GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Prefigurative Politics

Louisiana Lightsey

The problem of how to achieve radical democratic goals within a system that is not conducive to radical democratic principles continues to challenge activists and revolutionaries around the world. One response has been to "smash the state," as anarchists have said for centuries, while another has been to "be the change you want to see," as Gandhi's words have been interpreted since the 1960s. While most radical activists would agree that the two approaches need to be employed simultaneously to effect real revolution, there is a large body of literature and a flourishing activist tradition that emphasizes the importance of the latter; now considered prefigurative politics. This term has been used by academics within social movement studies as well as by activists within social movements themselves to describe the theory and practice of utilizing methods to effect social and structural change which embody the ideals of the desired future society. If the core ideals of the envisioned society are participatory democracy and social equality, a prefigurative movement would be committed to non-centralized, non-hierarchical, and non-discriminatory means of achieving its ends. Related terms, such as prefiguration and prefigurativism, usually mean the social and structural mode of enacting prefigurative politics.

The most substantial analyzations of the theory and evaluations of the practice of prefigurative politics have focused on the following contexts: pre-WWII workers' movements (Boggs 1977), the New Left (Breines 1980), the antinuclear movement (Epstein 1991), the alterglobalization movement (Maeckelbergh 2011 and Graeber 2014), the Egyptian revolution (van de Sande 2013), the Spanish Okupa movement (Yates 2014), and Occupy Wall Street (Schaffzin 2011). However, movements and organizations such as anarcho-syndicalism, the International Workers of the World, Students for a Democratic Society, the Black Panthers, the Zapatista Liberation movement, the Argentinian worker run factory movement, Take Back the Land, ecofeminism, the LGBTQ movement, etc., all have prefigurative elements, either in the way the participants related to each other, the creation of counter-institutions, or the protest tactics employed.

Early Usage of the Term

In his article "Marxism, prefigurative Communism, and the problem of workers' control", originally published in *Radical America* in 1977, Carl Boggs coined the term 'prefigurative' to describe the historical tradition and modern movements of radical politics in which modes of organization and social relations between participants takes precedence over achieving widespread structural change through conventional politics. Boggs situates the beginnings of prefiguration as a counter-narrative to the revolutionary traditions that dominated the industrial era: violent uprisings, Marxism-Leninism, social democracy, and structural reformism. He goes on to elucidate the three main elements of this prefigurative communist ideology:

(1) fear of reproducing hierarchical authority relations under a new ideological rationale, (2) criticism of political parties and trade unions because their centralized forms reproduce the old power relations in a way that undermines revolutionary struggles, (3) commitment to democratization through local, collective structures that anticipate the future liberated society. (Boggs 1977, 103)

Evidence of these tendencies could be found in spontaneous, local, and non-hierarchical organizations that preceded or split off from the hegemony of state socialism such as the Russian *soviets*, Italian

workers' cooperatives, and Spanish anarchist syndicates, to name just a few. Most of these movements were critical of revolutionary parties that merely supplanted power of the *ancien regime* without dismantling the bureaucracy, centralism, social divisions, and mass mystification that were its main mechanisms of control. Boggs emphasizes the perceived failure of the communist party to transcend the structures of power that Leninism purported to abolish as a key factor in the New Left's favoring of prefigurative politics. As many feminists, civil rights activists, environmentalists, and other leftists of the 1960s and 70s saw it, if any given anti-capitalist movement seeks to deligitimize the structural mechanisms of the establishment it must also seek to refuse to engage in those mechanisms within the internal structure of the activist collective.

After Carl Boggs, most evaluations of prefigurative politics were based on the New Left social movements of the 1960s and 70s. Wini Breines, in her 1980 article on the New Left and community organization, defines the term as an "essentially anti-organizational politics characteristic of the movement, as well as parts of the new leadership; it may be recognized in counter-institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics" (Breines 1980, 421). She supports Boggs' idea—that counter-hegemonic movements and institutions must be directly democratic in their structures of organization and strategies of diffusion—but expands the driving factors behind the popularity of prefigurative politics to include the growing desire for and imagining of a deep cultural and consciousness shift that was at the heart of many 1960s radical narratives (e.g., identity politics, communitarianism, counterculture).

Barbara Epstein, in her 1991 book *Political Protest & Cultural Revolution*, highlights elements of prefigurative politics within the non-violent direct action movements of the 1960s and 70s: "In each of the issue-based movements in which it has appeared, non-violent direct action has involved building community and trying to realize radically egalitarian values within the movement itself" (Epstein 1991, 1). Alongside sporadic and strategic attacks to the mainstream structures and values they were contesting, movement participants were deeply committed to transforming the interpersonal relations between one another.

Case Study: Occupy Wall Street

The Occupy Movement has been cited as the most recent incarnation of prefigurative politics, as "the practice of occupation and the very mode of existence of the movement are themselves prefigurative of a new, more democratic and more egalitarian world" (Deseriis & Dean 2012, 3). Probably