can show that you can – on a broad philosophical level – understand the interaction between powers and drives here, it will follow that you can understand all practical activity in this way, because all such activity involves the senses and it becomes easy to see how more sophisticated activities like singing or playing the guitar can also be understood in this way.

Here we think of the human senses expansively, taking them to include not only, e.g., the tongue, the ear, and so on, but the full range of stimulation and processing (in the brain and elsewhere) that's required to produce an experience from the stimulus in question. In this way, we can think of the senses as internal powers, insofar as by having, e.g., a good musical ear, you have the real possibility to produce certain experiences in response to external stimuli – e.g. the experience of hearing a piece of music from the soundwaves entering your ears. For this internal power to become a full power, it also requires the right external conditions. Having the power to appreciate a Beyoncé album requires both the right kind of musical ear and access to the music itself. Like other powers, the senses develop within and through their natural, social, and historical contexts.

The kinds of context needed to develop our senses naturally include a variety of requirements for adequate physical growth and development. But they also include a much more specific set of inputs which we will call 'power-specific' inputs. Without sufficient power-specific inputs of the right sort, a power will either not develop at all or develop only in a restricted way. Someone who is never exposed to music will not develop the kinds of powers of musical appreciation as someone who's surrounded by it every day. The kinds of power-specific inputs also matter to the ways in which a person's sensory powers develop. For example, the kinds of music someone is exposed to affects their ability to appreciate different kinds of music. Someone who's never heard metal before, for example, is unlikely to be able to appreciate the finer points of death metal, and may (shockingly!) not even be able to tell how black metal and death metal are profoundly different genres.

This analysis of sensory powers extends to affective powers more broadly – that is, powers that produce experiences, including emotions and feelings. Affective powers include the senses, but also other things like our powers to feel joy when we see that we're loved, or sadness when we reflect upon the pain of someone losing a close friend.

We can now see how powers and drives are intimately intertwined. Having an affective power implies being able to experience certain things in response to certain inputs, e.g. appreciating the sounds coming from a speaker playing music. This in turn generates drives, e.g. the drive someone has to listen to the music they enjoy, and when this happens the affective power in question, here the sense, develops in response to these power-specific stimuli. This in turn affects that affective power, and may cause it to grow, be maintained, disappear, or change in other ways.

However, drives also play an important role in determining the development of powers. If you really love listening to hip hop, you're very likely to listen to it more often than people who don't, and to listen to it more than you otherwise would – as a result of which your powers of appreciating it will tend to grow. If you have an overwhelming drive to dance, odds are you'll spend a greater amount of time thinking about it and doing it than if you don't – and you're more likely to develop greater dancing powers.

Thus, we can see that powers and needs *reciprocally determine* one another. By 'determine' here we mean something rather broad like influence. We don't simply mean cause, much less cause in a deterministic way. Thus, for X to determine Y is simply for X to influence Y – whether as a cause, as a contributing factor, in a limiting capacity, or what have you. This is important for thinking about prefigurative politics because it suggests the importance of developing *both* our powers to understand, appreciate, and construct free and equal social relations, *and* our drives to implement, improve, deepen, and extend them. As we will see in subsequent chapters, many of the arguments for prefigurative politics turn on its ability to develop our powers and drives in the right ways. Having looked at powers and drives in general, we now need to understand a particularly important power: consciousness.

(c) Consciousness

Human activity is characterised by consciousness. Consciousness enables us to reflect on, deliberate on, direct, and alter our activity as needed.[4] This is often associated with two things that are important for thinking about social change. First, it is part of an explanation for the developmental plasticity of human beings. We have the ability to consciously set our own standards for our behaviours, critically reflect on them, and alter them in response to our needs and interests. Secondly, it provides an explanation for human beings' major behavioural variation across different natural, social, and historical contexts. Different contexts involve different practices that are required in order to satisfy various needs and interests, and also shape the nature and contents of those needs and interests themselves. As a result, human beings tend to use their powers of consciousness to alter the standards of their activities according to their shifting needs and interests, though not necessarily in a uniform fashion.

Powers of consciousness affect people's other powers and drives in a number of different ways. One way in which humans expand their powers is by developing tools that help them to do things better: bows and arrows to hunt with; thicker clothes to keep out the cold; new ways of cooperating with wolves; hoes and sickles to till the soil; and many more. A related way of expanding our powers of consciousness is by inventing and/or developing different concepts, such as number concepts to help us tally items and track the passage of time, or colour concepts to help us better distinguish our impressions and describe and analyse the world we see (especially the fancy things). These expand our powers in important ways. Once we have number concepts, tallying large numbers of things, or keeping track of how long ago something happened, become much easier to do, and we can do them in more ways than before.

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[4] For the purposes of this chapter, we want to bracket the issue of whether animals have consciousness, and the extent to which they might have, because we are concerned only with thinking about human praxis in relation to prefigurative politics.

The development of new concepts also affects our drives. For example, we can only be driven by a desire to pin down the exact date of the siege of Troy after we have number concepts (which are necessary for precise dates), and we can only feel the need to find or develop the perfect shade of blue once we have the concept of blue (which is, we should note, far from a human universal).

The same is true for the concepts we have for different aspects of human behaviour and society, which are vital cognitive tools for social and political organisations and movements. For example, the concept of sexual harassment developed by feminist consciousness-raising groups made it possible for people to be driven to eliminate certain actions and behaviours in a unified way, to launch and carry out campaigns directed against them, and to formulate and pass legislation targeting them.

Consciousness enables us to develop tools that expand and shape our powers and drives with respect to all aspects of our environment. Our powers of consciousness are therefore a vital part of any account of social change. This is one of the reasons why revolutionaries constantly stress the importance of developing it. Freeing your mind won't guarantee that the rest will follow, but it is necessary to make the rest possible.

However, our powers of consciousness can also mislead us in important respects. We can, for example, come to believe that we have the power to levitate our coven-sibling out of prison or the power to stop bullets with magic – with some rather obvious downsides when they fail, ranging from wasting your time and energy to discouragement to injury to death.

When it comes to drives, things are sometimes subtler and often felt to be more personal in nature. Here it is useful to distinguish between what we call manifest values on the one hand and operative values on the other.[5] Manifest values are the values that an agent takes themselves to adhere to – e.g., someone who values gender equality in the sense that they take themselves to be driven to achieve it both in the future and in their relations with other people in the present. Operative values, however, are the values that an agent is actually driven by. Manifest values and operative values may of course coincide – it is possible to correctly take yourself to value, e.g., gender equality in practice. But it is also possible for them to diverge, as when someone takes themselves to value gender equality but is not in fact driven by it.

This distinction is important for thinking about prefigurative politics because one important aspect of a great deal of prefigurative politics involves changing participants' operative values so that they come to function in ways that better suit free, equal, and democratic forms of organisation both here and in the future. It is a well-known problem that participants may be formally committed to things like gender equality, antiracism, anti-authoritarianism, and so on – and thus have them as manifest values – without really being driven by them in their actions. For example, members of a group may be formally committed to gender equality within and beyond the group, while in practice ignoring everything said by women, consistently interrupting them, talking to them like inferiors, and so on without even being aware of it. These people may have gender equality as a manifest value, but can't be said to have it as an operative value. This can have a number of negative effects, such as reducing the impact of women members' good ideas within the group, disempowering women members, discouraging new women from joining, driving current ones away, souring relations among the group's remaining members, and so on. One important aspect of prefigurative politics is that of developing people's operative values in the

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[5] We owe the distinction between 'manifest' and 'operative' to Haslanger's (2012) account of concepts, but our distinction differs in important ways that we won't go into here.

right sorts of ways, so as to better lead organisations to bring about the forms of future society that they want.

Human powers of consciousness are just as rooted in our natural, social, and historical contexts as other powers. Like other powers, they develop differently and produce different products in different natural, social, and historical contexts. For example, people only develop agricultural equipment once they have started doing agriculture, they only develop the stirrup once they've started riding horses, and they only develop the concept of a real-time strategy game once there are computers to play such games on and some history of computer games to build on.

Importantly, the ideas developed by human consciousness respond to the natural, social, and historical contexts within which they are developed, and this context includes the existing and preserved ideas that have been handed down by history. This goes not only for artefacts consciously created to better interact with our environments in more or less direct ways, such as hunting and agricultural tools; it also includes the vast realms of the natural and social sciences, law, mathematics, art, philosophy, etc. A modern fantasy writer like George R. R. Martin is influenced in important ways both by the already-existing literary sources and traditions – fantasy literature, Marvel comics, realist and historical fiction – and by the particular context they've grown up within, such as the lessons of the Vietnam war and the feminist movement. Relatedly, the discipline of political economy was born not only from past social and political theorising, but also from a need to make sense of the new social formations of capitalism. Thus, the different forms and products of our consciousness are shaped both by the prior products of consciousness available and the broader natural, social, and historical contexts within which they operate.

The products of consciousness in turn act back on those contexts through the human agency that employs them and that they are part of. So, when a new piece of legislation is formulated and gets passed into law, this, should it be effective, changes the material lives of those subject to it. For example, feminists employing a concept of sexual harassment in the workplace have been able to drive through a variety of legislation targeting it, thereby helping improve the living conditions and life contexts of many working women.

Traditionally, one of the important roles of radical theory has been to develop forms of consciousness which enable people to better understand, assess, orient themselves in, and change their society. There are numerous examples of this, from the advocacy of Marxist economics among both anarchists and Marxists as a tool for workers to understand the dynamics of capitalism and thereby what is required for overcoming it, or the importance of feminism and decolonial theory for guiding organisation-building (which we look at in Chapters 4 and 5). Once we've experienced thousands of people organising effectively in non-hierarchical ways, it's hard to go back to assuming this is impossible. Once we've experienced what a different social organisation is like, it becomes much easier to develop ways of thinking and talking about it, along with concepts to identify and diagnose the shortcomings of the rest of society.

(d) Praxis and Social Change

We now want to pull all these elements together and see how they can give us a way of thinking about society, social change, social movements, and revolution. What we have been laying out is essentially a way of thinking about human beings and society in terms of a theory of praxis. The concepts of powers, drives, consciousness, and how they interconnect and interact

give us the basic building blocks we need to understand the ability of human beings to consciously act in ways that satisfy their drives within and through historically evolving social formations.

This allows us to theorise both social structure and social agency and change in the same terms. From the first perspective, social structures are the ongoing patterns of interaction between agents in particular contexts and these patterns affect the powers, drives, and consciousness that those living within them develop. From the other perspective, the powers, drives, and consciousness that people develop are used to act within, maintain, and/or change the patterns of interaction around them, and can be used to, and drive people to, maintain a given social structure or to change it, abolish it, or replace it with another structure.

The 'being' of a social structure is only a certain kind of becoming, namely the sufficiently stable social reproduction of certain patterns of social interaction over time. After all, dominant structures are not static entities – they have to be continually produced and reproduced, often in response to efforts of resistance and change. As Audre Lorde has pointed out, '[e]very oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change' (Lorde 1983: 38).

The revolutionary change from one social structure to another is another kind of becoming, namely a social process of developing new patterns of social interaction and dismantling others over time. The very different dominant structures that have emerged and continue to emerge through history are the outcomes of continued processes of cooperation and conflict between different social agents with different powers being driven in different ways. We are what we are continually becoming, and reshaping these processes of becoming is what social change consists in.

This way of thinking about human beings and society avoids two complementary mistaken ways of thinking about human societies and social change. On the one hand, it avoids thinking about social phenomena only in terms of abstract structures detached from the agents who produce and reproduce them. Such thinking risks reducing our understanding of agents and their actions to nothing but the outcomes of the external social forces which push and constrain them, making it almost impossible to properly account for the creative powers of individual and collective agency or to say much about what they really *do* and how they affect the structures around them. On the other hand, it also avoids thinking about social phenomena solely in terms of a collection of more or less taken-for-granted, unchanging, and atomistic individuals or grand transcendental Subjects, theorised in complete abstraction from their contexts and how they are shaped by these contexts.

Briefly put, following many of the core advocates of prefigurative politics, we adopt what today is called a poststructuralist conception of human beings and society. We agree with Foucault that power is capillary, i.e. that it is dispersed across society in myriad different forms, rather than exclusively situated in a small number of central institutions (Foucault 1983).[6] Power is situated not only in capital and the state, but also in the family, the prison, etc., as well as in organisations and movements of struggle and emancipation – the union, the reading group, the consciousness-raising group, the general assembly, etc. All of these include different distributions of power, which matter to what an organisation or movement can do, in part because they affect the different powers, drives, and consciousness that their members have and develop.

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[6] See Gradin 2015: ch. 3.

This capillary view of power suggests one reason why it's important for organisations and movements seeking major social change to work on more than just one form of power or institution at a time. All-round human emancipation is not just a matter of overthrowing a single institution – such as a central bank or a particular government. It is also a matter of generating social movements and specific organisations with the real powers, drives, and consciousness required for replacing them with genuinely free, equal, and democratic forms of life. And these are best developed by movements and organisations that address a number of different forms of unfreedom, inequality, and lack of democracy – including patriarchy, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and more – that characterise our societies.

This in turn raises the question: what do we mean by a 'social movement'? Drawing on the work of Cox and Nilsen (2014), we define a social movement as a process in which a social group develops a collective project of skilled activities, based on a way of making sense of and relating to their social world, that tries to change or maintain a dominant structure of powers and drives, either in part or in whole.[7] This effectively defines social movements in terms of our theory of praxis.

There are social movements from above and social movements from below. Social movements from above are ones where the members of dominant groups develop a collective project of skilled activities, based on a way of making sense of and relating to their social world, in order to change or maintain a dominant structure of powers and drives in order to maintain or develop their ruling position. Social movements from below are ones where the members of oppressed group(s) develop a collective project of skilled activities, based on a way of making sense of and relating to their social world, in order either to challenge the constraints that a dominant structure of powers and drives imposes on the development of new powers and drives or to defend aspects of an existing dominant structure which accommodate some of their existing powers and drives (see Cox and Nilsen 2014: 72).

Cox and Nilsen distinguish three ways in which social movements from below may contest dominant structures. First, they resist dominant groups' attempts to reshape social structures in their interests, e.g. tenants' organisations resisting increased rents. Second, they demand that dominant structures be modified to satisfy their drives and needs, e.g. women campaigning for an end to sexual harassment in the workplace. Third, they attempt to either abolish or replace one or more dominant structure of powers and drives with another, e.g. abolishing capitalism and the state in favour of libertarian socialism (see Cox and Nilsen 2014: 59).

For advocates of prefigurative politics, the third way that social movements challenge dominant structures is especially important. This is because concerns about prefigurative politics arise partly from reflecting on what it takes to replace one dominant structure with another. If it means

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[7] This is very nearly a quote from Cox and Nilsen (2014: 57), but with slight modifications to make it more suited to our terminology. This and the following paragraphs draw heavily on their work, which we find extraordinarily useful for thinking about social movements and social change. Note, however, that where we write 'powers and drives', Cox and Nilsen instead typically write 'needs and capacities'. Our concept of powers and their concept of capacities are, we think, the same. However, although they draw on Marx's concept of 'needs' here, they don't interpret Marx's concept of needs as drives or as drives of a particular kind (as we do), but instead in terms of the idea more common today of requirements of some sort. This actually makes our two definitions of social movements more different than they might at first appear, because it means that we, unlike Cox and Nilsen, explicitly include in our definition not only that social movements are concerned with what people, groups, and institutions can do and/or become and what they require, but also that they are concerned with the structures of what people, groups, and institutions are driven to do in practice.

anything at all, prefigurative politics means being committed to the idea that if we want to re-place certain structures with other very different ones, then we need to reflect some aspect(s) of that future structure in the movements and organisations we develop to bring it about.

Consequently, the idea of prefigurative politics doesn't make sense absent the idea of replacing dominant social structures, which brings us to the question of revolution. As Emma Goldman put it, '[n]o real social change has ever come about without a revolution' (2014: 77). Unfortunately, it's common to define revolution in very state-centric terms, as when, for example, Charles Tilly writes that 'whatever else they involve, revolutions include forcible transfers of power over states' (1993: 5). Such a definition won't do for our purposes, since many movements and organisations that think about prefigurative politics want to abolish state power altogether and replace it with something else. Although transfers of state power can be revolutions – e.g., the American and French revolutions – there are things we want to call revolutions – such as the Paris Commune, the Shinmin Commune, and the revolution in Chiapas – that involve replacing the state with a non-state social structure, at least within a certain area.

Today, there seem to be three main ways in which anti-capitalists think about revolution.[8] The first is the *one big event* view. Here a revolution is conceived of as a great singular event through which social power is seized, whether in the form of the seizure of the state by a political party or the outbreak of a riot that cannot be explained within an existing framework of thought (Badiou 2012; Žižek 2013).[9] This is often associated with Stalinism, insofar as it is interpreted as thinking about revolution largely in terms of the vanguard party seizing state power.

The second is the *flash-flash-bang* view. Here a revolution is conceptualised in terms of a series of cracks or ruptures within capitalism and/or the state, 'through which the edifice of capitalism is eventually cracked and a new world is supposed to break through' (Raekstad 2014: 3; see also Holloway 2010). This view is not uncommon among insurrectionist anarchists and autonomist Marxists, who often advocate loose networks of autonomous groups to help spark these ruptures, creating and defending autonomous zones and/or violently attacking capitalism and/or the state.

The third view is the *process view*. Here revolution is conceptualised as a process of creating and developing ongoing mass organisations and movements which fight for reforms in the present and aim to replace capitalism and the state with free, equal, and democratic socialist institutions. As such organisations grow, develop, and struggle, they change the powers, drives, and consciousness of their members individually and collectively. Their growth and development and winning of reforms increases their powers and the powers of their members, developing and altering members' drives and consciousness, making it possible for them to replace capitalism and the state. This is the view that we think is most conducive to thinking about prefigurative politics in a systematic way.

On our view, revolution is the task of radical movements from below. To achieve this they must struggle for and win smaller changes in the short term and large-scale revolution in the long term. The latter requires developing people with the right powers, drives, and consciousness not only for struggling against capitalism and the state, but for replacing them with a truly free, equal, and democratic socialist society. This, we will argue, requires a commitment to prefigurative politics, which we explore and defend in the remainder of this book.

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[8] This draws heavily on Raekstad 2014.

[9] It has been argued that Deleuze and Guattari fit this view. We disagree due to the rather different notion of an 'Event' that they employ.

This chapter has laid out the theory of human activity, or praxis, that accounts and defences of prefigurative politics are often based on. We looked at how this involves thinking about human powers, drives, and consciousness, along with related concepts of social change, social movements, and revolution. This way of thinking about human beings and society forms the basis for the arguments for prefigurative politics we discuss in the following chapters. In the next chapter, we look at one of our two main arguments for prefigurative politics, namely the necessity of prefiguring a free and equal socialist society within mass organisations, in order to develop revolutionary agents with the right powers, drives, and consciousness to introduce such a society.

4. Decision-Making in Large-Scale Organisations

In 1864, about 2,000 workers formed the world's first international working-class organisation in St Martin's Hall, London, followed two years later by its first congress in Geneva. What started as a crowded meeting in the benches of St Martin's Hall, grew into a large and influential international organisation: the International Workingmen's Association, usually referred to as the First International. At the time, working people were denied basic rights and freedoms, offered paltry wages and inhumane working conditions, excluded from any meaningful political participation, and any organisations they founded to try to change things were viciously persecuted by the authorities.

From the beginning the First International fought not just for better conditions, but for universal human emancipation. It proudly proclaimed that 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves' (Marx and Engels 1955: 288). To do this, it created a mass working-class organisation, which at the time was claimed to have millions of members. The precise membership is unclear, but it was at least 150,000 (Musto 2014: 7). It was an ideologically eclectic organisation, containing factions that would later come to be labelled mutualists, anarchists, communists, social democrats, syndicalists, as well as radical republicans. In light of this, perhaps it was doomed to fail. Certainly, there were difficulties from the beginning in agreeing on principles and strategy. But while it lasted, the First International served as an incubator for the core ideas that would shape much radical thought and politics for the next century. One of these ideas is what we now call prefigurative politics.

In this chapter, we look at the arguments about whether mass organisations should be structured prefiguratively. In other words, we look at debates about whether the formal structure of socialist mass organisations should mirror those of the free, equal, and democratic socialist society they aim for. The chapter begins (a) by providing some necessary history, explaining how debates about prefigurative politics arose within the First International and what they took prefigurative decision-making structures to be like, corrects some common misconceptions, and shows how these structures came to form part of a broader strategy of later organisations. Section (b) looks at the three central arguments for why mass organisations should prefigure, namely that this is necessary for developing revolutionary agents with the (i) powers, (ii) drives, and (iii) consciousness needed to bring about a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. After this, we consider and respond to three prominent criticisms of this sort of prefigurative politics: (c) that internal hierarchy and oligarchy are necessary; (d) that prefiguration is incompatible with political organisation and taking state power in ways that are necessary for major social change; and (e) that prefigurative politics is incompatible with armed defence. Finally, (f) we look at some of the limitations of these narrower debates about prefigurative politics and why this should lead us to think about prefigurative politics in an even broader way.

(a) Federalism in the First International and Beyond

Today, prefigurative politics is often associated with small-scale counter-cultural experiments, but this wasn't always the case. For much of the history of anarchist, Marxist, and syndicalist movements, debates about what we now call prefigurative politics fundamentally concerned how large-scale organisations (or would-be such) should structure their formal decision-making. Those debates began with disagreements between so-called federalists and centralists in the First International – that is, between those who believed that it should be run through a more participatory and non-hierarchical organisational structure and their opponents. It's vital to understand this history if we are to understand the nature, strengths, and shortcomings of the arguments they developed.

The 1868 Brussels congress of the First International marked a shift towards an approach similar to what would later be called syndicalist trade union struggle – which, as we mentioned in Chapter 2, focuses on revolutionary trade unionism. The Belgian delegation argued for the idea that 'the International carried within itself the institutions of the society of the future', where trade unions 'would be responsible for organizing production in the future society' and 'local sections, being geographically based, would establish consumer cooperatives for selling at a fair price the goods produced by the workers' cooperatives' (Graham 2015: 92). In this way, the social structure of the First International would deliberately reflect the social structure of the future society they aimed to replace capitalism and the state with.

Alongside these developments there arose the debates over 'federalism'. Federalism, *in this sense*, refers to a bottom-up and non-hierarchical system of collective self-rule: local councils make decisions locally, but where necessary they send delegates (usually mandated, instantly recallable, and ideally frequently rotated) to larger regional, national, or international bodies. Federalism in this sense does not refer to the kind of state organisation we see in so-called federal states like the US and Russia. In fact, federalism in the sense used here is usually taken to be incompatible with (hierarchical) states across the board.

Briefly put, the federalists in the First International were concerned that its emerging structure involved an alienation of power away from the workers themselves to a ruling clique on the General Council. They included most of the largest sections of the First International, especially in Belgium, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland, as well as important anarchist theorists like Michael Bakunin. Indeed, many federalists later came to identify as anarchists.

It's important to understand not only what these debates *were* about, but also what they were *not* about, since this is often misunderstood. The debates that followed were not so much about the First International's ultimate goals. On these there was (mostly) broad agreement between the federalists and especially Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: a free and equal future society beyond capitalism, feudalism, and the state, organised through freely federating councils from the bottom up, replacing the hierarchical division of labour, and distributing goods and services in a different way (according to either contribution or need).

Federalists and centralists instead mainly disagreed about the role and powers of the General Council with respect to member federations. The federalists argued that the individual member federations and the congresses they sent delegates to should make all major decisions within the First International. They also argued that member federations should retain a great deal of autonomy with respect to the General Council, with the latter limited to fulfilling a few mainly administrative functions. Marx, Engels, the Lassalleans and others, however, maintained that the

General Council should indeed have more substantial top-down decision-making powers over member federations.

This is the context for the much-discussed Sonvillier Circular, which we mentioned in Chapter 2, written by the federalist Jura Federation in 1871. The Circular argued that 'as the embryo of the human society of the future', the International 'is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship' (quoted in Graham 2015: 97–8). The implications of this argument were clear. If the International was to reach a free and federated future society, it must itself be organised in free and federal ways. The federalists argued that if the International failed to do so, it would make itself incapable of leading humanity to the universal emancipation that was its goal. Their background idea seems to have been that the society they hoped the International would create would inevitably be based on some already-available form of organisation. Since the dominant social institutions (capitalism and the modern state) were neither free nor equal, they couldn't provide such a basis. Free and equal forms of organisation therefore had to be developed by the International itself, so that they could universalise these forms when reshaping society. Centralised organisational means, they argued, would make it impossible to reach the International's stated goals.

Each side was forcefully driven by the fear that the other represented a secretive authoritarian sect trying to take over the International for their own nefarious purposes. Bakunin and many other anarchists wrongly believed that Marx commanded a statist cabal including the Lassalleans (who supported taking over the state and instituting a single-person dictatorship to carry out transition) and the German social democrats (who favoured elections as the major vehicle of transition).[1] Marx and Engels believed something similar of Bakunin. This is not the place to explore this in detail. However, we should note that, given the conspiratorial habits of many radical republicans and early socialists that both sides had experiences with, these fears were not entirely unfounded in context.

These disagreements were also not about whether to have higher-level councils such as Congresses and General Councils – all parties were on board with that. Nor did they in principle disagree about having delegates who would rotate frequently, serve for limited terms, or be directly mandated – i.e. formally required to act in ways explicitly decided by the group they represented, rather than being able to ignore them and do whatever they decide for themselves like politicians in representative states do. In fact, in *The Civil War in France*, referring to the Paris Commune, Marx described many standard features of federalist organising in glowing terms – including mandated delegates serving limited terms, who were frequently rotated and subject to immediate recall (Marx 1996).[2]

Nor were these debates about consensus decision-making, which is today often associated with commitments to anarchism and prefiguration, especially in work on the Global Justice Movement and Occupy (Graeber 2009, 2013; Maeckelbergh 2011, 2012). Crudely put, consensus decision-making usually involves giving everyone (all members of an organisation, everyone present at a meeting, etc.) a veto over the group's decision. In practice, some forms of super-majority (e.g. 90%) are sometimes labelled 'consensus', and many groups who practise consensus

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[1] In Bakunin, this combined a personal hatred of Marx and a strong anti-German and anti-Semitic conspiracy theory, which was not representative of most other anarchists at the time.

[2] Marx did, however, disagree about the value of participating in capitalist state institutions, but for explicit critiques of prefigurative politics we must turn to Engels or later Marxist thinkers.

decision-making include fall-back options to different kinds of majority voting when a consensus decision can't be reached (with differences in how soon, how readily, and how willingly they resort to this).

North American sections of the modern Global Justice Movement seem mostly to have got their ideas about consensus decision-making from post-war feminist and anti-nuclear movements, who were in turn influenced by Quaker practices. The Quakers seem to have developed them from a reading of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament (see especially Acts 15). The New Testament is not the only source, however. For example, the Zapatistas (the famous movement of indigenous people who have created an autonomous and self-governed society in South-Eastern Mexico, which we discuss further in other chapters), who were also heavily influenced by liberation theology and certain strands of Marxism, got their ideas about consensus decision-making from indigenous Mayan beliefs and practices.

Most of the classical anarchists, including those in the First International, and the vast majority of the world's anarcho-syndicalist movements, did not make decisions by consensus. Instead, they voted by simple- or super-majorities, and sent mandated, recallable, and rotated delegates to higher-level congresses. Many anarchists today still reject consensus decision-making, arguing that it consumes too much time and energy, allows minorities to hinder effective collective action, and can thus end up being rather undemocratic (Bray 2013; Cornell 2013). This is not to say that all anarchists reject consensus, only that they are often wrongly portrayed as unanimous on this issue, while in fact they often disagree.

To see how the kind of prefigurative participatory democratic structure that federalists advocated worked in practice, it's useful to consider two organisations that were part of one of the First International's most important successor movements: anarcho-syndicalism, in particular the Argentinian FORA (Regional Workers' Federation of Argentina) and the Spanish CNT (National Confederation of Labour).[3]

Anarcho-syndicalist unions have what we call a *dual aim* and a *double function*.[4] Their dual aim is to both reform capitalism in the shorter term and carry out a revolution that brings full freedom, equality, and democracy to all through the self-emancipation of the working classes in the longer term. Rudolf Rocker summarises their double function as follows:

1. As the fighting organization of the workers against the employers to enforce the demands of the workers for the safeguarding and raising of their standard of living.

2. As the school for the intellectual training of the workers to make them acquainted with the technical management of production and economic life in general, so that when a revolutionary situation arises they will be capable of taking the socio-economic organism into their own hands and remaking it according to Socialist principles. (Rocker 2004: 86)

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[3] We focus on the FORA and the CNT in this chapter, because they are two of the most prominent and influential anarcho-syndicalist organisations. There have been, and are, many others, but since it wouldn't be practical to talk about all of them, we'll focus on these two. There is some debate about whether the FORA should be considered an 'anarcho-syndicalist' organisation, in part because it did not officially describe itself as such, and because some of its influential thinkers denied that it was. However, it's clear that from their fifth Congress onwards, the FORA satisfies our definition of anarcho-syndicalism, as presented in Chapter 1.

[4] We borrow this particular choice of terminology (the historical sources are varying and inconsistent) from Zoe Addis.

The FORA and the CNT – like today's anarcho-syndicalists – were unions organised by local area and/or by industry, varying according to contexts and needs. They carried out a variety of economic, community-based, and other struggles, rejecting 'indirect action' such as standing for elections, instead favouring 'direct action' like strikes, sabotage, occupations, blockades, boycotts, and so on. In fact, the anarchist commitment to prefigurative politics can be linked to the idea of direct action: a group or individual doing something for themselves rather than appealing to external agents (especially the state) to do it for them (Gordon 2018; Graeber 2009).

Both organisations also advocated full freedom and equality for all people, and combated nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and militarism. Since capitalism was a global phenomenon, they were also internationalist. A global problem requires a global solution. And their struggles went well beyond just economic struggles. For example, in 1907 the FORA organised a rent strike (tenants collectively refusing to pay rent) in Buenos Aires that turned into a general strike of workers across many different industries.[5] During the 1920s – with a membership of between 40,000 and 100,000 – they also organised a series of strikes and won a national six-day working week. They created a host of highly effective popular education, media, and cultural activities, and much more besides. This broad and diverse approach to strategy, combining prefiguration with a variety of different tactics, is not unique to anarcho-syndicalists. For instance, the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World fought for rights to free speech, resisted the draft for the imperialist First World War, and advocated for women's reproductive rights – in part by providing information about birth control.[6]

Anarcho-syndicalists are committed to their union structure prefiguring the future society they want. Their unions prefigure the organisation of a future society, in that their organisational structure reflects the free federations of workers' and/or local councils which will organise future social life. What this comes down to in detail varies, but typically includes voting on decisions directly and/or on the lowest levels practicable; employing delegates who are mandated, instantly recallable, and frequently rotated; ensuring a great deal of local autonomy; avoiding establishing a distinct layer of paid officials; and so forth.[7] This decision-making structure distinguishes anarcho-syndicalism from most traditional unionism and political parties.

Apart from being important for transitioning to a new society, such organisational structure is argued to have a variety of benefits. Permitting local autonomy, it enables local units to draw on their superior knowledge and experience of their unique situation and context, adapting their tactics to what works best there and then. Being organised from the bottom up, such organisations make it possible for all members to put forward their best views, analyses, and arguments. The organisation thus gets a much richer collection of information and input. One of the strongest contemporary arguments for democracy is that it ensures a greater cognitive diversity (back-

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[5] This is not an isolated case. For instance, the Spanish CNT organised a rent strike throughout Barcelona in 1931.

[6] Margaret Sanger, who founded organisations that became Planned Parenthood, was a member of the IWW early on.

[7] For more on syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, see Damier 2009; Darlington 2013; Rocker 2004; Solidarity Federation 2014; Thorpe 1989; van der Linden and Thorpe 1990; and van der Linden 1990. It's worth pointing out that different strands of syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism differ on whether the union is an institution of struggle, or an institution of both struggle and transition. That is, they differ on whether their union will literally become the social structure of the new society during transition, or whether it is just one among many organisations struggling during transition, and the new society will require entirely new social structures to be built, which prefigurative organisations have already developed and trained people in.

ground, assumptions, knowledge, etc.) of people really participating, and that this is much more beneficial to decision-making than ensuring, for example, that everyone is 'smarter', better informed, etc. (Landemore 2012). By ensuring much greater and broader real participation among members, these structures are argued to be much better ways of reaching collective decisions than their more hierarchical alternatives.

Today, if they're large enough, most anarcho-syndicalist organisations organise both by industry and by local area. This enables them to structure their engagement not only in the economy and workplace, but also in housing and community struggles, along with feminist, antiracist, LGBT+ struggles and more. This is not new. For example, in the late nineteenth century the world's first anarcha-feminist organisation, which published the newspaper *La Voz de la Mujer*, fought for women's emancipation as part of Argentina's anarchist movement, as did the Mujeres Libres during the Spanish Revolution. However, the anarcho-syndicalist movements of the past had at least two shortcomings on these points which are worth mentioning. Despite proclaiming ideals of gender equality and sexual liberation, they often fell short in putting these into practice within their organisations. Their prefigurative focus was also often rather narrow – focusing on formal decision-making structures – and so did not do enough to address informal hierarchies and inequalities within their movements and organisations. We return to this below.

We should be clear that the different advocates of prefigurative formal decision-making structures do not necessarily agree on what it requires or on other points of strategy. For example, 21st Century Socialists and Democratic Confederalists (see Chapter 6) both seek to combine forms of prefiguration with taking existing state power at national and local levels, respectively. They therefore disagree with anarchists who reject working with or through the existing state. This means that the claim that prefigurative politics entails ignoring or rejecting strategy altogether or constituting a strategy all of its own (Breines 1982; Farber 2014) is misguided, as are claims that it is inflexible and ignores how post-capitalist society will differ markedly from capitalism (Van Meter 2017: 150). Still, supporters of prefigurative politics share a common claim: building socialism can't wait until after the revolution.

(b) The Arguments for Formal Prefigurative Decision-Making Structures

The basic idea of prefiguring formal decision-making structures can be spelled out in terms of the famous slogan of the First International, 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves' (Marx and Engels 1955: 288), and what this comes down to in practice. The arguments can all be interpreted as responses to what is sometimes called the *paradox of self-emancipation*.[8] Introducing a society where people collectively self-rule all aspects of their social lives requires people with the powers to organise social life in this way and the drives and consciousness to do so. However, current institutions – capitalism, the state, our education system, etc. – are deeply unfree, unequal, and undemocratic. They don't empower people or develop their drives and consciousness in the ways needed for us to emancipate ourselves. Nor can people be expected to have these things already developed, as if by magic, absent any social processes through which they develop them. So, comprehensive

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[8] Although the terminology differs, this is a well-known problem discussed by both anarchists (Ackelsberg 2005: 53) and Marxists (Campbell 2006; Campbell and Tutan 2008), as well as in Raekstad 2018b.

emancipation requires self-emancipation. If self-emancipation requires the right powers, drives, and consciousness, and if we can't develop these within our current institutions, how can anyone develop them and emancipate themselves?

The solution that prefiguration offers is for organisations of struggle and/or transition to reflect the deliberation and decision-making structures that a free, equal, and democratic socialist society will contain. A successful revolutionary movement needs to be able to survive and struggle effectively in the present and make itself capable of changing society in the ways it wants. For advocates of prefigurative politics, this requires forms of organising that develop people's powers, drives, and consciousness in the right ways. They think that this requires that the organisational means employed in the present must prefigure the kinds of social organisation aimed for in such a future society. The reason for this is straightforward. Free, equal, and democratic institutions do not yet exist in the economy or polity – or in any other major component of capitalist social life. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know how to organise production in a free and equal way if one has no prior experience of doing this. It is hard to feel the drive to live in such a way if you've never experienced anything like it. It can be hard even to believe that it's possible without experiences to the contrary. Prefigurative practice can change all of this, and it can do so without argument, in fact without uttering a single word. In other words, a successful socialist revolution requires a prior process of evolution, planting and nurturing the seeds of the future society within the soil of the old.

Prefigurative politics therefore means that the organisational means of the present must be appropriate to some broad vision of what a future society can and should be like. If you have no idea of the future you want, you can't try to reflect it in your current organising. This vision, however, like the prefigurative practices connected to it, should be inherently experimental and open to continuous alteration and revision in response to new conditions and experiences. This idea is famously captured in the Zapatista slogan: 'Asking, we walk.' Such thoughts might raise concerns about undue utopianism, but they shouldn't. Even staunch anti-utopians like Marx make a number of specific points about what socialist or communist society will be like (Ollman 1977; Raekstad 2016). As we saw in Chapter 2 and will see below, it's not just anarchists and syndicalists who argue for prefigurative politics. Marxists also do so, often based on Marx's own views on what socialism should look like. After all, the goal of socialists is not merely to destroy capitalism, but to replace it with something better.

Importantly, prefigurative politics is not at all opposed to struggle against capitalism and the state. It is a claim about how this struggle must be carried out if it is to be successful. This 'is not a matter of practising what one preaches for the sake of it', but a question of 'strategical arguments about the appropriate revolutionary path' (Gordon 2007: 61). Furthermore, it need not assume that *all* of the powers, drives, and consciousness of a future society are possible under capitalism or can fully develop under it. All it needs to assume is that the requisite powers, drives, and consciousness can be developed *to some extent*, despite capitalism and within the struggle against it. Let's now look at the three main arguments for prefiguring formal decision-making structures.

(i) Empowerment

On this view, Martha Ackelsberg writes that people should 'prepare themselves for revolution' and for inhabiting a new society 'by participating in activities and practices that are

themselves egalitarian, empowering, and therefore transformative' (2005: 53–4). Without such a movement, 'participants will never be empowered to act independently' (2005: 53). Similarly, Raúl Zibechi writes that within contemporary Latin American movements an 'emancipatory climate, which is conducive to the construction of the new world', is being developed in order to build towards a revolution by 'enhancing the capabilities buried within the people' (2012: 52–3). Michael Lebowitz makes essentially the same point when arguing that '[i]n practice, 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' (2012: 88).

This gives us the following argument for prefigurative revolutionary practice: achieving a free, equal, and democratic socialist society requires people with the powers to organise themselves and others in free, equal, and democratic ways.

These powers cannot be sufficiently developed simply by reading the right theory. In our activism, we've time and again seen enthusiastic young people with an excellent command of some form of radical theory show up in non-hierarchical organisations, only to be completely bewildered by what's going on and both surprised and frustrated by the experience. Their mistake was not in their lack of know-how. That's understandable and perhaps inevitable in new members who've never come across these forms of organising before. Rather, their mistake was in assuming that they would be able to have a good grasp of what's going on in non-hierarchical forms of organising simply from reading the right theory. Although theory is valuable and important, it's not sufficient for learning how to practise new forms of social organisation well.

These powers also cannot simply be handed down by some enlightened elite to the masses. Instead, they must be developed by the masses themselves through their practices. This requires that the organisational means employed in the present must prefigure the kinds of social organisation aimed for in a socialist society. This is because *the only way for people to sufficiently develop their powers for new forms of free, equal, and democratic organisation is by practising doing so*. This argument is pretty intuitive if you compare it to practically anything else that people learn – from playing sports and instruments to having sex or acting in films. How good do people tend to be at something if they've never done it before?

This doesn't imply that people *only* learn by doing, but practising doing something is necessary to learn how to do it well. Practising is not the *only* part of learning, but it is vital. Nor does this mean rejecting teaching or instruction. In prefigurative organisations, new members often learn a lot from seeing how other members do things and receiving advice and help from others. This is valuable, and raises important questions about non-hierarchical forms of instruction and leadership (see e.g. Dixon 2014). Compare this to learning how to play football. You can learn a lot from watching more experienced players, having a coach teach you what to do, and so on. However, if you never actually play football, you're not going to get very good at it. Similarly, if you never actually practise free, equal, and democratic forms of organising you won't get very good at that either.

(ii) The Drive to Change

A prefigurative organisation is a concrete utopia. It's a good place that exists and an anticipation of a better world that doesn't – yet. Its inspirational powers grow from this tension. Marina Sitrin writes that to 'see oneself as an actor, when historically one has been a silent observer, is a fundamental break from the past' (2012: 84). Participants in prefigurative organisations like

the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (one of the most important organisations in the US civil rights movement), parts of the radical women's movement in the 1960s and '70s, and the New Democracy Movement (including Occupy), repeatedly describe the feelings of love, joy, and community that arise when you're part of an empowering organisation. The strategic importance of these affective aspects of organisation should not be underestimated.

The terminology is new, but the idea goes way back. In 1844, as quoted earlier, Marx wrote 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. (1992: 365)

The basic idea is this: people join an organisation to fight for certain extrinsic ends – in this case better wages and working conditions. The organisation they join instantiates a certain kind of practice that they end up participating in. The experience of this causes people to change their needs, goals, and desires.[9] This is a theme which is echoed throughout discussions of the affective aspects of prefigurative organising today (Graeber 2013; Holloway 2010; Maeckelbergh 2011, 2012; Sitrin 2012; Zibechi 2012), and is supported by a plethora of historical accounts.

All of this suggests a second argument for prefigurative politics. Achieving a free and equal society requires not only people with the powers to organise it. It also requires enough people who are driven to do so. Experiencing free, equal, and democratic social structures is empowering and enjoyable. One of the effects of these experiences is that people come to acquire a new taste for the kinds of freedom, equality, community, democracy, etc., that they embody. People who experience this come to want to have a say over decisions that affect them, to solve their problems for themselves, not to be ruled by others, want a free way of life, to live in a community of equals, and so on. As a result, participants will begin to seek these things in their activism and other areas of social life, such as workplaces and local communities. These new drives, and the pleasure of satisfying them, also provide a powerful motivation to continue to struggle and win. They push against the system and drive us towards transcending it.[10]

(iii) Consciousness-Raising

As we saw in Chapter 3, consciousness is not something that is 'elevated above the this-worldly realm of human practice' (Cox and Nilsen 2014: 32). It is just as situated within ongoing human practices as other human powers. As such, one of the ways (though not the only way) we affect our consciousness and powers thereof is through the practices we partake in. This highlights the crucial connection between praxis and consciousness: there can be no development of consciousness detached from real and experienced praxis. Developing revolutionary consciousness therefore requires developing the forms of practice that can nurture and sustain it, especially forms of free, equal, and democratic practice that this consciousness can be the consciousness of.

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[9] As we pointed out earlier, this partly assumes that 'needs' are understood in the motivational sense mentioned above; see Raekstad 2018a.

[10] This is an obvious point that we don't have the space to develop further here: if you're a philosophical determinist, the power/drives distinction comes down to simply an active conception of powers.

This gives us a third main argument for prefigurative politics in large-scale organisations: prefigurative politics is important for developing revolutionary consciousness. David Graeber writes that:

> For decades, the anarchist movement had been putting much of our creative energy into developing forms of egalitarian political process that actually work; forms of direct democracy that actually could operate within self-governing communities outside of any state. The whole project was based in a kind of faith that freedom is contagious. 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. (2013: 89)

Beliefs and assumptions about what the world is like and what is humanly possible play an important role in social change – for both causing and preventing it. If large numbers of people can't even imagine social institutions being organised differently, if they can't even imagine what a world free of capitalism, the state, sexism, racism, and so on can be like, how committed can they be to removing or replacing them? This is not unreasonable. If human society can't survive without the state, the traditional anarchist and Marxist goal of a stateless future society is an impossible pipe-dream. Why devote any part of your life to pursuing that?

A revolution needs large numbers of people to be able to imagine, understand, and figure out how to reorganise social life. Enough people need to believe that free, equal, and democratic modes of deliberation and decision-making are possible. They need to be able to understand, adapt, and alter them as needed. Participation in, and experiences with, movements and organisations that employ these kinds of deliberation and decision-making structures is by far the best way to develop the proper consciousness of them. Prefiguring free, equal, and democratic formal organisational structures is therefore an important part of developing the consciousness that is necessary to bring such a society about.

This point generalises to experiences of prefigurative politics more broadly. Once you have experienced really free, equal, and democratic modes of deliberation and decision-making, seen that they really work, and enjoyed them, it's hard to go back to prior assumptions that such things are impossible and undesirable. This is similar to what Bernard Williams, in a different context, called 'the intellectual irreversibility of the Enlightenment': once such a 'question has been raised, there is no respectable route back from confronting it' (2002: 254). This is one reason why large-scale prefigurative organisations are so important for social change: they give many people a shared taste of a future society that it's hard to turn away from.

We've personally seen this play out again and again in the organisations and movements we've been a part of. For instance, we've seen organisers teach activist groups the nuts and bolts of non-hierarchical deliberation and decision-making. We've seen the joy and excitement on members' faces as they experience a very different, better, and more enjoyable way of organising social life.

Developing consciousness of different and better forms of social organisation is not, of course, the only kind of consciousness-raising that's important. In Chapter 3, we mentioned how feminist consciousness-raising groups developed the concept of sexual harassment, and how the

socialist tradition focused on political economy in order to understand the nature of capitalism and what is required to replace it. Organisations and movements have an important role to play here too. For example, anarcho-syndicalist and other radical unions often become gateways to politics beyond the workplace and economy. They help members grow as agents by building their organising capacities, their confidence in themselves and their abilities, and by enabling them, through day-to-day organising, to see how their problems and struggles are connected to those of other oppressed, exploited, and marginalised people. The practices of working towards a common cause, supporting one another, and cooperating for a grander goal, help to build feelings and conceptions of solidarity, mutual aid, and helpfulness, enabling workers to become more aware of the shared nature of their class interests and better struggle to realise them.

The latter two arguments emphasise how important organising itself is to people becoming committed to social change. To take just one suggestive example, the Japanese socialist *Heimin Newspaper* published a column in the early 1900s under the title 'Why I Became a Socialist'. The seventy-eight contributors from all walks of life described why they had become socialists – some took just a couple of sentences, while others went on for whole pages. A clear pattern emerged: 'Almost all respondents mentioned formative experiences of' (1) 'exploitation, injustice, or discrimination, whether directly experienced or witnessed', or (2) 'their participation in social movements' (Tierney 2015: 108). One of the strongest features of prefigurative politics, properly practised, is the awareness and reflection it insists on in relation to how our movements affect us as political agents and human beings, and the implications this has for changing the world.

These ideas shouldn't surprise anyone familiar with the anarchists' and Marx's theory of praxis (see Chapter 3). Just as the beginnings of capitalism can be found in certain social relations that grew and expanded under feudalism, the seeds of socialism must be planted and grown within capitalism – despite the best efforts of capitalists and the state at preventing them. Every new form of society has grown from the one that preceded it – out of its contradictions, institutions, struggles, etc. – and there's no reason to think that that will change. As Rudolf Rocker argues apropos anarcho-syndicalism:

> For the Anarcho-Syndicalists the trade union is by no means a mere transitory phenomenon bound up with the duration of capitalist society, it is the germ of the Socialist economy of the future, the elementary school of Socialism in general. Every new social structure makes organs for itself in the body of the old organism. Without this preliminary any social evolution is unthinkable. Even revolutions can only develop and mature the germs which already exist and have made their way into the consciousness of men; they cannot themselves create these germs or generate new worlds out of nothing. It therefore concerns us to plan these germs whilst there is yet time and bring them to the strongest possible development, so as to make the task of the coming social revolution easier and to insure its permanence. (2004: 59)

We can see from this quote how misguided accusations that prefigurative politics somehow 'ignores the complex relationship between individual and social change' are (Van Meter 2017: 150). One version of this critique is the accusation of what is sometimes called 'voluntarism': the idea that human beings can, by sheer force of will, step outside of their society as freewheeling autonomous subjects, creating new relations and institutions as if existing ones didn't exist and didn't severely limit what we can do and become.

Prefigurative politics rejects this notion. It builds on the idea that we cannot simply will ourselves to become fit to create a new society on the eve of revolution, but must learn to become so through developing and sustaining the right social relations and institutions. Of course, many things like capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and the state constrain what we can do and must therefore be considered strategically – and many responses to these things don't prefigure a better world. These are some of the reasons why, as we've seen, advocates of prefigurative politics differ on a number of points of strategy and tactics. It is also why, as we will see, they have a variety of different ways of dealing with things like state power and armed defence. In fact, in the following chapters we will see that it is rather vanguardists and liberals who make this 'voluntaristic' mistake, advocating simply placing the correct representatives at the top of hierarchical institutions, without properly considering how they will be changed by their new social situation.

It is sometimes argued that capitalism itself is sufficient to make workers revolutionary and cause them to overthrow capitalism in favour of socialism. This is at best partly true. Capitalism does seem to generate resistance of certain kinds – especially trade unionism. It also seems to generate certain forms of consciousness conducive to social revolution. But as the last century-and-a-half has shown, capitalism is far from sufficient to take us to a free, equal, and democratic socialist society – at least any time soon, much less before our environment collapses.

There are many critiques of the kind of prefigurative organising discussed in this chapter. These appear not just in, say, Stalinist rejections of anarchism and syndicalism, but also in debates within Marxism itself. The rest of the chapter will address three of the most prominent such critiques: that hierarchy is inevitable in large-scale modern organisations; that prefigurative politics is incapable of addressing state power; and that prefigurative politics is incompatible with armed defence of the revolution.

(c) The Necessity of Hierarchy?

Many people today assume that any large-scale human organisation has to be hierarchical and oligarchical (minority-ruled) in order to function (well) (Weber 1994; Harvey 2012). This argument doesn't necessarily challenge the value of prefiguration in general. If non-hierarchical social formations aren't really compatible with, say, modern technology, this would only imply that such forms of organising are impractical for some societies. It does not argue that current organisational forms should not prefigure forms which would be workable and desirable in a different kind of future society, only that neither of these should be strictly non-hierarchical in nature. It's possible to think that non-hierarchical organising is unworkable and that there are (other) aspects of a future society that are worth prefiguring. The argument does, however, challenge the kinds of prefigurative politics being discussed here, i.e. organising large-scale organisations non-hierarchically.

The main problem with the argument that non-hierarchical organising is impossible in modern society is that it doesn't hold up to the evidence. Accounts of bottom-up organisation during the Spanish and Ukrainian revolutions, as well as from numerous current recuperated factories and autonomous regions like Rojava and Chiapas, all show that this is not the case. In all these instances, social organisation and coordination have taken place on both small and large scales and have been very successful, and by all accounts much more efficient than the hierarchical modes

of organising they replaced. None of these societies are perfect utopias. They continue to struggle against patriarchal gender norms within their communities, as well as against other forms of informal hierarchies and inequalities, in various ways (see Chapter 5). However, they have still created societies that are fundamentally and qualitatively different from the hierarchical ones they replaced.

We can also compare the resistance to fascism in Germany and Spain during the 1930s. Despite uniting millions of workers in unions and parties, German social democrats were able to organise very little effective resistance to the Nazis, while the anarcho-syndicalist Spanish CNT, by contrast, organised much more, and more effective, resistance to fascism over several years (Rocker 2004). Furthermore, it can be argued that a more consistently libertarian approach would have enabled them to win. First, it has been suggested that a more consistently anti-imperialist approach could have made Franco's soldiers (many of whom were North African mercenaries) more sympathetic to their struggle. Second, had they not contradicted their anarchist principles, joined the republican government, and left the army under the existing state's command then the Communist Party would not have been able to use the existing state apparatus and its control over the army to betray the revolution (Chomsky 2016).

One response to this is to argue that even if non-hierarchical organisations are possible and capable of organising well, they can't last over time because of the so-called *iron law of oligarchy*. Robert Michels, the anti-democratic liberal and later fascist,[11] argued that any large-scale organisation tends inevitably towards oligarchy for technical and psychological reasons:

> The technical tendencies 'concern the indispensability of leadership in groups': any organisation of any significant size quickly makes it impossible for all members to deliberate directly without intermediaries, as a result of which it needs a system of delegates or representatives to deliberate, decide, and give orders to the rest; some skills such as oratory, knowledge, or other abilities gradually set some apart from the others; larger organisations also gradually develop more and more differentiated tasks, which it becomes harder to integrate; seeing the big picture also becomes harder and harder; as this goes on, the majority of the organisation finds it more and more difficult to conduct and supervise the organisation's activities; and so increased trust and power has to be given to these intermediary layers. (Raekstad 2017: 602)

The psychological reasons include the supposedly inherent apathy and incompetence of the masses vs the elite, with the former feeling a need to be led by their supposed betters. This argument has recently been taken up by Jodi Dean (2016), who contends that we should accept oligarchically organised communist parties as the main vehicles for taking us to an egalitarian socialist society.

If accepted, Michels' and Dean's argument entails giving up on the core commitment of anarchism and Marxism to collective self-emancipation:

> If any revolution requires an organisation to carry it out, and any organisation is necessarily oligarchical, then any emancipation Dean envisions would have to be

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[11] Michels' political life began as part of the German and Italian socialist parties, with a particular leaning towards syndicalism. Michels wrote Political Parties (1911) after rejecting socialism and democratic mass movements entirely. In 1928, Michels 'returned to Italy at the personal invitation of Mussolini' and 'became an apologist for fascism', receiving a Chair in first Perugia and then Rome, before dying in 1936 (Cook 1971).

conquered not, as Marx insists, 'by the working classes themselves', but by a minority of oligarchs on their behalf. This definitively rules out any meaningful notion of working class self-emancipation. (Raekstad 2017: 610)

There are many flaws in Michels' argument. Michels' study (1962 [1911]) is based almost solely on German and Italian union organisations, which were not very interested in non-hierarchical decision-making and took no major steps to prevent internal hierarchies from forming (Barker 2001). It also ignores how even fairly hierarchical and top-down organisations can and have developed to become more democratic and radical (Voss and Sherman 2000).

Most importantly, Michels' and Dean's arguments say nothing about the organisational means developed by prefigurative mass organisations – including the anarcho-syndicalist Argentinian FORA and the Spanish CNT, the Brazilian landless peasants' movement MST, and many others – for preventing oligarchy, or how they've survived for decades and in some cases (such as the Swedish SAC) for over a century without becoming oligarchies. There are also numerous revolutionary experiences and experiments in creating non-hierarchical societies, such as revolutionary Spain and the Ukraine, and present-day Chiapas, which do much to challenge this argument. We would argue that oligarchy only seems inevitable because it permeates the world around us and has done for centuries. Not long ago, so did absolute monarchy and the gender binary.

(d) Political Organisation and Seeking State Power

Another criticism of prefigurative politics (and especially of its anarcho-syndicalist varieties) holds that its rejection of state participation inevitably hinders efforts to, in Lenin's words, 'unite the workers in big, powerful and properly functioning organisations, capable of functioning well under *all circumstances*' (1972: 244). Today, this argument is often buttressed by claims that prefigurative organisations have never been able to sustain large memberships or survive over time, and that they have failed to play any significant role in anti-capitalist struggles. This argument also doesn't hold up to the historical evidence.

The first response to make is that prefigurative politics, in the sense we've been discussing here, does not necessarily entail rejecting all state participation. For example, there are strands of thought – e.g. Democratic Confederalism and 21st Century Socialism (see Chapter 6) – that combine some commitment to prefigurative politics with attempts to utilise existing state institutions. There are a number of concerns about the viability of these approaches. But the important point here is that these examples show that there is no *necessary* contradiction between a commitment to prefigurative politics in general and a range of different approaches to dealing with state power.

Another response to this criticism is that its historical claims are false. Many prefigurative organisations have been large and long-lasting, with memberships in the tens or even hundreds of thousands. These include the anarcho-syndicalist organisations like the Argentinian FORA (which had memberships of over 100,000) and the Spanish CNT (which in 1934 had 1.58 million members – see Beevor 2006: 24). In fact, according to the famous Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, during 1905–14 'the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist' (1993: 72–3), and, according to Benedict Anderson, anarchism and syndicalism constituted 'the main vehicle of global opposition to industrial capitalism, autocracy, latifundism, and imperialism' at the turn of

the twentieth century (2006: 54). Furthermore, two of the most promising socialist experiments, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas in Mexico and the Kurdish movement in Rojava in Northern Syria, have employed prefigurative politics with significant success. They involve large, permanent organisations and social structures governing large numbers of people (about 300,000 for the Zapatistas, and about 2 million for the Kurds in Rojava), which have been able to organise successfully under even the most adverse conditions.

Clearly, then, a commitment to prefigurative politics in the sense defended here does not prevent the formation of large, permanent organisations capable of functioning well under a variety of circumstances. Claims that non-hierarchical prefigurative modes of organising are impossible in large-scale organisations are therefore false.

(e) Defence

A third argument we must consider originates with Friedrich Engels. Engels argues that prefigurative politics is incompatible with the authoritarian institutions required for effective defence against capitalist and state attack.[12] For example, it has been claimed that the state-centred and authoritarian tactics of the Russian Bolsheviks enabled them to beat the Ukrainian anarchists. If the Bolsheviks hadn't been so authoritarian, the argument goes, the Russian Revolution would soon have succumbed to counter-revolutionary attacks from the Russian aristocracy, and the USSR would have been short-lived.

There are three responses to this argument. Firstly, we should repeat that prefigurative politics as defended here is not necessarily incompatible with all forms of state involvement – e.g. securing armed defence (for more on which, see Chapter 6).

Secondly, it's not clear that taking state power was what enabled the Russian Bolsheviks to win. The Ukrainian anarchists were certainly defeated by the much larger Red Army commanded by the Bolsheviks. However, it's not clear that any army could have survived against a force that was so much larger. After all, no White (Tsarist loyalist) or Green (national liberation) armies managed to resist the Red Army either. For this criticism to work, it needs to include some additional argument about how the Ukrainian anarchists would have been able to win had they taken state power. So far, nobody has been able to provide this.

Thirdly, there's a broader range of evidence that undermines this argument. The anarchosyndicalist unions we mentioned above continuously challenged the power of the state and capital. Both the FORA and the CNT were continuously having members falsely imprisoned and murdered, their offices raided, their newspapers shut down, and so on, but they still managed to struggle and win. Council communists in Germany also faced the armed might of the state, managing, among other things, to force Wilhelm II to end the First World War, primarily through a general strike in key strategic industries. The Zapatistas have been in a continuous armed conflict with the Mexican state since 1994, occupying land in the hilly rainforests that the state has attempted to possess. Despite still suffering periodic attacks by the Mexican army, they have managed to organise an impressive network of media, education, and international solidarity to help them to survive and support other struggles. Finally, the democratic confederalists in Rojava have managed to resist not only military attacks and repression from several neighbouring states,

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[12] There are versions of this in 'On Authority' (Engels 1972) and 'The Bakunists at Work: An Account of the Spanish Revolt in the Summer of 1873' (Engels 1988).

but also to successfully combat ISIS/ISIL militarily, all while reorganising their own society by introducing participatory democratic governance, running projects to combat sexism and gender stereotypes, taking over and securing public services, organising national and international solidarity, and much more (Knapp et al. 2016).[13]

While there are many examples of organisations that have managed to defend their revolutionary progress while being prefigurative, there are also examples of organisations losing after compromising on their principles and taking over existing state power. During the Spanish Revolution, the CNT and FAI (the Iberian Anarchist Federation – a Spanish anarchist federation active within the CNT) broke with anarchist strategy in favour of a 'popular front' tactic of leaving the army in the hands of the state, subordinating anarchist militias to the existing state, and joining the existing state themselves – despite criticisms from the wider international anarcho-syndicalist movement. This led to many of their parliamentary representatives trying to prevent the revolution which was happening throughout Spain, and arguably enabled the Communist Party to fatally betray the revolution altogether, leading to the victory of Franco's fascism (Azaretto 2014; Chomsky 2016; Damier 2009: ch. 14).

In other words, the historical record shows that there is no inherent contradiction between a pragmatic and effective approach to the means of coercion and their usage on the one hand, and prefigurative politics on the other. We all know that prefigurative organisations haven't won the relatively few revolutionary wars they've been part of and ushered in a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. What the record does show, however, is that prefigurative politics is compatible with the effective use of coercive means and armed defence.

(f) The Formal and the Informal

The debates we've looked at in this chapter focus overwhelmingly on formal decision-making institutions. However, if we care about truly free, equal, and democratic institutions – both now and in the future – we need to think much further than that.

This reflects one of the shortcomings of many past movements advocating prefigurative politics. When they thought of prefigurative politics, they focused overwhelmingly on formal decision-making structures. Such structures are, we agree, very important, but much more is needed for those wishing to prefigure and reach a truly free, equal, and democratic society. On the one hand, the women's organisations that formed within anarcho-syndicalist movements – like the anarcha-feminist group that published *La Voz de la Mujer* in Argentina or the Mujeres Libres in Spain – did a great deal of important work advancing the cause of women both in the anarcho-syndicalist movement and in society more broadly. On the other hand, historical anarchist, syndicalist, and anarcho-syndicalist movements as a whole often fell short when it came to putting their stated commitments to ending sexism into practice.

The historical picture here is complicated, and there are at least three perspectives on this that are worth bearing in mind – all of which capture an important part of the whole picture. Comparing historical anarchist, syndicalist, and anarcho-syndicalist organisations to mainstream

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[13] In fact, they recently (March 2019) declared their victory over ISIS/ISIL. Like any military conflict is, this is a complicated case, especially due to the involvement of Russia and the United States in the region. For instance, the US provided significant material support to the Free Syrian Army. Unfortunately, we don't have the space to examine this in detail here.

liberal and conservative organisations at the time, they are consistently on a par or much better with respect to issues of gender, race, sexuality, imperialism, colonialism, and so on. For example, at a time when mainstream unions would often exclude migrants, racial minorities, and women, syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist unions welcomed them as equal members in the struggle for universal human emancipation. On the other hand, comparing them to what most activists on the left today demand of their organisations, they look at best inconsistent, and often fall very short indeed. From a third perspective, we can see that in many cases these organisations played an important role in bringing about positive social changes in their societies. For instance, although neither the US syndicalist union the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) of the early 1900s nor the German anarcho-syndicalist union FAUD addressed sexism in ways we'd expect of such organisations today, they did play an important role in, for example, advocating and beginning to provide for women's reproductive rights, thereby contributing to the advance of women's rights generally.

As we've also pointed out, many of these organisations did not adequately consider the importance of informal inequalities when they thought of prefiguration. Thus they often neglected the prefigurative significance of informal hierarchies and inequalities. Suppose you want an organisation that is truly participatory and democratic – that is, collectively self-governed by the totality of its members. Suppose also that it implements your preferred participatory-democratic formal rules for how to carry out decision-making, but that it operates within, say, a highly sexist society, while taking no steps to address this kind of hierarchy and inequality within the organisation itself. If this is the case, you will leave these informal hierarchies and inequalities in place. Women members will face a large number of barriers to effective participation, such as not being listened to, being interrupted and spoken over, being belittled, perhaps being subject to various forms of harassment and assault, and so on. This in turn means that they won't be able to participate fully and effectively, even when all the formal rules are followed. Such an organisation may have the best formal decision-making structure in the world, but would nevertheless not be fully democratic, because some of its members are, in practice, prevented from fully participating in self-governing the organisation.

In summary then, if we want free, equal, and democratic institutions we can't only look at formal decision-making structures. We also need to address the informal hierarchies and inequalities that permeate our society. Addressing them can take a variety of formal (e.g. women's caucuses) or informal (e.g. changing attitudes towards gendered labour) forms, but if we ignore them then even the hopes of the narrower-focused advocates of prefigurative politics will have a hard time being met.

In this chapter, we've looked at one important aspect of prefigurative politics: prefiguring a future society through the decision-making structures of large-scale organisations. We've looked at the arguments about why this is important for developing revolutionary agents with the power, drives, and consciousness necessary to reach a free, equal, and democratic society. We've also addressed concerns about the necessity of hierarchy, political organisation and taking state power, and armed defence, and looked at some of the limitations of thinking about prefiguration in an overly narrow way.

This leads naturally to the question of how best to think about prefiguration in a broader sense, one capable of understanding and addressing not only questions of formal decision-making structure, but also the many informal hierarchies and inequalities that those working towards a truly free, equal, and democratic society must confront. This we discuss in the next chapter.

5. The Personal is Political

When telling the story of how prefigurative politics became an influential concept, most authors focus on its anarchist and Marxist roots. This story tends to concentrate on the opposition to class oppression and exploitation. As we have shown in earlier chapters, this history is essential and is rightly given a lot of attention since it has been so influential on the left over the past 200 years. What we have also argued, however, is that antiracist and feminist movements have been crucial in the development of prefigurative politics, especially in recent decades, which is not usually given the attention it deserves.

This chapter elaborates on what we have called the personal-is-political argument for prefigurative politics. This argument spells out, in more direct terms, how feminist and antiracist ideas feed into the foundations of prefigurative politics. It can be understood as a feminist and antiracist interpretation of the other main argument of this book, the praxis argument (see Chapter 4). The latter showed that, if people are to implement a free, equal, and democratic society, they need to develop the right powers, drives, and consciousness in order to do so, which can only be done through practice. The personal-is-political argument elaborates on these ideas by showing what feminism and antiracism tell us about what kind of practice that should be. As we will see, among its main insights are, firstly, that prefigurative activists must not only create formally equal decision-making structures but must also address informal and indirect hierarchies and inequalities. Added to this, we must recognise the role that emotions and personal experiences play in our politics. Finally, we must grapple with the ways in which different forms of oppression, whether classed, racialised or gendered, intersect with each other.

(a) The Personal/Political Distinction

Since the 1960s, the slogan 'the personal is political' has been painted on many a placard and poster, been printed in feminist literature and spoken of in meetings and consciousness-raising groups. The slogan represents a refusal of the false separation between 'political' matters on the one hand and merely 'personal' matters on the other, which is a distinction that has often functioned to protect men's monopoly of power and suppress women's voices (Heberle 2016).

The personal/political distinction is often taken for granted in modern societies, where the word politics usually refers to the things that politicians do in government buildings: making decisions, debating legislation, holding meetings, giving speeches, and so on. The things those politicians, or anyone else for that matter, do in their spare time – for example, their banter during coffee breaks, who they live with, who cooks their food and looks after their children – are usually seen as non-political personal matters.

This division between the political and personal has been upheld by political thinkers and actors for centuries, especially those of the liberal tradition. The distinction between the personal and the political in its current iteration in liberal societies was shaped by the same forces that shaped Europe's transition from a feudal society to a modern one, that is, to a capitalist and

colonising form of patriarchal society. It was above all championed by the emerging capitalist class, who were wealthy but did not belong to the aristocracy or monarchy, and felt a need to protect their wealth and religious freedom from state interference. The idea that the personal is distinct from the political became one of the core principles of classical liberal ideology, which holds that the nation-state is something good and necessary, but that its power must be limited to allow personal freedom. The personal/political distinction was thus originally made primarily with the state in mind: our 'personal' lives should be left alone by the state, taxes should be as low as possible, and state interference in matters of personal choice should be avoided. This certainly makes sense from the perspective of bourgeois white men who want to protect their private wealth from the state and treat their families and employees however they like – but as feminists have shown, it is not a very helpful distinction for those who are less privileged.

Feminists have argued that the distinction is actively harmful for marginalised people, and especially women. For one thing, it falsely assumes that collective scrutiny of and debate about what happens in the 'personal' sphere is always undesirable. From a feminist perspective, however, there are cases where intervention by others in personal matters is both necessary and welcome. For example, domestic violence and rape within marriage have become matters of public debate only thanks to feminist lobbying in recent decades; prior to this they were seen as lying outside of the realm of public debate or political action. As a result, women were often hindered from speaking about them and taking collective action against them. 'Me Too' is a current example of a feminist movement highlighting the political nature of so-called personal matters. Tarana Burke founded the movement in 2006 as a way to enable women to speak about sexual violence and to point out that it is a systemic rather than an individual problem.

For feminists of colour, the personal being political has also, in addition to the above, been a way to highlight the raced nature of the supposed distinction between the personal and the political. Something that is often forgotten, especially by white feminists, is that the state and other forms of authority have *already* been intervening to the detriment of the lives of people of colour ever since the beginning of European colonialism. For example, Black people in the US and Europe have been subject to police harassment, imprisonment, laws against inter-racial marriage, and of course slavery, for several hundred years, and many still are. Indigenous people in colonised countries, meanwhile, have faced countless forms of invasive governance by colonisers who have viewed themselves as paternalistic and civilising: from religious conversion and prohibition of indigenous languages, to forced marriage, to slavery and abduction. In this sense, then, the personal being political highlights the fact that the state and public discourse have meddled more deeply in people of colour's lives than in white people's – which is an entirely different kind of objection to the state than the bourgeois one. We will return to elaborate on this antiracist critique in section (d).

The personal/political distinction is founded on a view of humanity that seriously underestimates human interconnectedness. The distinction implies that our private lives are not significantly shaped by the society in which we live, or shape it in turn; that our personalities, tastes, opinions and lifestyles can somehow neatly be separated from questions of power or society. As feminist and antiracist critiques have made their way into the academy in recent decades, many liberal philosophers upholding the personal/political distinction have admitted that our personal lives are indeed affected to some extent by society and its culture, language, ideology, fashion, etc. – denying that this is the case would be impossible – but they have sought to tone this down in favour of championing a notion of personal freedom and limited state interference (Berlin

2000 [1969]: 173). Left-wing feminists and antiracists have questioned whose 'freedom' this kind of thinking in fact protects, arguing that it mainly serves the freedom of rich men to exploit and oppress women, the working class, and/or people of colour.

The criticism of the distinction, then, is both that it is inaccurate and that it is actively harmful. It's served to exclude certain areas of life from negotiation and public scrutiny, consigning predominantly women's issues to the realm of the supposedly apolitical. It has also helped to conceal the ways in which personal issues are affected by, and affect, the state and broader society – a concealment that has been particularly detrimental to women of colour. Rather than seeing the personal as distinct from the so-called political, feminists argue that we should pay particular attention to the ways in which our personal lives both affect and are affected by formal political rules in society. How I spend my own money, what I dream about, how I dress, who I spend my time with, who I desire, what my gender is or isn't – all of these are highly political and social questions. This, of course, does not mean or imply that they should be subject to state control or interference. What it does mean is that they are worthy subjects of political reflection, debate, and organised action.

(b) Addressing Informal Hierarchies and Inequalities

That the personal is political is hardly a new or cutting-edge insight nowadays, but too few organisers have appreciated its implications for how we organise. One fundamental implication is that power does not just express itself in formal rules and policies, but also in our everyday interactions. This means that in order to create free, equal, and democratic relationships, we must consider not only formal rules and arrangements, but also the ways in which social norms, roles, values, and divisions of labour affect people's abilities and power. For example, a formally democratic organisation won't be truly democratic in practice if some sub-sections of the members, who have been socialised to take up more space in society and to project their voices more loudly, end up dominating meetings and discussions. Nor is it going to be truly democratic or egalitarian if some people are always expected to do more labour than others outside of meetings – looking after children, doing housework, or helping others process emotional stress – which gives them less time and energy to prepare and research issues. Similarly, some people are better equipped to participate and be heard in meetings than others, perhaps because they have received better education or been taught how to speak eloquently, or because the makeup of their brain and body is well suited to traditional meeting forms (i.e. sitting in one place and concentrating for long periods of time, reading small print, writing, and so on).

Any activist committed to reaching a truly free, equal, and democratic society must, in other words, consider how to address these informal hierarchies. Most obviously, this means designing organisations, events, spaces and materials in a way that does not exclude certain groups from participating. This often requires organisers to become aware of and think critically about their own assumptions and prejudices. When we organise an event, are we assuming that the participants are people with similar needs, interests, and requirements as ourselves, without realising it? When designing posters or leaflets, are we assuming that everyone else has the same aesthetic values, reference points and taste as ourselves?

Many excellent resources exist to help us challenge these assumptions and prejudices and to learn to create more inclusive spaces and groups. One example is the DIY Access Guide to

organising music gigs (Attitude is Everything 2017), which explains important ways of making events accessible to disabled people, whether by giving free tickets to personal assistants, having wheelchair ramps, or providing a quiet room where people can go if they're experiencing anxiety. Another example is Seeds for Change's guide to creating publicity and outreach materials (2017), which helps the reader challenge their own assumptions. Seeds for Change have also created a useful guide to facilitating inclusive meetings (2009), which describes techniques like go-rounds (going around the group and asking everyone's view in turn), active listening (splitting into pairs where each person takes turn to listen to the other for a few minutes without interrupting or commenting), and small group discussion exercises that distribute input on decision-making more evenly across the group.

We need to do more than merely not exclude certain groups, however. Since we live in a society that provides some people with more resources, confidence, entitlement, and skills than others, these informal and indirect inequalities require particular attention. Prefigurative organising should also include measures that counteract broader inequalities and that give socially marginalised groups particular support. Though there are many people in our society who attempt to reject racism by simply claiming they 'don't see race', or rejecting patriarchy by claiming they 'don't see gender', this is not a successful prefigurative approach to the problem. Rather than pretending that inequalities are not there, we need to work on dismantling them and replacing them with egalitarian practices and relationships. To get a better idea of how this might be done, let us look at a couple of examples.

One of the best examples is the Zapatistas, which as we've seen in previous chapters is an egalitarian community of around 300,000 largely indigenous people in Chiapas in south-eastern Mexico. The Zapatistas gained de facto independence from the Mexican state in 1994, but the state has not recognised this and continues to wage a 'low intensity' war against them, with frequent deadly outcomes on the Zapatistas' part. The Zapatistas' governance system is participatory democratic and federated. All adults attend regular neighbourhood assemblies to take part in decision-making. Elected delegates are then sent from these meetings to a municipal council that covers a larger area to discuss decisions that affect more than one neighbourhood. Elected delegates are in turn sent from these to the region-wide meetings. The decision-making structures are designed to avoid concentration of power and to promote inclusion. For example, roles rotate often, there are no full-time positions, and everyone is expected to hold office at some point.

Zapatista organisers were aware from the outset that widespread gender roles and norms, imposed in their current form by European colonisers, have made it very difficult for women's voices to be heard, even when decision-making structures are formally participatory (Schroeder et al. 1997; Marcos 2014). In most communities in the Chiapas region women have had very limited freedoms, for example they've not been free to choose whom to marry or whether to have children. There is a strongly gendered division of labour, with agricultural work in the fields, woodwork, and political work seen as men's work, and cooking, cleaning, and childcare seen as women's work (Millán 1998). Creating a formally gender-neutral decision-making structure would never be sufficient to overcome these deep-rooted hierarchies in broader society, so Zapatista organisers have taken a number of actions that counteract them.

Just before their initial uprising on 1 January 1994, Zapatista organisers passed the Women's Revolutionary Law, a list of ten bullet points declaring fundamental women's rights, including the right to education and freedom from domestic violence (EZLN 1994). Zapatista organisers often

stress the importance of gender equality in their speeches and radio shows so all community members and supporters are continuously reminded. Many of the murals and posters that adorn walls and buildings in Zapatista communities foreground images of women. One example is a mural on the side of a building in the small town of Morelia, which shows a Zapatista woman painted in bright colours, recognisable as a Zapatista by a colourful handkerchief concealing the face. The woman is standing in a corn field (corn farming being deemed a man's job according to prevailing gender norms), holding a baby in one arm and swinging a machete up to the sky with the other. Across the machete is written in neat cursive writing: Another world is possible.

The gender equality initiatives the Zapatistas have introduced since the passing of the Women's Revolutionary Law are many and varied. For example, they run gender awareness training for community members; have founded a women's fund, the BANAMAZ, to support women's collectives within Zapatista communities; and run women's gatherings offering workshops and skill-shares, including an international gathering for women in 2018.

Thanks to this work, women have gradually begun to take a greater share of seats in municipal and regional councils, which were overwhelmingly male-dominated when the Zapatista governance system was founded in 2003 (Zapatistas 2013). The inclusion of women in councils has progressed slowly in places, and there are still more young than older women who take part, since married women and mothers are often unable to leave their family duties, or aren't permitted by their husbands to leave their usual work to serve in political roles. It's taking a long time, but significant progress has been made since 1994.

A different example on the other side of the globe is the British anti-authoritarian communist organisation Plan C. Plan C has several chapters across different cities and regions in the UK, coordinated through a national network. It, too, has a formally participatory democratic decision-making structure, but it uses caucus groups for members belonging to social groups that are particularly marginalised. For example, some branches have a women and nonbinary people's caucus group, and some have a people of colour's caucus group. These caucuses ensure that the interests of those groups are given specific attention in meetings and projects. The London branch of Plan C also has a Social Reproduction Cluster for men and people of masculine experience, whose job it is to actively counterbalance our society's expectation that women, people assigned female at birth and femme people will do most of the domestic and reproductive labour. For example, while the women and nonbinary people's caucus co-organised a large action and protest event on International Women's Day in 2018 together with other feminist groups, the Social Reproduction Cluster ran a food stall at the protest and a creche where kids were looked after while their parents were demonstrating. Instead of allocating domestic labour by self-selection – which in practice means we're likely to fall back on the usual patriarchal, racist, and classed social norms and roles – Plan C deliberately works to ensure a really democratic and egalitarian allocation of these oft-hidden forms of labour.

These are examples of targeted action to counteract particular hierarchies and inequalities. Some readers might object that many of these measures are not in themselves prefigurative, because they would not exist or be needed in the future society they aim for. In a narrow sense this might be true. For example, women-only or people of colour-only caucuses would probably not exist in a truly free, equal, and democratic future society. Indeed, those very categorisations of people would probably no longer exist in their current forms at all. We would argue, however, that in a broader sense it is prefigurative to organise in these ways, because this helps bring about the kinds of outcomes that radical left groups aim for. It makes sense to call these measures

prefigurative because their effects in the here-and-now – the relations and practices they produce – are prefigurative.

These examples illustrate a finer point about our definition of prefigurative politics. They show that prefiguring does not mean simply pretending that society is already free, equal, and democratic. It does not mean ignoring currently existing hierarchies and inequalities. Rather, it means bridging the gap between what is and what could be, in a way that implements important aspects of the desired future society in the here-and-now (Raekstad 2018b; Swain 2017). That is why our definition of prefigurativism is '*the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now*' – not, say, '*acting as though the desired future society is already here*'. Pretending that one already lives in a free, equal, and democratic society might be a fun exercise, and probably an interesting educational experience, but it's not likely to be very effective at changing current society into that future society.

Having looked at the importance of addressing informal inequalities, let us now look at a second aspect of the personal-is-political argument, which concerns the role of emotions in strategising and organising.

(c) Reason and Emotions

In Chapter 2, when we outlined the development of the term 'prefigurative politics' as Carl Boggs started using it in the late 1970s, we quoted the author and activist Sheila Rowbotham. Rowbotham's intervention into the debate came only a couple of years after Boggs' initial articles, published as part of a socialist feminist pamphlet in 1979. Rowbotham's text added to Boggs' critique of hierarchical and vanguardist forms of organising by arguing that they are often based on a worldview that ignores the role of emotions in our lives. Rowbotham questioned some of the basic assumptions and beliefs about the world that underpin hierarchical approaches to socialist organising, with particular focus on the well-known British organisation the Socialist Workers Party. Such hierarchical organisations, Rowbotham argued, have often wrongly assumed that human beings are able to design political strategy from a purely rational point of view, without involving their personal experiences, emotions, or circumstances in their understanding of political problems and solutions. In line with this belief, the Socialist Workers Party and other hierarchical organisations have delegated political strategising and leadership to a small group of individuals, trusting in their ability to formulate political aims and objectives that would serve all party members' interests. Great thinkers such as Trotsky, Lenin, and Marx, as well as current leadership figures within the party, are in this view the intellectual motors of the movement. These individuals, thanks to their superior knowledge and reasoning skills, can understand the problems faced by the working class, and the solutions to those problems, better than anyone else.

Rowbotham's text added to the rich, and still evolving, feminist and antiracist tradition of critiquing the reliance on an idealised view of abstract reason. Though it is a widespread assumption in contemporary Western societies, the idea that scientific knowledge – or other forms of theoretical knowledge for that matter – can be created through universally correct and perfectly unbiased reasoning, by experts who are able to rise entirely above their personal experiences and

emotions, has been questioned from many different perspectives.[1] Contemporary philosophers of science, for example, generally reject it, largely on the grounds that it doesn't hold up to the evidence (see Chalmers 2013). For Rowbotham, and for feminist and antiracist traditions more broadly, the reliance on an idealised view of abstract reasoning is not only mistaken, but actively harmful.

Rowbotham argued that since the personal is political, a theorist's personal context and experiences influence which ideas they come up with, which background assumptions they make, what they take to be good justification and legitimation for their views, and so on. (Obviously, this is not to say that everything is relative or that there is no such thing as truth.[2]) Those who elevate Lenin's or other leaders' insights and theorising about a 'science of socialist revolution' should acknowledge that these ideas did not appear out of thin air, but were drawn from the experiences of the theorist. Once we acknowledge that theorists are human beings like everyone else, and are part of the society they inhabit, then the idea that their theorising is completely detached from their personal context and experiences is difficult to maintain. As human beings, we are all affected by our experiences and perspectives on the world, whether we are aware of it or not. The question is not how we remove these influences or how we might want to wish them away, but rather how we acknowledge and take them into account.

This critique is also central to decolonial thinking. Quijano (2007) and Mignolo (2011), for example, have argued that the idea that knowledge can be perfectly 'politically neutral' and 'universal' is not only mistaken, but also has the effect of solidifying existing power hierarchies. European colonisers have often referred to allegedly universal knowledge in attempting to justify their invasion and rule over the global South; knowledge, that is, about economics, race, gender, or social progress. Many scientists, proclaiming themselves to be objective, have argued that economic growth is the best way to improve a country's living conditions, or that men and women's hormones justify European-style traditional gender norms, as if these were undisputed scientific facts. Such claims, however, are deeply rooted in particular assumptions and interests.

This has several implications for prefigurative politics. The first one reiterates the importance of inclusive and genuinely democratic decision-making. Since nobody is capable of creating political analyses that are entirely free from biases and assumptions, it matters who is participating when decisions are made; it is not possible for experts or elites to simply theorise their way to a 'universally correct' decision on any given topic (Franks 2006: esp. ch. 3).

Beyond formal decision-making structures, though, the personal-is-political argument also has some broader implications. It affects how we view our participation in social movements altogether, and how we understand what happens in them. Since politics is about more than just level-headed reasoning, prefiguring, say, egalitarian social relations means taking people's emotions and personal experiences into account (Gould 2009a, 2009b). For example, conflicts might arise between different individuals or groups that don't seem to make logical sense, maybe be-

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[1] This is a point of view with a long history in the philosophy of science. Much ink has been spilled over the degree to which the influences of social and historical contexts are compatible with cherished ideals of, e.g., rationality in science, but we won't explore any of this here. For a starting point on these debates, see Chalmers 2013.

[2] We cannot use this critique of ostensible objectivity to justify a 'post-truth' interpretation of reality. Of course, there are truths, but there's no way we can drag ourselves out of our lived experiences to see those truths from some 'purely objective' perspective. Our social processes of creating and developing knowledge and formulating truth-claims are necessarily intertwined with the ideology, assumptions, etc., that surround us. What the feminist-decolonial argument highlights is that the sense we make of whatever happens 'out there' is affected by our social and historical context.

cause personal chemistries don't work between people in the organisation, or because different individuals trigger bad memories or negative feelings in each other. Members might hold stubborn views or oppositions to new ideas that they are not able to explain or justify using rational arguments. The most useful and prefigurative response to these behaviours is not to simply dismiss them as inappropriate or immature but to openly acknowledge that they are part of political organising, and to collectively learn how to deal with them. For some organisations this might involve training members in emotional awareness and establishing ways of communicating that treat emotions as valid and omnipresent. A simple example of the latter is for the facilitator of group meetings to remind participants to acknowledge the role emotions play in shaping their viewpoints: 'Sounds as though you might be feeling [x/y/z]. Am I right?' (Kaner et al. 2007: 53). Many groups also use go-rounds in their meetings and workshops, where everyone states how they feel about a topic, or what their general mood is at the moment, before discussing a particular issue.

This work might also involve running regular workshops to help members learn how to stop reproducing harmful norms and habits, which are so often raced, classed, gendered, and so on. Having grown up in modern societies we have all internalised those hierarchical structures and norms that characterise it, so unless we directly and consciously address them we all go through life with various racist, capitalist, and patriarchal assumptions. According to prevailing Western social norms, having a particularly strong ability to reason and to rise above the influence of emotions is a distinguishing trait of not only whiteness, but also masculinity, and the higher classes. Where feminine people are stereotypically seen in Western societies as emotional and whimsical, masculine people are typically viewed as more level-headed and analytical. Where indigenous communities are supposedly superstitious and primitive, modern societies are supposedly driven by science and reason. Where community-based economies are purportedly based on love and friendship, capitalism is taken to be 'objective' and quantitative. These binary oppositions have little to do with reality, and their function is mainly to legitimise and maintain hierarchies between groups with different attributes or resources. Being children of modern societies, however, we have all been taught to internalise these ideas and act as though they were true.

Saio has been running workshops and training programmes aimed at challenging internalised oppressive behaviours for the past fifteen years. These usually take place in activist groups and communities, but also in universities, cooperatives and other workplaces. Participants, who are predominantly white and middle class, are supported in expanding their learning about their own complicity in social hierarchies, and ways to resist and counteract them.[3] The specific aims and contents of these sessions vary, but they typically combine learning about theoretical analyses of what hierarchy is and how it works with discussions of personal experiences, and physical and emotional work. The theoretical questions might include: what is white supremacy and how does it systemically disadvantage people of colour in different socioeconomic positions? What are some common defence mechanisms used by privileged groups when our privilege is challenged, and how can they be overcome? (See, for example, Oluo 2018; DiAngelo 2018.)

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[3] Saio's work in recent years has tended to focus on the complicity of oppressor-groups in oppression (i.e. working on white supremacy with white people, heteronormativity with cisgendered people, etc.) rather than on work with oppressed groups liberating themselves. This is simply because the complicity of oppressors, and the difficult work of unpacking it, is so often neglected in discussions of social transformation. Many other approaches are necessary however; nobody is claiming that, for example, running a workshop for white people on their complicity in white supremacy will single-handedly end racism.

Discussing theory on these questions, participants link it to personal experiences and examples from their own lives. This work is influenced by a somatic approach (see e.g. Firth 2016: 131–6), which among other things emphasises the interactions between our social relationships, our ideas, our emotions, and the physical functions of our bodies. Somatic theory is complex and difficult to summarise, but one of the main ideas is that these different aspects of our lives (i.e. the theoretical, the emotional, the bodily, and the interpersonal) are best understood as a whole, rather than as independent parts. To take a specific example, racist stereotypes and prejudices consist not only of a set of thoughts but also of a set of emotions, relationships to other people, and muscle tensions in our bodies (for example, we might feel tense or get a knot in our stomach when we encounter certain situations or ideas) that we often lack awareness of, or fail to understand the connection between. Challenging the ingrained racist stereotypes we carry with us, in other words, requires more than simply changing the thoughts that we think. It also requires processing our emotions (for example by acknowledging them to ourselves or communicating them to those who are close to us if they are willing to help); changing the physical processes in our bodies (for example through body scan meditations, role play, or dance); and changing our relationships with other people (for example by organising with others, helping others, and so on).

These workshops are often very challenging, not only because they require a lot of work from everyone involved, but also because they touch on sensitive issues. Recognising quite how deeply involved and complicit we are in oppressive social structures can be difficult. This learning is necessary, however, since our chances at overcoming oppression without it are slim. This work is therefore essential, but it needs to be done with care.

It is also important to acknowledge the emotional challenges of being a radical left organiser in a hierarchical and oppressive world. In a sense, prefigurative organising is by design a constant failure, always falling short of the desired future society towards which one is working (Dixon 2014: 83). Like all radicals, we are going against social norms, structures, and expectations on a daily basis, which can be challenging at the best of times. We are often kicking up a stink, saying no to what appear to be easy solutions, suggesting alternative ways of doing things. We do this in a world where most people are not interested in what we are doing, are not aware of their own political power, or do not have the ability to join in. Many of us feel exhausted and overwhelmed at times by taking on the task of working for a better world, and simultaneously feel troubled that everyone is not able to join in that struggle right now and that maybe we are inadvertently alienating them. We even become our own enemies in certain situations, criticising each other for not being 'radical enough' or for being unable to participate in more activism (Bergman and Montgomery 2017).

At the same time, prefigurative politics can be enormously emotionally rewarding. Taking power into our own hands rather than appealing to authorities to change things on our behalf can be empowering, and brings us closer to the world we want to live in. Whether uplifting or challenging, emotions are a part of everything that humans do, so we cannot act as though they are optional or can be left aside.

(d) Intersectionality

Capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, to name the most prevalent ones, have often been understood as separate logics of power that exist independently of each other. Many commentators and activists have therefore focused their analyses on one and not the others. Some strands of Marxism (but far from all) have even argued that white supremacy and patriarchy are not oppressive structures in their own right, but are merely superstructures of capitalism, that is, outcomes of the economic workings of capitalist exploitation.

Since the late 1970s, however, different feminist authors have explored the mutuality and inseparability of patriarchy and other forms of oppression (see e.g. Combahee River Collective 1977; Lutz et al. 2011: 1–2). In 1989, the critical legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the concept of intersectionality, which has now become by far the most common word for this kind of idea.

Intersectionality is the idea that social structures do not exist in isolation from each other, but are interlinked. For example, patriarchy is not experienced in the same way by, say, Gwyneth Paltrow as it is experienced by an indigenous Mayan woman with cerebral palsy living on a farm in rural Mexico. There are indeed some commonalities, the most important ones being that gendered divisions of labour, violence, and norms make them both worse off and less secure than most men would be in their respective positions. The specific difficulties they face, however, are quite different in practice, being co-determined by the other aspects of their lives: their class, racialisation, etc. In addition to this, context matters: Gwyneth Paltrow will not experience patriarchy in the same way at, say, a dinner in an exclusive restaurant as on the terraces of a local stadium watching a football match. What this means is that, while it's possible to discern what is patriarchal about patriarchy, racist about racism, and so on in abstract terms, when we apply these ideas to practical examples, we need to see how different social structures and contexts interact to create particular outcomes.

This section argues that the personal-is-political argument leads us to an intersectional analysis of social problems and their prefigurative solutions. It clarifies what an intersectional analysis is, since so many have misunderstood the concept. For example, we have witnessed many comrades describing people who experience multiple forms of oppression (e.g. queer disabled people of colour) as 'intersectional', while refraining from using that word when referring to people who only experience fewer forms of oppression (e.g. white heterosexual working-class men). This is not an accurate or helpful use of the term. Similarly, there is a widespread misconception in parts of the left that an intersectional analysis detracts from the importance of class. That idea is equally inaccurate. By looking at a particular example of a social movement campaign, we show how intersectionality concerns people from all walks of life, how it adds usefully to our analysis of oppression, and what kind of implications this has for prefigurative activists.

As we have already argued, the personal being political means that it is impossible for any individual person to create a perfectly 'objective' and unbiased analysis of the world or programme for making it better. Throughout the history of the left, many theorists and political leaders have claimed to have discovered the single correct understanding of social problems and their solutions, and have devised revolutionary roadmaps for everybody else to follow. What the personal-is-political argument shows, however, is that rather than unveiling truths free from bias, they have often merely assumed that their own situation, experiences, perspectives, and bi-

ases are an accurate representation of everyone else's. The interests of marginalised groups have thus often been neglected in these analyses.

The concept of intersectionality arose out of a concern with such a neglect within feminism itself (see e.g. Combahee River Collective 1977; Spivak 1988; Harris 2001; Hill Collins 1990). From the 1970s onwards, criticisms from feminists of colour gained increasing influence in broader feminist debate, arguing that the concept of woman, i.e. the subject-position typically posed as the agent and the beneficiary of feminism, had been understood in much too simple terms. Too many Western feminists have spoken about women as a fairly homogeneous group with fairly uniform needs. Intersectional feminists have argued that this assumption is a consequence of certain kinds of women having a disproportionate influence on Western feminist theory and campaigning: those who are white, European, non-disabled, heterosexual, cisgendered, etc. The particular expressions of patriarchy experienced by women of colour, disabled women, women in the global South, trans- and gender nonconforming women, poor or economically precarious women, and so on – which all are varied and ever-changing – have often been marginalised or left out of these feminist analyses. Once we start including people of different attributes and backgrounds, it becomes a lot more complicated to make not just broad, but supposedly universal statements about what the agents and beneficiaries of feminism want and need. The same, of course, is true of the agents of antiracism, disability activism, socialism, and so on.

Importantly, this is not to say that it is impossible to discern social hierarchies such as patriarchy or white supremacy when we analyse the complexities of the world. Nor does it mean that domination, oppression, and exploitation are merely subjective experiences. On the contrary, the patterns are quite striking. For example, women as a group do significantly more unpaid housework than men in the same social strata (Ferrant et al./OECD 2014). LGBT+ people experience verbal and physical abuse in public in a way that straight and cisgendered people do not (OHCHR 2017). People of colour are more likely to be incarcerated than white people (Chicurel-Bayard 2014; Ramesh 2010). These are clear and distinguishable forms of oppression, domination, and exploitation, and they are far from merely subjective or imagined. The way these oppressions express themselves are, however, complex and context-dependent.

Because different social structures are always intertwined, there is no such thing as taking action *only* with respect to capitalism, or patriarchy, and so on, in isolation from other social structures. All political campaigns, individuals, organisations, and projects are in fact already practising a politics on class *and* race *and* gender, and so on – whether they recognise it or not. Since it is so difficult to speak about these concepts in the abstract, we will here look at an example of one specific social movement campaign to see how it's placed within an intersection of different oppressions. The example is the US-based women's campaign Lean In, founded by the COO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg. We will use this example to show how intersectionality plays out in practice.

Lean In started in 2010 when Sandberg gave a TED talk, which later led to a book and eventually a lobbying campaign that highlighted the dearth of women leaders within business and politics. Lean In argues that so few women are reaching leadership positions because most women do not know how to be assertive and do not believe in themselves. To rectify this, women must 'lean in': assert themselves and take opportunities. The Lean In Foundation holds discussion groups for women across the US, conducts surveys on women in leadership, and runs media campaigns with celebrity endorsements. One promotional video features a montage of successful celebrities speaking into the camera, including Beyoncé, Condoleezza Rice and Jane Lynch, delivering in-

spirational messages to viewers: 'Let's encourage girls to lead, to be strong and be ambitious'; 'you can change the world' (Lean In/Ban Bossy 2014).

While the problems highlighted by Lean In are very real, they are not quite as universal, or as universally significant, as the campaign makes out. Rather, the problems they discuss predominantly affect a very specific and restricted demographic: wealthy, elite, white, and non-disabled women. Whereas Lean In presents itself as a campaign about gender, it is in fact also about class, race and disability, among other things. The class of the campaign is bourgeois, the racial bias is white, and the interests of disabled people are almost completely excluded. Of course, Lean In does not explicitly present itself as an elite, white, ableist women's campaign, but these biases and perspectives are nevertheless there. They are not made explicit, and it's likely that Sandberg and co. are not even aware of them. Indeed, the very fact that we're usually unaware of our biases is something that makes them so powerful.

The Lean In campaign is bourgeois and elite in the sense that the broader social inequalities that working-class women face are given no space. The campaign focuses on smashing the glass ceiling in business and politics, but there are many issues that are far more urgent for working-class women. Some obvious examples are capitalist exploitation, a lack of access to good health care and education, and corporate shirking of responsibilities to care for the environment and pay taxes. To most working-class women, whether the shareholder who creams off the profit that they have created through their labour is a man or a woman makes little difference to their economic situation or any other meaningful aspect of their lives. The campaign, furthermore, caters predominantly to white people – despite the fact that Beyoncé and Condoleezza Rice feature in a campaign video and despite there being several pictures of women of colour on the Lean In website. The presence of some token faces does not make an antiracist campaign. The campaign does not mention any of the issues that particularly affect women of colour: police violence, mass incarceration, and racist stereotypes, to mention but a few (hooks 2013). Lean In also fails to mention the inherent whiteness of the leadership positions into which it aims to get women. Elite women of colour are usually able to succeed within business and politics only to the extent that they are able to 'act white': speak like white people, dress like white people, make decisions that don't challenge white supremacy, etc. (see for example Shante 2018).

Lean In, furthermore, is ableist due to its silence on disability. It takes the position of non-disabled women by arguing that a lack of assertiveness is what is keeping them from empowerment. To disabled women, whose bodies might not move in ways that society expects them to, or whose minds may not work in the neurotypical way, building self-belief is not what is going to end the inequalities they face. Silence on an issue such as disability does not mean taking no position on it when the status quo is favouring certain groups in our society over others. Standing by, being silent, and assuming the neutrality of the group that is currently in power, does not amount to non-partisanship – it amounts to partisanship with the powerful.

The example of Lean In illustrates what kinds of concerns we have to grapple with if we're to prefigure free, equal, and democratic social relations. It requires reflection on whose concerns and interests are centred in our political analysis and practices. Any organiser focusing exclusively on overthrowing capitalism, or on preventing disastrous climate change, or on any other type of single issue, should reflect on what assumptions they are making about who the beneficiaries and agents of their campaign are, and whether certain social groups' interests are ignored as a result. Similarly, silence on a particular form of oppression, such as racism or disability, does not amount to neutrality but to a de facto siding with predominant hierarchies in society. While no

organisation or movement can take an explicit stance on every political issue on the entire globe, we do need to consider the ways in which our activism may be contributing to certain groups' continued marginalisation.

Many socialist organisations wrongly assume that the working class is a homogeneous group whose members experience exploitation and oppression in the same way, and therefore view calls for increased attention to intersectionality with suspicion. It is often argued that foregrounding questions of race, gender, disability, and so on, and paying attention to the ways in which they intersect with class, weakens socialist movements and organisations. For example, many argue that insisting on addressing sexism within a radical union will be divisive and will result in a diversion from its primary aim of organising class struggle against capitalism.

An assumption that often underlies this scepticism towards intersectionality is the idea that patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, and so on, will simply disappear after the revolution, because those forms of oppression are superstructures of capitalism rather than structures of oppression in their own right. Since they will fade away once the capitalism that sustains and requires them is replaced, this view has it, it's both unnecessary and counter-productive to try to address them. As this chapter has shown, however, this argument cannot be sustained once we acknowledge that the personal is political. The idea that capitalism comes first, or is somehow more fundamental than all other forms of oppression and exploitation, is a white, male, and able-bodied idea. It wrongly takes the perspective of more privileged groups within the working class and assumes that their particular interests speak for everybody.

There are many successful intersectional movements both in history and today. For example, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most important syndicalist union in the United States, the IWW, took care to organise women workers and workers of colour at a time when they were largely excluded from most major unions. They did so highly effectively, and some of these members (such as Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman) went on to become some of their most influential writers, speakers, and organisers. Looking at a more recent example, the 2018 Teachers' Strike in the United States in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona won major salary raises and improved working conditions using an intersectional approach. It stands as one of the most successful strike waves in recent US history. This movement, which is still active today, is intersectional in the sense that it has foregrounded the influence of race and gender – not just class – in explaining the worsened working conditions of teachers. The strike won, in part, because of its success in reaching out to, and forging alliances with, local communities, part of which involved acknowledging and taking steps to address forms of race and class inequality. It is therefore by no means obvious that intersectional politics weakens important social struggles. Rather, there is good reason to think it can strengthen them.

This chapter has looked at the personal-is-political argument and its implications for prefigurative politics. We have argued that it makes a commitment to a prefigurative politics aiming at a truly free, equal, and democratic society potentially more wide-ranging than one might at first imagine. Prefigurativists following this perspective should, firstly, pay attention to the informal hierarchies and inequalities that play out in their lives, including their political practices. Secondly, they should acknowledge and take into account the role of emotions and personal experiences in their thinking, strategising, and organising. And finally, they should understand the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and what implications this has for their political practice.

The next chapter is the first of two that address some common misconceptions and dilemmas of prefigurative politics. Chapter 6 looks at the question of whether prefigurative organisations could or should seek to seize control of the existing state. Many critics have argued that prefigurative politics is ultimately toothless because it doesn't attack the state directly. As we'll see, many prefigurativists have responded to this by rejecting the idea that seizing state power can lead to a desirable social transformation at all. Rather than empowering the revolution, seizing the state is likely to corrupt the movement, as countless examples from history show. What's more, prefigurative organisations are able to defend themselves against even the most violent attacks from the existing state without contradicting or compromising their commitment to prefigurativism, despite many critics' claims to the contrary. Other prefigurativists, meanwhile, have taken an entirely different approach and have sought to seize state power, but in a prefigurative way, which has had mixed success so far.

6. Prefigurative Politics and the State

In 1917, the Russian Revolution shook the world. For the first time in modern history, arguments about how a socialist revolution should be carried out were put to the test, and for the following century it was *the* revolution that all others were compared to.

The twentieth century was dominated by three models of socialist transition, all based on taking existing state power: through winning elections (Sweden); coups (Russia); and military conquest (Cuba and China). However, with many of these countries now being straightforward capitalist societies and others following suit, it's clear that they did not, in the end, replace capitalism. Nor did they provide the kind of free, equal, and democratic socialist society they were aiming for. Many anarchists and Marxists alike argue that this is unsurprising. Neglecting prefiguration and focusing only on seizing and retaining the existing state is bound to fail to construct such a society because it substitutes top-down minority rule for the revolutionary self-activity of the working classes. Perhaps the twenty-first century will be different.

In this chapter, we explore the question of whether seizing existing state power is useful for socialists aiming for a free, equal, and democratic society through the lens of prefigurative politics. We first examine four traditional anarchist arguments against taking over the existing state as part of a transition to socialism.[1] On this view, taking state power (a) is neither sufficient nor necessary for socialist transition; (b) changes the interests, drives, and consciousness of those who seize it causing them to counteract popular emancipation; (c) neglects building the institutions needed for transition to a free, equal, and democratic society; and (d) the nationalisation programmes it employs will pave the way to dictatorship. As we will see, these are all based on anarchists' commitment to prefigurative politics.

We should note that many strands of Marxism – such as council communism and autonomism – agree with anarchists on the undesirability of taking existing state power. These Marxist arguments against state-led revolution are more often aired in academic debates than anarchist arguments are. Anarchist views, on the other hand, are more influential in popular movements. As such, we have chosen to focus on the anarchist arguments in this chapter. Any thinking about the state and socialist transition should take these arguments seriously. They offer an explanation for why no successful capture of existing state power by a socialist party has introduced anything like the free, equal, and democratic socialism that it aimed for.

Debates about taking state power were simpler when most social democrats and Leninists unambiguously rejected prefigurative politics in preference for the existing state, which they would reconfigure and use to construct socialism. Today, however, different thinkers and movements are trying to synthesise the two – which Boggs actually recommended back in 1977. The last two sections of this chapter discuss two of these – (e) 21$^{\text{st}}$ Century Socialism and (f) Democratic Confederalism – along with some prefigurative concerns that have been raised about them.

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[1] This relies heavily on the PhD research of Zoe Addis. We are greatly indebted to Zoe here and throughout the book.

Before we proceed, a few confusions in relation to seizing state power need to be cleared up, because debates about prefigurative politics and the state – especially between anarchists and state-centred strands of Marxism – are often hampered by terminological differences and resulting misunderstandings. Anarchists define the state as, among other things, 'necessarily hierarchical, authoritarian' (Kropotkin 2018: 226–7), while Marxists often define it in more functional terms – whatever fulfils a certain set of functions counts as a state, whether hierarchical or not. This difference is important when Bakunin and Marx describe the Paris Commune virtually identically, but Bakunin talks about it as stateless and Marx as the kind of workers' state needed to transition to socialism.[2] Definitions aside, there's an important debate about whether people aiming for a free, equal, and democratic socialist society should participate in the kind of states we have today. For added clarity, we will use the term 'existing state' to refer to this.

Terms like 'politics' and 'party' offer similar complications. Critics of taking existing state power are often accused of being apolitical or anti-political, and sometimes adopt these labels themselves. The truth of such claims depends on the definition of 'politics', and it's often unclear what that is. Some use the term to refer to roughly what (hierarchical) states do, which would make anarchists 'anti-political' because they reject participating therein. The same would follow for any social movement, like Occupy, which doesn't primarily define itself by reference to the state (Brissette 2016). Others distinguish 'bourgeois state' politics from 'proletarian' politics (as did, e.g., Bakunin and Kropotkin), rejecting only the former. Finally, the term 'party', in Marx and Bakunin's day, referred simply to any kind of political grouping or tendency – not even necessarily one with a formal organisation. Marx made this clear in an 1860 letter to the poet and activist Ferdinand Freiligrath, apropos mentions of the 'party' in the *Communist Manifesto*: 'I have tried to dispel the misunderstanding arising out of the impression that by "party" I meant a "League" that expired eight years ago, or an editorial board that was disbanded twelve years ago. By party, I meant the party in the broad historical sense' (Marx and Engels 2010: 87). It's in this sense that Bakunin, despite vehemently opposing state participation, called those who agreed with them a 'party'. Today, however, the word often refers specifically to an organisation aiming to take state power. Although we'll mostly avoid using these terms, it's important to know that they are used in these different ways by different people at different times, and that there's no single sense that they all agree upon and employ.

The roots of socialist concerns about taking existing state power are often thought to lie in the conflict that unfolded between the federalist sections of the First International on the one hand and Marx and Engels on the other. We, however, think that their early roots actually lie in the federalists' experiences with republican and earlier socialist strategies and their perceived failures. The Jura federation (who wrote the Sonvillier Circular discussed in Chapters 2 and 4) drew their initial conclusions from their experiences with the Swiss cantonal elections of 1868 (Eckhardt 2016: 14–16, 106–7). Anarchists such as Bakunin developed their views on the folly of seizing state power based on an analysis of famous republicans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like the Jacobins of the French Revolution, the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini, and the openly authoritarian socialist tendency the Blanquists, who held that any socialist revolution must be highly hierarchical and elite-led (Bakunin 1973: 91, 169). The Blanquists advocated

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[2] This is in contrast to the earlier views that Marx sets out in the Communist Manifesto, which argued that universal suffrage would enable the proletariat to seize the existing state and use it to transition to socialism. Marx points this contrast out, e.g. in the 1872 preface to the Communist Manifesto.

a revolution via coup carried out by a small and secretive group. These critiques were then later applied to other socialist groups, such as the Lassalleans, Marx, and German social democrats, whom Bakunin argued all held that any socialist revolution must start with seizing control of the state (Eckhardt 2016: 67–71). As time went on, they were extended to the various other state-centred strands of Marxism, like Leninism, Stalinism, Trotskyism, Maoism, etc. We would argue that early anarchist critiques of Marx and Engels are best understood if they are read primarily as critiques of the strategy developed by early Marxist parties, rather than of Marx and Engels themselves – in part because much of what they write about Marx is erroneous.

(a) State Power Neither Sufficient Nor Necessary

The first argument is that taking state power is neither sufficient nor necessary for winning major reforms or reaching a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. This is shown by any cursory look at history. *Merely* taking existing state power in the name of socialism has been shown time and again not to be enough. For example, most of today's social democratic parties proclaimed socialism when they first came to power; none of them achieved it. Whatever the status of this argument may once have been, the evidence of the past century is overwhelming and definitive.[3]

Taking over the existing state may be insufficient, but is it necessary? Advocates of taking state power – from orthodox Second International (social democratic) and Third International (Stalinist) Marxists to advocates of 21st Century Socialism – argue that seizing the existing state is necessary for a number of reasons. If socialists don't take this state away from capitalist control, those who control it will ensure that 'every real threat to capital will be destroyed' (Lebowitz 2006: 68). Once in the hands of socialists, it can act as 'the midwife of a new society' (68), either (as in more state-centred versions) by nationalising the economy and leading the way to socialism or by helping elements of the future socialist society develop and grow within the shell of the old (see the 21st Century Socialism discussed below).

The Chilean thinker and activist Marta Harnecker argues that, unlike the transition from feudalism to capitalism, socialist relations of production are not planted and don't begin to grow within capitalism without state action. Only after taking over the existing state can socialists 'begin to create the conditions that allow them to move gradually toward establishing socialist relations of production in the various economic spheres of the society'. This is necessary if socialists are to transform the 'individualist, consumerist, paternalistic culture' of capitalism (Harnecker 2015: 174), overcome the social fragmentation of contemporary capitalism, and use the state's top-down power to help guide and teach people how to govern and exercise power from the bottom up.

Anarchists, by contrast, argue that the transition from capitalism to socialism, just like the transition from feudalism to capitalism, must begin from the seeds of the new society planted and grown within the old – and this in turn requires prefigurative politics. We've seen why they think this: because such prefigurative institutions are needed to develop revolutionary agents with the right powers, drives, and consciousness to spread such social relations throughout society. Here too, history offers valuable lessons. Instances like the Paris Commune of 1871, the Ukrainian

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[3] Taking existing state power is also insufficient because, as we saw in Chapter 5, oppressive structures go beyond, and beyond the simple control of, the state.

'Free Territories' during the Russian Revolution, the Spanish revolution of 1936, and the Shinmin anarchist commune in 1930s Manchuria, show that it is certainly possible to begin a transition to socialism without seizing existing state power. So does the persistence of autonomous regions today, like Chiapas and Rojava.

One might object that, even if taking over the state is neither necessary nor sufficient for reaching a free, equal, and democratic socialism, it's still useful. Prefiguring better future institutions may be necessary, but perhaps taking over the state can help. Against this, anarchists argue that taking existing state power will be counter-productive for at least three related reasons.

(b) The Praxis of the State

One reason why anarchists argue that seizing state power is counter-productive is that the practice of domination corrupts those who do it. They argue that, no matter how radical a politician may be, once they are 'transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into a political atmosphere of wholly bourgeois political ideas', they 'will cease to be actual workers and will became statesmen, they will become bourgeois' (Bakunin 1973: 54). The nineteenth-century anarchist and geographer Elisée Reclus argued that the 'habit of commanding' and the 'exercise of power' generate in those who seize state power a 'contempt for the masses' and an 'exaggerated sense' of their 'own worth' (2013: 145). As a result, 'socialist leaders …, finding themselves caught up in the electoral machine, end up being gradually transformed into nothing more than bourgeois with liberal ideas. They have placed themselves in determinate conditions that in turn determine them' (2013: 147).

This is for two reasons, both of which build on anarchists' views on how human beings' power, drives, and consciousness are shaped by the social relations and processes they are part of. Firstly, 'the iron logic of their position, the force of circumstances inherent in certain hierarchical and profitable political relationships' (Bakunin 1990: 52), changes those who hold them in ways preventing them from introducing a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. This is because 'people do not make circumstances; no, on the contrary circumstances make people' (Bakunin 1990: 52). Placing representatives at the top of hierarchical state structures alters their drives (e.g. their wants, values, and goals) and broader consciousness. They will come to want to keep the positions of greater relative power, wealth, and privilege that they attain. They will tend to justify them to themselves, see their role as indispensable and even desirable, and slowly become, and feel themselves to be part of, the ruling classes. Because of this, and because introducing a genuinely free, equal, and socialist society threatens their new positions, they will come to work against the movement fighting for it. Anarchists use this to explain why, whenever socialist politicians come to power after years of parliamentary work, they at best act only to manage capitalism and never take us to socialism.

A second reason why the practice of existing state politics corrupts is that the continuous compromises that capitalist politics imposes on its participants force them, over time, to give up on their commitments. To maximise their votes, politicians are forced to compromise on their principles and oppose working-class action that otherwise might cost them votes. In order to achieve anything in parliament, they must form alliances with bourgeois parties, which over time results in diluting their socialism until they become socialist in name only. Thus, Bakunin writes that 'whenever workers' associations ally themselves with the politics of the bourgeoisie, they

can only become, willingly or unwillingly, their instruments' (2016: 181). Both of these factors are further exacerbated by the fact that any socialist party which begins to be successful will attract 'bourgeois minds and career-hungry politicians' who will help to more rapidly transform any would-be socialist party into nothing more than 'an ordinary reform movement' (Rocker 2004: 55). The powers attained by these leaders and parties will further enable them to prevent and combat social change effectively – especially if they also strengthen state power through increased centralisation and economic nationalisation.

If a political party and/or its leadership also controls other organisations or movements – such as unions or community organisations – they will not only betray the revolution in parliament, but further disarm and disempower movements outside the state. Seizing existing state power is therefore not only ineffective, counter-productive, and a diversion of resources away from more useful forms of struggle; it actively harms the prospects for positive social change long-term.

Today, anarchists also point to the perceived failure of every single statist attempt at building socialism, whether through elections, coups, or military conquest. More recent examples arguably also support these conclusions. It took the incumbent Greek governmental party Syriza, long a committed socialist party by all accounts, less than a single administration to betray all their major commitments, from standing up to foreign credit lenders to saving public services to empowering social movements (Guerrero-López and Weaver 2015; Kouvelakis 2016; Jay 2018). By contrast, non-statist revolutions such as the Zapatistas' uprising and the Kurdish revolution in Rojava have succeeded in bringing about lasting societies and institutions that we can call socialist. These are far from utopias, but they are strikingly more free, equal, and democratic than either liberal democracies or authoritarian state socialist societies.

It might be argued that the existing, hierarchical state, if and when it has been seized by a 'true' socialist party and has successfully transitioned from capitalism to an early stage of socialism, will lose its capitalist character. Even if such a state retains some hierarchical 'capitalist characteristics', it will now be a properly democratic workers' state, which can be relied upon to carry out universal emancipation. This argument is a bit like saying that boiling water, once moved from a pot to a glass, is now really cold water with some 'hot water characteristics'. It's terminological trickery: the internal structure of the thing remains the same, and insisting that it be called something else because it's in contact with something else (without changing its internal structure) does nothing to change either the fact of its internal structure or what we can expect to result from it. The results of spilling 100-degree Celsius water on yourself will be the same whether you say it's 'hot water' or 'cold water with hot water characteristics'. So too, anarchists argue, will retaining a hierarchical state, regardless of how you label it.[4]

The anarchist argument we've examined here is essentially a claim about how certain social contexts change those who are part of them. Just as free, equal, and democratic social relations shape those who are part of them, so too do hierarchical and authoritarian social relations shape those who are part of them. Anarchists argue that when socialist politicians take existing state power, they enter into a social situation that's new to them, where, among other things, they gain a great deal of wealth, power, and privilege. Once in this new situation, these representatives' drives and consciousness will gradually change, over time causing them to resist transition to a more free, equal, and democratic society, which would threaten their new position. Furthermore,

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[4] We'd like to thank our friend, Eivind Dahl, for suggesting this analogy.

the powers they attain by taking state power and/or having control over social movements will enable them to do so effectively.

This argument does not insist that seizing state power is impractical for *all* kinds of social change. Anarchists know well that social democrats, Stalinists, and other statists have succeeded in taking over societies and changing them in sometimes major ways. Rather, the argument is that taking over the existing state is less useful for achieving reforms than organising bottom-up social movements and direct action outside of state and political party control, and that it will forestall transition to the kind of free, equal, and democratic socialist society that they aim for. If the cost of taking power is becoming and doing everything that you opposed to begin with, what have you achieved but a change in personnel?

(c) State Power and Building a New Society

A second reason why anarchists argue that seizing state power is counter-productive is that it neglects building the new institutions needed for a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. As we saw in the previous chapter, anarchists argue that reaching such a society requires developing prefigurative institutions of struggle and transition in order to develop the power, drives, and consciousness necessary for reaching it.

For anarchists, reaching this society requires new economic institutions and new political institutions to go along with them – just like the transition to capitalist economic institutions required new political institutions to go along with it. New functions – being free and equal – require new institutions with different social structures to fulfil them. However, because the existing state is, by virtue of its structure and historical design, a hierarchical institution, it is inherently unfree and unequal and so cannot fulfil these new functions. Fulfilling them requires developing new social structures (Kropotkin 2018). These, anarchists argue, cannot be created by the state, but must be 'created by the workers themselves, in their unions, their federations, completely outside the [existing] State' (Kropotkin 2018: 164). The argument here is that the existing state is structured such that it cannot be genuinely free, equal, and democratic and therefore therefore cannot work to prefigure future institutions that are.

As we saw above, more state-friendly socialists like Marta Harnecker counter that using existing state power can create the conditions for a free and equal socialist society by e.g. introducing large-scale programmes to teach the masses how to govern themselves. In response, anarchists argue that involvement in state politics is more likely to be a diversion from developing the powers needed to change society and that as long as most people aren't directly involved in their actual self-governance, they aren't really practising or training for self-governance at all. As Baginsky puts it, state control 'degrades the proletariat, relegates it to the role of the patiently and passively waiting client who becomes a plaything, a guinea pig in the hands of the lawyers' (2015: 14). Instead of developing the powers of self-management needed for a free, equal, and democratic socialist society, state politics teaches the general public to depend on others to give things to us and do things for us. We learn to accede to being ruled by others, not how to rule ourselves, much less how to do so in new ways. This means that the general population won't develop the kinds of institutions or the powers and consciousness needed to transition to a free, equal, and democratic socialism.

Let us return to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which founded the USSR. It's usually understood as a state-led revolution, which it is indeed a prime example of. But it also contained many prefigurative elements. In different ways, prefiguration is key to understanding both its success and failure. One of the things that enabled the revolution's initial success was (as Bakunin and Marx predicted) the peasant commune. It formed the nucleus for a new society and ensured that the revolution initiated by the urban Petrograd Soviet (that is, the council of St Petersburg – 'soviet' literally translates as 'council') and the relatively small Bolshevik Party exploded into a new society all across the Russian Empire. (The Bolshevik Party was not well known or very popular among Russian peasants, who made up the vast majority of the population.) This process was also aided, of course, by the multiple self-organised institutions – like the urban soviets and workers' councils – that had been birthed before the 1917 seizure of state power took place. Emma Goldman argued that:

> The medium for … effective guidance was on hand: the labour organizations and the cooperatives with which Russia was covered as with a network of bridges combining the city with the country; the Soviets which sprang into being responsive to the needs of the Russian people; and, finally, the intelligentsia whose traditions for a century expressed heroic devotion to the cause of Russia's emancipation. (1998: 386)

While the aim of the revolution was 'the negation of authority and centralization', that of the Bolshevik Party, which was 'organized and centralized in the State', was to 'force the activities of the people into forms corresponding with the purposes of the Party' by strengthening the state and monopolising 'all economical, political, and social activities' (Goldman 1998: 391).[5] The Bolsheviks, under Lenin's leadership, destroyed the factory councils that governed workplaces through localised participatory democracy; suppressed any autonomy of the soviets; and excluded, imprisoned, or murdered dissenters. Goldman argues that in so doing the Bolsheviks destroyed the bottom-up libertarian forces of the revolution and made it impossible ever to reach a free, equal, and democratic socialism. In fact, there's a good case to be made that the centralised and authoritarian structure of the Bolsheviks' own party is what caused them to construct the Soviet Union along similar lines – reflecting the structure of the only non-capitalist and non-feudal social structure they had any real experience with (Lebowitz 2012).

It is often argued that these actions were forced upon the Bolshevik leadership by the necessity of defending the revolution against the coordinated assault of the Tsarist, US, British, and other forces. This is sometimes supported by Lenin's partial support for workers' participation in 1917, before and at the beginning of the revolution, as a tool specifically to combat capitalist power (Lenin's precise motivations are somewhat unclear). There are three problems with this response. Firstly, there are examples from Russia during the same era of revolutionary organisations who did keep their participatory democratic and bottom-up decision-making processes, such as the anarchist Makhnovites who liberated the Ukraine, and successfully defended themselves from bourgeois counter-revolutions – before being betrayed by the Bolsheviks.

Secondly, this response is actually not relevant to the argument, since it does nothing to show that the Bolsheviks doing these things made reaching a free, equal, and democratic socialist

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[5] For a collection of critiques of Leninist revolutions, focusing on the Russian Revolution, see The Friends of Aron Baron 2017. For a recent anarchist collection of writings discussing the value of taking state power today, see Black Rose Anarchist Federation/Federación Anarquista Rosa Negra 2018.

society more possible. The anarchist argument, after all, is that the Bolsheviks' strategy made it impossible for them to reach such a socialist society. Even if that strategy was necessary to defend against external threats, it doesn't follow that it didn't also make reaching such a socialist society impossible.

Thirdly, the idea that the Bolsheviks were protecting the revolution from counter-attacks is contradicted by Bolshevik leaders like Lenin and Trotsky. In the 'Speech Delivered at the Third All-Russia Trade Union Congress' in 1920, Lenin argued explicitly that '[d]ictatorial powers and one-man management are not contradictory to socialist democracy' (1974b: 503). Even much earlier, in 1918 – about which Lenin (in 1920) wrote that it 'seemed as if we could proceed to the work of peaceful construction' and the '[c]ivil war had not yet begun' (1974b: 503) – Lenin argued that there was 'absolutely *no* contradiction in principle between Soviet (*that is*, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals' and that the 'revolution demands … that the people *unquestioningly obey the single will* of the leaders' (1974a: 268–9). From the early days of the revolution, Lenin rejected any idea of workers' self-management, insisting on '*iron* discipline while at work, with *unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader, while at work' (1974a: 271). Trotsky wrote that 'if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs … we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner, much less painfully' (2007: 152).[6] According to Lenin and Trotsky, single-person dictatorship in the realm of production was not forced upon them by the necessity of armed conflict. It was a key component of their transitional strategy.

(d) Nationalisation and Dictatorship

A third argument for why seizing state power is counter-productive is that using the state to introduce socialism via nationalising the economy will pave the way to dictatorship. This argument is related to the argument that the practice of domination corrupts, but is distinct from it. It holds that nationalising the economy massively concentrates power in the hands of the central state, and that this makes it more likely for that state to become a dictatorship. Kropotkin writes that:

> We affirm that as long as the statist socialists do not abandon their dream of socialising the instruments of labour in the hands of a centralised State, the inevitable result of their attempts at State Capitalism and the Socialist state will be the failure of their dreams and military dictatorship. (Kropotkin 2018: 191)

> [I]f an insurrection succeeded in giving France, or England, or Germany a provisional socialist government, it … would be the stepping-stone for a dictator … (Kropotkin 2018: 193)

Long before the Soviet Union decided to nationalise the economy rather than leave it in the hands of self-organised workers' and peasants' councils, Kropotkin argued that this would lead to dictatorship.

These arguments prove the complete falsity of claims that anarchists ignore the question of state power (Dean 2016), or that they refuse state power for merely 'ideological reasons' (Harvey

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[6] For more on the Bolsheviks' views on workers' control of production, see Brinton 2004.

2017: 242). They reject seizing the existing state not simply because they hate it or aspire to some ideal of purity, but for thought-out strategic reasons in large part built on their commitment to prefigurative politics. They argue that seizing state power cannot and will never take us to a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. The history of the past century does much to support that conclusion.

This poses a powerful question to the new wave of contemporary populist socialism associated with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Bernie Sanders, and Jeremy Corbyn. As socialists, they don't simply want the welfare state capitalism of yesteryear. Rather, they want a more comprehensively free, equal, and democratic socialist society. This too was the goal of most of the parties that are now called social democratic, most of whom were part of the Marxist Second International – a successor to the First International, consisting of socialist political parties that arose in the late 1880s. It might be argued that some of Corbyn's ideas go beyond social democracy – such as funding independent cooperatives or gradually transferring ownership of large companies to workers. This is not entirely correct, because funding cooperatives was a commitment of old social democrats, while the ideas about ownership transfer (through the so-called Löntagarfonder) were developed by Swedish social democracy as part of the so-called Rehn-Meidner model. These were, in the end, not extensively implemented; it remains to be seen whether Corbyn will do so. The social democratic parties of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all failed to achieve their goals through taking over the state; they have gone on to abandon their commitment to any fundamentally different society and in many cases have become prominent supporters of neoliberalism. Furthermore, post-war social democratic parties were also built on, and buttressed by, powerful social movements. Indeed, it's been argued that these movements were key to their ability to push through reforms. Given that today these parties lack substantial ties to powerful social movements outside the party and proposals that go beyond traditional social democracy, it's crucial to ask the question: what reason is there to think that they will do any better?

There's an important retort to this that's worth considering. As we mentioned above, Marta Harnecker and others argue that developing more free, equal, and democratic socialist relations requires taking state power. Here's the argument: if prefigurative organisations become large enough to begin to challenge the state and/or capitalism, but the ruling classes retain control of the state, then the latter will use the state to destroy these organisations. As such, taking existing state power is necessary to make large-scale prefiguration and transition to any kind of socialist society possible.

There are two ways of responding to this argument. The first is to argue, as many anarchists and left Marxists do, that this claim is false. Many prefigurative organisations have, as we saw in the previous chapter, managed to survive and grow to become powerful while challenging capitalism and the state. They have often done so in the face of severe and persistent state repression, not by ignoring the state, but by defending themselves against it and seeking to abolish it during transition. For instance, the Spanish CNT was able to resist and defend itself in the face of very severe state repression, but made the fatal mistake of leaving the army and their militias in the hands of the state and joining the state themselves. This enabled the Communist Party to betray them, securing the victory of Franco's fascist forces. Anarchists also argue that one of the main reasons for the decline of anarchist and syndicalist movements during the first half of the twentieth century was not merely state repression, but the increasing dominance of Stalinism as a result of people looking to the putative successes of the Russian Revolution.

Another way of responding to this argument is to propose a way of combining taking existing state power with some form of prefigurative politics. In fact, this is just what one of Boggs' 1977 articles ended by recommending. This view can be understood as an attempt to escape the bind you're in if you accept that taking existing state power inevitably corrupts you, yet if you don't take state power, it will be used to crush you. If both these claims are true, it would seem that transition to a free, equal, and democratic socialist society is impossible. For advocates of a mixed approach, this bind can be escaped by combining the taking of some existing state power with a comprehensive programme of prefigurative political change – which includes reshaping the existing state in fundamental ways.[7] In the final two sections of this chapter, we look at two recent proposals for how to do this: 21st Century Socialism and Democratic Confederalism.

(e) 21st Century Socialism

21st Century Socialism seeks to harness the existing state in conjunction with forms of prefiguration as part of socialist transition (Harnecker 2015; Mészáros 1995; Lebowitz 2010, 2014, 2015). It has been particularly influential on recent administrations in Venezuela (Ciccariello-Maher 2016; Wilpert 2006). An important part of it is based on Mészáros' insistence that 'the forms and instruments of the struggle had to match the essentially *positive* character of the [socialist] undertaking as a whole' (1995: 676). In other words, 21st Century Socialism has taken on board the prefigurative idea that revolutionary social change requires building the institutions that reflect those of the society they aim for in the future – yet it maintains that this can be done in conjunction with seizing control of the existing state.

21st Century Socialists envision the future in terms of what Lebowitz (drawing on Part III of Mézsáros' *Beyond Capital*) calls the 'Elementary Triangle of Socialism'. This triangle consists of social ownership of the means of production; production organised by workers; and production for the satisfaction of social needs. Social ownership of the means of production means that land, factories, machines, etc., are owned not by rich individuals, corporations, or states, but by society as a whole through workers' councils. Production organised by workers means that production is planned, organised, overseen, and carried out by workers themselves, rather than by bosses. And production for the satisfaction of social needs means that production is geared not towards maximising profits, but towards satisfying the real needs of people and communities, determined by themselves in councils where everyone has an equal say. These three sides to the triangle form an organic whole, such that each is important for supporting the others and none can be had in isolation. A transition to socialism must develop all three sides of the triangle as a whole if it is to succeed.

In more concrete terms, 21st Century Socialism stresses the importance of developing self-governing local councils and a social economy through which social needs can be developed and articulated and where production and reproduction can be carried out by workers themselves. This requires establishing a network of communal councils along with a non-capitalist social economy. These are simultaneously structures of struggle and transition. They are institutions within capitalism through which the struggle to transcend it takes place (though certainly not

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[7] We would like to note that we aren't certain which of these is more plausible. We both reject the traditional state-centred approaches of social democracy and Stalinism. However, we aren't certain whether we think a non-state or a mixed approach is the only or best approach to socialist transition.

the only ones), and they constitute the germ of the new society growing within the shell of the old.

21st Century Socialists also argue, however, that the existing state is a necessary part of this process. Both a participatory-democratic governance structure and economy must be supported by the state according to this view, but they are supposed to operate autonomously from it and be self-organised by their participants from the bottom up. The existing state is to be used to defend the revolution from internal and external threats and to help support and grow the development of prefigurative institutions through things like legal recognition, protection, and financial support. While accepting that taking state power is far from sufficient for introducing the socialism they want, 21st Century Socialists maintain that it remains necessary.

We can see how this approach can be defended against some of the aforementioned critiques of participating in existing states. By not nationalising the whole economy, but combining it with workers' self-management (admittedly in an often contradictory way – see Larrabure 2013), 21st Century Socialists can argue that they avoid Kropotkin's concerns about nationalisation. The economy is not put in the hands of the state *per se*, but into the hands of workers using the powers of the state. As for the concern that state seizure neglects the importance of building new prefigurative institutions, they can argue that far from impeding the development of prefigurative social structures and the forms of agency required to spread them, state power is necessary to aid their development and protect their self-management – for example through supportive legislation and funding.

However, this does not mean that 21st Century Socialism was or is uncontested from the left. Anarchists are still very concerned about the corrupting effects of domination, which they argue that 21st Century Socialists have yet to properly address. They insist – and Lebowitz, among others, agrees – that the inherited state remains a fundamentally capitalist and hierarchical institution. Given this fact, anarchists argue that the practice of state participation will likely have the same effects as it's had on all other socialist parties that have taken existing state power over the last century. At best, they argue, 21st Century Socialism will yield some version of social democracy, but not the comprehensively free, equal, and democratic socialism it aims for.

Two more concerns can be added to this with respect to the Venezuelan attempt at 21st Century Socialism. First, Venezuela's communal councils and the social economy remain heavily dependent on the central state's goodwill, especially for funding. If and when its goodwill reduces or disappears, what prospects do organisations that are so heavily dependent on it have for continuing along the road to socialism? Despite the intention of public programmes to build power from below, it has been argued that there is a growth of a layer of bureaucrats who are consolidating power through clientelism (Buxton 2016 and María 2016), and that this undermines the prefigurative intentions of the 21st Century Socialist project, insofar as it undermines the bottom-up forms of democracy that the communal councils and social economy were intended to provide. This casts further doubt on the ability of 21st Century Socialism to carry out the prefigurative part of its programme.

Secondly, the Venezuelan presidency is very powerful. As a result, communal councils and the social economy are heavily dependent not just on the central government, but on the personal preferences of the president. The amount of arbitrary power this puts in the hands of a single individual – now president Maduro – is cause for concern not just among anarchists, but among many more state-friendly socialists as well. How reliable is a process of social change going to be if its success or failure is at the mercy of the goodwill of a single powerful person?

(f) Democratic Confederalism

Where 21st Century Socialism relies heavily on taking national-level state power, Democratic Confederalism – also called Libertarian Municipalism – seeks to combine prefigurative formations with (only) local-level state power. This approach was initially developed by the former anarchist Murray Bookchin (Biehl 1998; Bookchin 1993, 2005, 2015) and further developed by thinkers and activists in the Kurdish organisations the PKK and PYD – especially Abdullah Öcalan (2017). It is an important influence on the revolution taking place in the region of Rojava in Northern Syria (Dirik 2016; Dirik et al. 2016; Knapp et al. 2016; Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness 2015). Rejecting class struggle through e.g. syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist unions, Bookchin drew on an extensive knowledge of territorially based council structures that have played a role in numerous uprisings and revolutions – from ancient Greece and Italian city-states to the Russian and Spanish revolutions.

The goal of Democratic Confederalism is to replace capitalism and the state (along with patriarchy, racism, etc.) with a confederation of bottom-up and directly democratic assemblies, through which people self-manage their society in a free, equal, democratic, and ecologically sustainable way. All policies are to be debated and decided on in local, face-to-face assemblies. (Though given the potentially universal availability and sustainability of smartphone and internet 2.0 technology nowadays, virtual meetings and discussions could also be part of this model.) These send delegates to confederal councils who are strictly mandated and immediately recallable, with confederal councils merely coordinating and administering the policies decided on by assemblies.

Democratic Confederalists seek to transition to this society by setting up directly democratic assemblies here and now, while also forwarding candidates to seize state power at local or municipal levels. Having won seats in these councils, they aim to further democratise municipal institutions by rooting them in face-to-face assemblies, joining them into a confederation of equal parts outside of the central state, and taking over the economy on a regional basis. Its precise economic structures are unclear, but what is clear is that this strategy avoids any centralised nationalisation of the economy.

Abdullah Öcalan has added much to this body of thought, in particular a theory of gender inequality as the first form of systematic hierarchy and oppression, an insistence on women's emancipation as a necessary condition for any comprehensive human emancipation, and a stress on religious and cultural pluralism. These thoughts have greatly influenced the PKK, PYD, and the revolution in Rojava. (We argue for a different, more co-constitutive view in Chapter 5.)

In Rojava – a society with a population of over two million people spread across three different administrative regions – there is currently a combination of bottom-up assemblies and councils organised by the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) and a more top-down state-like structure with courts, parliament, etc. These council structures have been successful in organising and providing public services, reorganising the economy in various ways – with many important economic functions run by cooperatives subject to the requirements of local councils – and dealing with the numerous complications of a horrific civil war.

Rojava's organisations – courts, communes, etc. – use a system of *dual leadership*: all positions of power are vested in two people who must both consent to a decision – one of whom must be a woman. They also employ a combination of mixed gender and women-only organisations, for example in the army (the YPG and YPJ). All mixed-gender institutions have a 40 per cent quota

for women, which many exceed. There has also been an explosion of women's cooperatives, organisations, and initiatives of all kinds and widespread promotion of women-centred approaches to science.

Here too we can see how this model can respond to some of the aforementioned critiques of taking existing state power. By not nationalising the economy, Democratic Confederalists too avoid Kropotkin's concerns about nationalisation. By explicitly and deliberately building new, prefigurative institutions, they too can argue that far from impeding the development of the prefigurative social structures of the new society and the forms of agency required to spread them, taking existing state power on a local level can instead aid and protect those structures as they develop.

However, questions remain about the praxis of state power. David Graeber (2016) raises three essentially prefigurative concerns about this approach. First, it arguably side-lines issues of social class. Social class is neither one of its main points of focus, nor is its model of transition designed with the goal of eliminating class oppression in mind. Though this may not seem like much of a concern right now (according to many of the revolution's participants), if questions of class and class power aren't sufficiently addressed they may reassert themselves in time and prevent transition to a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. If one isn't very concerned about social class, will one be able to prefigure and construct a classless society during transition? If one doesn't do so, will one be able to reach a free, equal, and democratic socialism? Secondly, given that the council structure is very time-consuming and demanding, this may come to limit who can participate effectively – generally privileging those of higher classes, since they will likely have more time, energy, etc., available. Thirdly, the dual power arrangement between top-down state-like institutions and bottom-up council structures has not yet been formalised. This may bolster foreign pressures and the upper classes in preventing the transition to a free, equal, and socialist society. Moreover, if central state structures persist, and are able to retain much of their power, what is to stop them from using that power to gradually betray the revolution as so many have done in the past?

This chapter has examined the distinct, but related, arguments about how people seeking a free, equal, and democratic socialist society should relate to state power. In particular, we've looked at some Marxist arguments for taking existing state power and at four anarchist arguments against it. Finally, we've seen how two contemporary strands of socialism seek to combine some kind of prefigurative politics with taking existing state power. This shows that one common critique of prefigurative politics – that it ignores or elides questions of state power – is fundamentally mistaken.

However, there are more contemporary critiques of prefigurative politics, the most prominent of which will be discussed in the next chapter. There we will see whether it's true that prefigurative politics is naive because it lacks an analysis of current society and social change; insular because it ignores organising outside of narrow activist circles; and/or divisive because it splinters the left.

7 Radical Prefigurativism, Not Liberal Individualism

The past few years have seen a trend within some social movement literature to treat prefigurative politics with cynicism. Many argue that prefigurative politics is ineffective as a social movement strategy because it's unintentionally individualistic, and that it actually has more in common with liberalism than with socialism. This chapter explores this kind of criticism by discussing and responding to three different versions of it. Firstly, in section (a) it looks at the claim that prefigurative politics is naive because it lacks a robust analysis of how social structures work. Secondly, in section (b) it examines the claim that prefigurative politics is insular because it prioritises the activists' own individual needs over the needs of the broader population. And thirdly, in section (c) it challenges the idea that prefigurativism is divisive because it splinters the left.

It's important to consider and discuss these claims, not only to straighten out some misconceptions and unfair dismissals of prefigurative politics, but also to show what the more insightful criticisms can teach us about how to prefigure better and how to avoid common pitfalls.

(a) Prefigurative Politics as Naive

It is a prominent narrative in recent literature to see prefigurative politics as naive or lacking a rigorous analysis of social structures. Prefigurative politics is often described in this literature as something that activists engage in because it *feels* or *seems* right, rather than because they have a thought-out analysis of political problems and their solutions.

Srnicek and Williams (2015) offer one version of this narrative. They describe prefigurative approaches as part of an outdated and uncritical 'folk politics' that is weakening the left. What they call folk politics is founded on ignorance and impulsiveness; it's a collection of uncritical ideas around how social change is achieved, a kind of misguided common sense held by large swathes of the left. For example, whenever a G7 summit or a state visit comes to town, local leftist activists rush to organise the usual marches, media stunts, and other actions, through the usual horizontalist decision-making structures, which to Srnicek and Williams is 'symbolic and ritualistic' (2015: 6), but not effective. The authors argue that the aims of these movements are usually unclear, that they lack any kind of serious analysis of society and the economy, and that they are unable to achieve meaningful social change:

> At its best, prefigurative politics attempts to embody utopian impulses in bringing the future into concrete existence today. Yet at its worst, an insistence on prefiguration becomes a dogmatic assertion that the means must match the ends, accompanied by *ignorance of the structural forces set against it.* (2015: 28, emphasis added)

This, they argue, is why the left is failing.[1] As we will explain below, Srnicek and Williams are right to point out that many leftist activists would benefit from accessing more, or perhaps better, political theory and discussing their ultimate political aims more analytically in their organisations. Their characterisation of prefigurative politics, however, is not accurate or useful.

Soborski's 2018 book *Ideology and the Future of Progressive Social Movements* also criticises contemporary radical left movements for lacking a rigorous political analysis. For Soborski, prefigurative politics usually entails a lack of thought-through ideology and 'a refusal to endorse any clear political goal' (2018: 53). Prefigurative activists simply do not know or understand what kind of things are wrong with current society, and hence what kind of things they should be attempting to change. They lack a theory of how society works. As Soborski puts it:

> [P]refigurative commitments are not usually anchored in a firm theoretical foundation. Indeed, political theory is typically seen as having no application in prefigurative activism, and a strong link is often drawn between the practice of prefiguration and the ostensible absence of ideology. (2018: 53)

Soborski's argument is a theoretical one, but it also revolves around two practical examples: the World Social Forum summits and Occupy, especially Occupy Wall Street. Soborski surveys critical studies of these two movements, finding that neither paid enough attention to the informal inequalities that impede democracy and inclusiveness (2018: 56–8). These informal inequalities meant that only certain kinds of people were able to make their voices heard – that is, more privileged, wealthier, and more confident people. At the same time there were *too many* voices involved in decision-making, making agreement on specific policies almost impossible. Soborski describes Occupy as 'a movement "with no demands"' because 'it was simply impossible to agree on goals that every occupier could endorse' (2018: 57). While we would add that this was not true of all Occupy groups (for example, Occupy London released an Initial Statement of goals early on in the occupation, as well as a number of specific demands in the following weeks, see e.g. Malik 2011), the literature Soborski surveys highlights serious problems with these two specific examples.

Soborski's theoretical framing, however, which links the problems of informal hierarchies and lack of political aims to prefigurative politics *as such*, is less useful. Soborski's understanding of the concept is implausibly narrow, describing prefigurativism an approach that focuses on 'the "how" of the movement' at the expense of 'the "what for"' (2018: 54). Prefigurativism here lacks an ideology, and the void of ideological content is filled with 'ideas of horizontality, direct democracy, autonomy, creativity and spontaneity' (2018: 53). This portrayal of prefigurative politics ignores the rich history of political analysis and ideological commitment that we have discussed in this book. More specifically, the powers, drives, and consciousness arguments, and the personal-is-political argument, all go far beyond merely advocating any particular decision-making structure, and none of them deny that prefigurative organisations have an ideology.

Smucker's 2017 book *Hegemony How-To* also focuses on Occupy as a practical example, and particularly Occupy Wall Street. Occupy was a protest movement deeply infused with some key aspects of prefigurative politics. In Zuccotti Park, the New York City branch of Occupy built up 'a microcosm of society ..., a kitchen, a medical tent, a security force, a public library, even a whole

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[1] Srnicek and Williams concede in one sentence (2015: 29) that prefigurative politics is not inherently problematic, yet they consistently associate it with these negative aspects of 'folk politics'.

alternative decision-making structure' (Smucker 2017: ch. 4). The same, to varying degrees, was attempted in almost a thousand cities across the world. Members of the public could turn up to an Occupy camp and get involved in anything they saw: education, decision-making, protesting, cooking, building, and so on.

Smucker argues that prefigurative politics was a large contributor to the failure of Occupy to last any longer or effect any more societal change than it did. Prefigurativism was, to Smucker, the less successful of two tendencies that ran through the Occupy movement – the more successful tendency being a 'strategic' one. Prefigurative politics is here characterised by spontaneity and a lack of planning and tactics; it allegedly focuses on activists achieving a '*feeling*' of political change, rather than on bringing about any actual large-scale political progress. Strategic politics, on the other hand, Smucker sees as more analytical and politically aware. It starts with a vision, a goal, and works out a political strategy from there.

Expressions of prefigurative politics in Occupy Wall Street, according to Smucker, predominantly came in the form of consensus decision-making processes, for example through the use of so-called mic-checks – i.e. when a large group of people near a speaker repeats what the speaker is saying, sentence by sentence, so people at the back can hear – and jazz hands, or as Smucker calls them, 'sparkle fingers' (2017: 105), i.e. when participants in a meeting indicate their agreement with the speaker by wiggling their fingers.

These decision-making tools were important, according to Smucker, because they 'foster[ed] strong group identity, cohesion, and solidarity'. They were not, however, ever going to be implementable on a broader scale and they lacked 'a larger overarching strategic framework' (2017: ch. 4). In Smucker we again see the recurring theme of prefigurative politics being something that *feels* good to activists, rather than something that's founded on serious political analysis: 'prefigurative spectacles did seem to create a palpable *feeling* of utopianism at Zuccotti Park for many participants. *Utopianism as a feeling* is hardly about the future; rather, it is felt, deeply, here and now' (2017: ch. 4, original emphases).

This characterisation of prefigurative politics as the opposite of 'strategic' politics will remind the reader of Wini Breines' early contribution to the literature in 1980 (see also Breines 1982), which we discussed in Chapter 2. Breines saw prefigurative politics firstly as an approach to organisational structure (rather than as anything broader), and secondly as an approach that sees formal organisation as something inherently authoritarian. What Breines did not argue, however, is that this amounted to a lack of all ideology or theory among prefigurativists. Rather, one of Breines' central arguments was that a prefigurative way of organising was deliberately chosen because it was deemed the most effective way of achieving outcomes that were not only diverse, but were also of a cultural nature (that is, they sought changes to social norms and values, rather than changes to institutions, laws, or policies; see Breines 1980: 423). Many of the finer points in Breines' argument appear to have been lost over time. Indeed, out of the recent authors cited here, only Smucker pays any serious attention to Breines' work, and in doing so admits to having an idiosyncratic and simplified interpretation of it (Smucker 2017: ch. 4).

In this book we have taken issue with Breines' conception, arguing for a broad rather than a narrow understanding of prefigurative politics. We've argued that a narrow understanding, which covers only an organisation's decision-making structure, is difficult to maintain given the powers, drives, and consciousness arguments (see Chapter 4), and the personal-is-political argument (see Chapter 5). We've also argued that the vast majority of prefigurativists – from the factions of the First International to the theorists discussed in Chapter 2, to the FORA, Zapatis-

tas, Rojavans, Black Panthers, and the range of other organisations discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 – have not aimed for any kind of structurelessness. Rather, they have focused on building long-lasting organisations with well-designed and formalised decision-making structures. Where Breines' is right, however, is in pointing out that prefigurativism does not inherently lack all political analysis or theory. Prefigurative approaches – even those that, mistakenly in our view, claim that groups can be 'structureless' – do not lack a foundation in social analysis per se (though it is absolutely true that specific examples of actually existing groups might). Rather, prefigurative politics is founded in a *different* political analysis from typical liberal or vanguardist approaches. This is something that was central to Breines' (1980) argument but that so many recent critics appear to have overlooked. It's worth, therefore, summarising again what is meant by a prefigurative political analysis.

Back in Chapter 3, we outlined some of the theoretical foundations of prefigurative approaches. We showed that a commitment to prefiguration is often based on a capillary view of power. This view holds that, while there are places and institutions in society where power is concentrated – for example the state or large corporations – power exists *everywhere* in society in different forms and intensities. To take an example, ableism (i.e. the discrimination and oppression of disabled people) is not only enshrined in the laws, policies, and behaviours of centralised institutions such as the state or large corporations. It is true that the state and corporations enact ableism by, for example, agreeing that housing, food, and transportation should cost money, and that only those people who can pay for them by earning an income through wage labour or through exploiting workers are entitled to decent living standards. Those things are all openly enshrined in governmental law and policy in the sense that most states in the world expect their citizens to earn an income, and they provide very little support to those who can't. There are countless other ableist laws and policies. But ableism goes further than this. It's also enshrined in the attitudes, expectations, language, and behaviours of the non-disabled people in society, and also internalised by many disabled people. Removing ableist laws, in other words, will not in any straightforward way guarantee the removal of ableist culture, values, or attitudes. We can take the continued existence of misogynistic discrimination, prejudice, harassment, and assault – which were made illegal long ago – as evidence of this. That is why a change in the law is usually not sufficient when the aim is to bring about deep and radical change in broader society, as Breines and many others have pointed out. This does not, and need not, imply that changing laws never makes a difference to changing (other) social relations – clearly it can. It does mean, however, that social structures go beyond centralised institutions, and so too must strategies for social change.

Struggle that is focused only on centralised institutions can in fact be far less 'structural' than is often imagined. For example, demands for stricter international climate agreements, more investment in green energy (Lukacs 2017), or better corporate anti-pollution policies – important though they are – often do not lead to a great deal of structural change. Rather, they often serve to empower states and large corporations to continue with the status quo, with some minor adjustments. What can, on the other hand, effect greater structural change is, for example, to create non-profit forms of business that are organisationally incentivised against polluting, and to buy, swap, or earn products from them. These latter actions offer a set of social relations that are radically different, which is why we can say that they are, or at least can be, more structurally different than, say, the state implementing marginally better policy.

The idea that prefigurative politics in and of itself tends to neglect the structural nature of oppression thus relies on a very specific and implausibly narrow understanding of both prefigurative politics and social structure. We welcome discussions about the shortcomings of actually existing social movements and their lack of political analyses, and we want social movements influenced by prefigurative ideas to have better access to political writing and to take strategic questions more seriously (that's one of the reasons we have written this book). However, rejecting prefigurative politics as an entire approach, based on the shortcomings of some organisations who claim to use it, would be a mistake.

(b) Prefigurative Politics as Insular

Alongside accusations of naiveté, prefigurative politics is often accused of being insular. In other words, it is described as an approach that tends to divide activists into small camps and prevent them from organising in solidarity with oppressed groups more broadly. There are different variations on this criticism. Firstly, some argue that prefigurative approaches lead activists to focus too much on their own groups' internal practices and relationships, which distracts them from broader social problems. While the working class sees their wages decreasing and costs of living go up, this criticism goes, prefigurative activists sit around discussing the ins and outs of their organisations' decision-making forms or their personal relationships. A second variant of this argument has it that a commitment to prefigurative politics means that other aspects of political strategy are rejected. We will consider these variants in turn.

Farber (2014) argues that prefigurative organisers are often too busy discussing 'trivial matters' internal to the group – such as 'deciding who will clean up or bring the pizza' – to do the important work of reaching out to struggle together with the broader population for better economic policies at the national level. (We can only assume that Farber doesn't mean to dismiss feminist critiques of gendered divisions of labour altogether by referring to these feminised social reproduction chores as 'trivial'.) The risk of seeing everyday practices as important, in other words, is that we might come to lose sight of the bigger picture and get distracted by obsessing over details, even if we do not intend to do so.

A similar idea recurs in Smucker's already-mentioned book on Occupy Wall Street, which argues that the prefigurative tendency of Occupy saw activists putting the 'life of the group' at the forefront, 'eschew[ing] engagement and contestation in the larger common realm of power and politics' (2017: ch. 4). That is, activists ended up focusing much more on their group's internal processes than on engaging in struggles in broader society. Smucker therefore sees prefigurative politics as essentially 'a project of private liberation' (2017: ch. 4), a political approach focused on liberating the individual activists engaging in it, rather than supporting oppressed or exploited groups more broadly.

Wroe and Hooker criticise what they call 'lifestylism', i.e. the practice of changing personal habits as a way to affect political change, which they seem to associate with certain forms of prefigurative politics without using that term. They argue that lifestyle projects such as building housing cooperatives, practising veganism, or living in squats can be useful strategies under some circumstances, but they often have 'a strong element of "turning one's back on society"' (Wroe and Hooker 2011; see also Wilson's 2011 reply). Those involved, they argue, often become

focused on creating havens for activists, to where they can escape from the misery of mainstream society, rather than focusing their attention on bringing about systemic change.

For Soborski, who we also discussed in the previous section, prefigurativism has always had a 'highly individualistic dimension' (2018: 51). The reason for this, argues Soborski, is that prefigurative politics was never about finding a common ideology or aim. Rather, the focus has always been on allowing activists to express their individual views (2018: 60). Soborski paints a bleak picture of prefigurativism, arguing that it does not in fact challenge the prevailing neoliberal order, but is rather 'compatible with aspects of the neoliberal vision of human nature, especially its preoccupation with personal autonomy' (2018: 51).

In the previous section we argued that prefigurative politics does not generally involve any opposition to permanent formal organisation and that it does not lack a political analysis. The same arguments show why the idea that prefigurativism would be inherently individualistic, and therefore incapable of challenging the status quo, is also difficult to maintain. While Soborski's description of Occupy Wall Street paints a picture of an insular movement, this is not representative of prefigurative organisations more broadly. Indeed, although neither of the authors of this book were in New York to observe Occupy Wall Street, we did participate in some of the London Occupy events, and had many comrades who were active organisers in Occupy St Pauls. The London branch of Occupy in fact ran several outreach projects, including a solidarity campaign with social housing tenants that helped residents of a council estate in North London to resist evictions resulting from poverty and gentrification.

In our experience, and as the history in Chapter 2 shows, the vast majority of prefigurative organisations operate with the aim, and the actual practice, of changing broader society. For example, the prefigurative organisations we discussed in Chapter 4 – such as the FORA and the CNT – were deeply committed to large-scale and long-term permanent organisation. They fought both for a host of immediate improvements to people's lives in general – like affordable rents, higher wages, and weekends – and for an international socialist revolution. The same goals and outward-facing practices often persist in similar syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist organisations today, such as the IWW or the current CNT. The other prominent examples we have discussed in this book (the Black Panther Party, Zapatistas, Rojava Kurds, and so on) are further evidence of this.

To give a more specific example, we can look at the social centre in East London called the Common House, which Saio is involved in running. It hosts free training and educational sessions for a diverse range of people, which are advertised widely and are payable by optional donations. Its member groups run many activities that are specifically focused on reaching new audiences, including film nights, stalls, leafleting campaigns, and collaborations with other campaigning groups. Common House volunteers are also mindful of how we greet and welcome newcomers when they walk through the door, saying hi to new people and answering any questions. We take care to explain what the Common House is at all of our events, not assuming that everybody already knows. In addition to inviting new people to join us, we also take proactive steps to support the struggles of vulnerable social groups. For example, our user groups offer free English-language classes for migrants and asylum-seekers, free counselling and mental health support, peer support sessions for queer and trans people, and much more. These measures are commonplace within prefigurative movements – outward-facing and solidarity-based action are not something rare.

We do, however, agree with the point that activist groups may end up focusing too much on their own internal problems, over and above extending solidarity to larger sections of the population. Soborski describes how this tendency arguably emerged in Occupy Wall Street, arguing that far too few discussions were held about the relationship between the Occupy movement and broader political change, which led to a lack of outward-facing or solidarity actions. Any prefigurative activist – indeed, any activist in general – should be mindful of these potential pitfalls.

We can also understand why prefigurativism is particularly made a target of this criticism so often. We have been arguing, after all, that a prefigurative approach is something that must be *enacted* and *experienced*, not just read about. Whereas vanguardist approaches tend to see revolution as a service that elite activists more or less can carry out on behalf of the general population, prefigurativism demands much broader participation. That's because vanguardism tends to focus on centralised power – existing states, laws, government policies, and corporate behaviour, which can be changed by a small minority – while prefigurativism often extends much further to our everyday behaviours, private lives, assumptions, language, and so on. In this very narrow and specific sense, then, prefigurative politics does focus on activists' own processes, because it insists that we need to pay attention to our own social relations and behaviours. But this should not be mistaken for insularity. If anything, demanding much broader participation in revolutionary activities is an argument for focusing on outreach activities.

What often adds to the confusion is that many critics seem to assume that prefigurative politics can't be combined with other elements of strategy. That is, they seem to imply that if you believe in the value of implementing desired future relations in the here-and-now, then *all* of your actions must do so. In reality, however, a commitment to prefigurative politics doesn't rule out doing other, non-prefigurative, things as well. Rather, the prefiguration we've been discussing in this book is part of a strategic ecosystem that includes a whole host of other tools for achieving the kind of social change a group is after. Most of the organisations we have discussed mix prefiguration with other aspects of strategy, such as participating in electoral politics, court cases, elite-organised protests, parody and subversion, armed uprisings, and more. The Zapatistas and the Kurds of Rojava, for example, are engaging in armed struggles against local governments and guerrillas whilst prefiguring participatory-democratic societies. The Industrial Workers of the World union – which we discussed in Chapter 2 and whose constitution contains the famous quote: 'forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old' – strikes for better pay for workers in capitalist corporations such as Starbucks alongside its prefigurative work. The British anti-authoritarian communist organisation Plan C, whose Social Reproduction Cluster was mentioned in Chapter 5, often organises counter-protests and blockades to prevent fascists from marching and rioting, alongside implementing those relations that it does want to see in the future. The Common House social centre hosts workshops, talks, and film nights on subvertising, drag performance, and other forms of parody and subversion.

We are hardly the first to point out that prefigurativism works well – perhaps best – in combination with a host of other tools. In fact, basically all the groups we've discussed who practised or practise prefigurative politics – from the FORA to the Zapatistas – do so as one part of a much broader strategy for achieving the social change they want. Nor is this unrecognised even in the contemporary literature. Andrew Cornell's *Oppose and Propose* (2011), for example, has been hugely influential in arguing that a holistic strategy includes both resistance to those things we *don't* want, *and* proposals and implementations of those things that we *do*. And Chris Dixon's

Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements (2014) has shown how many contemporary North American organisations successfully mix prefigurative politics with a host of other aspects of strategy. Prefigurative politics has rarely been intended or used as an isolated strategy for social change, much less one that rules out the use of effective non-prefigurative strategies. There are, of course, debates about whether certain aspects of strategy – such as taking existing state power, or engaging in armed military conflict – are effective and compatible with prefigurative politics. But those debates are not generally about whether these things are prefigurative (and therefore supposedly acceptable or unacceptable), but about whether they are useful for achieving the kinds of social change that these groups aim for.

(c) Prefigurative Politics as Divisive

There is also a third criticism of prefigurativism that is worth discussing here since it pops up so frequently. This criticism has it that prefigurative activists are more focused on the differences between people within the left (differences in race, gender, sexuality, disability, and so on) than they are on the unity of the working class, which is argued to have a divisive effect on the left. This criticism, as we understand it, stems from a confusion of certain forms of prefigurative politics, especially calls for intersectionality, with the prominent neoliberal tendency often referred to as 'identity politics'.

Liberal identity politics is a moderate (that is, non-radical) approach to social change, based on broadly liberal ideological commitments. It starts from the premise that deep and systemic social change is not necessary for reaching a free, equal, and democratic society, because society is already fairly close to this ideal. Social movements should therefore focus on making minor adjustments to laws, policies, and social norms, rather than on working for more systematic or radical change. Admitting that women and minority groups face particular obstacles to capitalist success, such as discrimination, pay gaps, and prejudice, liberal identity politics aims to give members from these groups the same opportunities as white male members of the ruling class to succeed in society in its current form. For example, when liberal women agitate against the glass ceiling in capitalist businesses, that is identity politics. When liberal antiracists argue that a greater number of Black politicians and CEOs will end racism, that is another example. The central idea is that women and minority groups must be better assimilated into all parts of society as it currently stands, and that discrimination must end so that they can compete on what they believe to be the same footing.

Many critics on the left argue that identity politics, with its focus on personal identity and its denial of class unity, has entered the left as a trojan horse. A classic example of this criticism can be found in the International Marxist Tendency's international congress statement from 2018 (IMT 2018), which describes intersectional approaches to socialism as identity politics that is splintering and weakening the left. Instead of uniting as workers, this kind of argument goes, intersectional activists insist on highlighting the different ways in which people are affected by racism, patriarchy, and ableism. This only plays into the hands of the bourgeoisie since the left cannot stand united. Some commentators add to this kind of argument that racism, sexism, and ableism will simply disappear after the revolution, once the capitalism that sustains them (and requires them) is replaced. It is therefore both unnecessary and counter-productive to try to address anything other than capitalism for the time being, according to this view.

This criticism, in other words, sees intersectional politics, including intersectional forms of prefigurativism, as divisive, and conflates it with liberal identity politics. There are many things wrong with this criticism: it assumes a white, male, and able-bodied perspective while silencing marginalised groups; and it's based on a severe misunderstanding of what intersectionality actually argues, which we explained in Chapter 5. Rather than intersectionality being divisive, the status quo which intersectionality critiques is what's hindering the development of class solidarity. Maintaining that class comes before all other forms of oppression, and that other forms of oppression can largely be ignored until after the revolution, leaves these other forms of oppression intact within movements and organisations. This, of course, makes them a hostile place for members of these other marginalised groups, making it harder for them to participate effectively and strongly discouraging them from joining to begin with.

The confusion between intersectional prefigurativism and identity politics is, however, not entirely accidental. The first use of the term 'identity politics' emerged from Black feminist socialism, not liberalism, and it was strongly connected to ideas that would later be termed intersectional. Only after the concept 'identity politics' had emerged on the radical left did liberals latch on to it and develop their own meaning for it. The first people to popularise the term 'identity politics' – or some say, the first to use it at all – were the US-based Black feminist group the Combahee River Collective. The Combahee River Collective was openly revolutionary and socialist. Their activities included educational work, running consciousness-raising groups, picketing racist workplaces, supporting Black people who had been targeted by the police, and much more (Harris 2001). Their strongest legacy is the Statement they published in 1977, which has reached such fame partly because it includes the first widely known use of the term 'identity politics':

> There have always been Black women activists ... who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual *identity* combined with their racial *identity* to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. ... This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of *identity politics*. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. ... We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. ... We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation. (Combahee River Collective 1977, emphases added)

The term 'identity politics' here referred to at least two ideas that we are already familiar with from previous chapters of this book: that the personal is political (which, as we show in Chapter 5, is an argument for prefigurative politics), and that different hierarchical structures are interlinked and co-constitutive (in other words, that they 'intersect', as Kimberlé Crenshaw would later call it). The Statement also criticises the idea that one group can liberate another group on their behalf, which can be read as a criticism both of elite vanguards in social movements and of so-called civilising Western colonial powers orchestrating international 'development'.

The Collective's use of the term identity politics had nothing to do with liberal ideology. Rather, its message was that society needed to be fundamentally changed in order for hierarchical structures to be undone. This change would need to be carried out by people who have

different and varied experiences of intersecting oppressions, with an acknowledgement that our personal experiences and perspectives are political.

There is thus a strong link between identity politics and intersectional forms of prefigurativism, but not in the way most critics assume. Identity politics in the Combahee River Collective's sense is a struggle for *radical* and *systemic* change – unlike liberal identity politics which merely wants to assimilate marginalised groups into existing social relations.

Many radical intersectional approaches go even further than this in another important way. While liberal identity politics assumes the desirability and permanence of both the existing social relations and the identities of the people who navigate within them, many intersectional prefigurative approaches are working to change not only social relations but also identities. That's because our identities are seen, not as fixed or innate, but as the products and mechanisms of social structures. In other words, while liberals want to see more Black or women presidents and CEOs, many radicals want to fundamentally change not only political systems or business forms, but also the very meanings of 'Black' and 'woman'.

Socialists have long understood the category 'working class' as a category that belongs to capitalism, and that we want to see the end of. The point of socialism is not to reduce capitalist oppression or make things a little better for the working class, it's to abolish classes and class power altogether. Race, gender, and other identity categories are drawn by many theorists and activists into the same analytical light. For example, Huey Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panther Party, argued: 'If we do not have universal identity, then we will have cultural, racial, and religious chauvinism …' (Newton 1974). As we showed in Chapter 5, this is not to say that current categories and identities can simply be ignored, but it provides a direction for a future beyond these identities: 'we struggle for a future in which we will realize that we are all Homo sapiens and have more in common than not' (Newton 1974).

Influential radical scholars on race and gender, such as Stuart Hall (1991) and Judith Butler (1990), have argued that racial, gendered, and other categories are best understood as effects, embodiments, and tools of oppression, rather than as eternal identities that have any meaning in their own right. It is white supremacy that creates the current identities 'Black' and 'white', and patriarchy that creates the current identities 'woman' and 'man', rather than those identities being inherent to people with certain skin tones, gestural expressions, or body parts. (Or more accurately, it is white supremacist ableist capitalist patriarchy that creates all identities, but it is the white supremacist element that emphasises race, the patriarchal element that emphasises gender, and so on.)

As evidence of this, think of the enormous historical and geographical variations in what is considered to be a race or a gender. The racial categories we now use date back only to European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries eugenicists attempted to justify them using so-called 'racial biology', which has since been entirely debunked by contemporary science (Rattansi 2007). That modern gender categories are some simple result of 'nature' is similarly discredited by contemporary research (Fine 2011; Fausto-Sterling 2012). Gender categories have varied massively across time and place. For example, many societies had more than two categories of gender, or did not see gender as necessarily linked to biology, before European colonisers imposed binary and allegedly scientific categories (see e.g. Amadiume 1987; Oyewumi 1997; Hinchy 2019). Even within Europe, the current mainstream understanding of gender arose only in the early modern period and was intricately tied to social hierarchies and exploitation (see e.g. Federici 2004). Many intersectional prefigurativists, then,

seek to abolish these oppressive and exploitative categories *together with* their underlying structures. This is an entirely different political project from seeking to better assimilate people from these categories into the capitalist economy, which leaves both current categories and economic inequalities intact. A prefigurative commitment to intersectionality is therefore very different from liberal identity politics.

This chapter has taken issue with the conflation of forms of prefigurative politics with forms of liberal individualism. Indeed, critiquing prefigurative politics has become a minor sub-field within socialist theory that has grown over the past few years, and is accompanied by many blog posts, articles, and online memes outside of academia (for examples see the endnote).[2] We have welcomed some aspects of the criticisms we have discussed, because they point out common pitfalls and poor implementations of prefigurative politics. Many criticisms, however, are founded on misunderstandings or implausible assumptions. We have looked at and responded to some of these critiques in this chapter, discussing what they get right and where they go wrong in their blanket rejections of prefigurativism.

Critics are right that some supporters of prefigurative politics may be naive, lacking in political analysis, and neglectful of structural concerns – as activists using any approach may be. It is not accurate, however, to say that prefigurativism is inherently naive, anti-analytical, or neglects structural concerns. Prefigurative politics is often based on a different, and we argue more accurate, understanding of social structure than that of their opponents. Social structures don't just exist in 'high' places such as governments or corporations; they exist all around us and permeate our lives.

While some prefigurative projects end up being insular and self-centred, this is not a necessary feature of prefigurative politics either. We've seen in previous chapters that a large number of prefigurative organisations and movements, far from navel-gazing, have focused on working for comprehensive social change in a myriad of different ways. We have indeed argued that radical liberation must enable broad participation from different marginalised groups. Finally, we've argued that radical intersectional prefigurativism is something very different from liberal identity politics. The aim of a lot of radical prefigurativism is not for marginalised groups to assimilate into currently existing society, but to replace the structures that underpin that society.

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[2] The following are some examples, which we have provided as proof that this occurs, rather than as any recommended reading (be aware that some content is homophobic and white supremacist): www.reddit.com; i.kym-cdn.com; pics.me.me; i.kym-cdn.com.

8. Conclusion: Now. Here. You.

When we think about people who have changed world history, who have stood up for freedom, equality, democracy, and justice, we usually think of their actions on the proverbial or literal barricades: protesting, taking direct action, striking. We think of gay liberation activists rioting and demonstrating at Stonewall with their fists held high. Rosa Parks refusing to give up that seat on the bus. The Black Panther Party lining the streets with their fists in the air and rifles hanging off their shoulders. When someone mentions 'social change', our minds rarely go to those less photogenic scenes, like members of a radical union carefully negotiating their decision-making structures, community organisers renovating a neighbourhood hall, or educators running a workshop on how to unlearn internalised racism. What we have argued in this book, however, is that achieving a truly free, equal, and democratic society is impossible without these kinds of things. We should not only be against the social conditions and structures that we *don't* want, but also simultaneously be for those that we *do*. Rather than being different things, movements 'against' and 'for' are intimately and necessarily linked.

This book has traced the history of the concept of prefigurative politics through to its current meaning, which first crystallised in two articles written by Carl Boggs in 1977. Before those articles, the ideas Boggs was referring to had been much discussed, and such forms of politics had been practised by many who didn't use that particular term – including anarchists, anticolonial activists, feminists, and others. Today, debates about prefigurative approaches are on the rise in social and political movement worldwide. We have written this book to clarify the meaning of prefigurative politics and to illustrate the philosophical ideas that tend to underlie it, at a time when the concept is starting to be so widely used that its roots and its analytical coherence are sometimes lost from view. We have also written it to address some common misconceptions and misunderstandings that are emerging as the concept is being more widely used and debated.

One of the main conclusions of this book is that prefigurative politics should be understood in a broad sense, and that it has a broader applicability than many might imagine. Here we differ from commentators and activists who have used the term to refer more narrowly to the implementation of certain decision-making structures in social movement organisations, or who have limited their discussions to small-scale organisations. We agree that establishing participatory democratic organisational forms is a necessary step for reaching a much better society, as we especially emphasised in Chapter 4. That chapter showed why and how large organisations can organise democratically to help their members develop the powers, drives, and consciousness needed to bring about a free, equal, and democratic socialist society. Formally free, equal, and democratic rules, however, are not sufficient for prefiguring a comprehensively free, equal, and democratic society. We have emphasised, especially in Chapter 5, that politics plays out not only in formal organisational structures, or in 'high places' such as governments or large corporations, but also in informal aspects of human interaction, behaviours, language – potentially, all aspects of our social lives. Since the personal is political, we cannot stop at studying official rules;

we must also look at how those rules are implemented and interpreted, the factors that affect a person's ability to have their voice heard, to take part on an equal footing, and so on.

As well as arguing for a broad understanding of the word, this book has also focused on explaining the assumptions about the world that underpin a commitment to prefigurative politics. To this end, we have emphasised that theoretical knowledge is not something that can be disconnected from one's social context and experiences – in particular the many different social practices that one is part of. It is not possible to understand or enact a radically free, equal, and democratic society simply through reading and applying theory about it that an expert has created.

For one thing, our abilities and powers to enact a better world are inherently processual, meaning that they develop and arise through social processes and experiences. Just as it's impossible to learn how to ride a bicycle or how to complete the computer game Skyrim through reading about it alone, we need practice in order to develop the right powers and skills for bringing about a new and better world.

For another, freedom, equality, and democracy aren't things that an individual person can enact on their own. They can only be brought about by large groups of people working together to bring them into existence and then maintain them over time. That is why, as we argued in Chapter 4, it is imperative to have large-scale prefigurative institutions that work actively to bring about radical social change. A free, equal, and democratic society requires the enactment of those values on a large scale, which in turn means that large numbers of people must gain the powers, drives, and consciousness that are required to enact them, which in turn requires practice.

Another, and strongly interrelated, assumption about the world that underpins prefigurative politics is the idea that the personal is political. In Chapter 5, we used the personal-is-political argument to elaborate on the critique of vanguardism, showing that an intersectional perspective on social structures reveals the way in which different forms of oppression are interwoven. While some political leaders and theorists have claimed to have created – or that others have created – perfectly 'objective', unbiased, and universally applicable analyses of what is wrong with the world and how we can improve it, these are often in turn based on the marginalisation of certain groups of people and their perspectives. An intersectional perspective, by contrast, can shed light on how, for example, the way in which capitalist exploitation expresses itself in our lives is dependent on our position in other social hierarchies such as racism, patriarchy, and ableism.

A third aim of this book, in addition to arguing for a broad understanding of prefigurative politics and outlining its underlying assumptions, has been to address some common criticisms and misconceptions. Chapter 4 has shown that, contrary to what many critics seem to assume, prefigurative politics does in fact work for large-scale organising – indeed, the debates about prefigurativism within the early socialist movement were primarily about how to implement it in mass movements. Since freedom, equality, democracy, and any other salient features of a socialist society can only be introduced and maintained through the practices of a large number of people, we argue that it would be impossible to achieve such a society without mass prefigurative organising. Only prefigurative organising on a large scale would be able to develop the powers, drives, and consciousness required to reach such a society. While some have objected that genuine democracy in large-scale organisations is impossible, we have shown that such claims are not only analytically weak, but ignore the long and rich history of large-scale democratic organisation on the libertarian left.

Many critics have argued that prefigurativism is doomed to fail because it can't confront repressive state power. Chapter 6 was therefore dedicated to the question of whether seizing control of the state is necessary, or even helpful, for radical social change. Anarchists have provided many compelling arguments for why the seizure of state power is in fact counter-productive, but 21st Century Socialists and Democratic Confederalists still seek to combine it with prefigurative politics. We have argued that, regardless of which side you fall on in that debate, taking over the existing state can at best play one part in a larger constellation of strategies and tactics. Changing formal rules and regulations is not sufficient for prefiguring a truly and comprehensively free, equal, and democratic society; nor can the informal changes and developments that this requires be handed down by rulers given power in any straightforward way.

The final set of criticisms and misconceptions of prefigurative politics that we have addressed revolve around the idea that prefigurative politics lies dangerously close to a harmful kind of liberal individualism. Prefigurativism, in this view, allows activists to stay within their comfort zone, focusing on their own consumption patterns or lifestyles, without having to do any of the heavier political lifting of seriously dealing with the power wielded by capitalism and the state. Chapter 7 showed that these criticisms are largely based on implausibly narrow understandings of what prefigurative politics is, and tend to conflate prefigurativism per se with things that particular activists do in its name. Claims that prefigurative politics inherently lacks a political analysis, is necessarily navel-gazing, or has a divisive effect on the left, generally fail to take the rich history of prefigurative action and thought into account.

This book has attempted to piece together what we currently think is the best way to understand prefigurative politics. Starting from the past and present ideas and practices that are associated with it, we've drawn on our experiences, observations, conversations, reading, and thinking to piece together how best to make sense of different forms of prefigurative politics.

The book has gone through the arguments in both a chronological and thematic order. We started with looking at some background to the concept and discussions about how it should be defined. We then set out the theory of praxis, in particular the conception of power, that tends to underlie prefigurative politics. This provides the basis for arguing that movements and organisations should prefigure the kind of participatory democratic decision-making structures they want for a future society, in order to develop the *powers, drives, and consciousness* needed for such a society to be possible. What too few people acknowledge, however, is that the *personal is political* and that our particular positions in a matrix of intersecting social structures shape and affect our political analyses. This view started becoming influential in the 1960s and '70s but is still too often marginalised in contemporary debates. Finally, the last two chapters before this conclusion focused on criticisms of and misconceptions about prefigurative politics. As we have seen, this approach is often dismissed because of a lack of understanding of what it really entails.

Looking ahead, the practical implications of this book for our political organising should be clear. We have used examples of existing social movement organisations to illustrate what prefigurativism is like in practice. We have argued (among other things) that social movement organisations should prefigure participatory democratic decision-making structures; organise at large as well as small scales; address informal and indirect obstacles to effective participation; invite all participants to contribute to political analysis; and actively counteract prevailing hierarchies and inequalities by redistributing labour and resources. Many of us are familiar with already-existing radical left prefigurative organisations in our local areas, or online, that we can join and support. Others might be involved in organisations that are not yet prefigurative, and

will get working on implementing prefigurativism in their organising there. There are also many who will need to start new prefigurative organisations where none exist. Given the tenacity of radical movements over the past century and a half – where people facing poverty, oppression, overwork, and ill health have gone up against their oppressors, organised, fought, and won – there's certainly some reason to think that the future looks bright.

We also want to emphasise that this book is far from the final word on prefigurative politics, and we don't want it to be. As we have seen, the contemporary literature – with its more developed terminology, more precise definitions, and more focused and systematic approach to the topic – only stretches back to the late 1970s. There are still many areas in prefigurativism that have yet to be better understood. One such area is the feminist, decolonial, and antiracist influences on prefigurative thought. In this book we have attempted to foreground some of these influences, but they still tend to be marginalised. A clearer and more detailed set of historical accounts of the connections between feminism, decolonialism and antiracism and prefigurative politics is still very much needed. Another area is the development of organisational tools and resources that can help us discuss, recognise, and tackle different kinds of informal inequalities within our organisations and movements. While many such resources already exist, as we have referenced and exemplified in the book, more of this work is needed. We hope there will be lively debate on prefigurative politics in the coming years, with greater conceptual clarity than before, and that even more social movement groups will continue to learn how to use prefigurativism better and more deliberately.

In writing this book, we've aimed to make sense of prefigurative politics as a set of historical and contemporary political practices and an associated body of movement-based political theory. The kind of theorising we've been doing is first and foremost a theorising of, and for, actually existing politics. It is clear to us that if humanity is to have much of a future – on this planet and in general – it needs to transition to a much more free, equal, and democratic society, and that one of the things such a transition requires is serious and widespread prefigurative politics. We hope that this book is far from the end of debates about what prefigurativism is, what it requires, and what it should look like. Alongside debate, however, there must also be action.

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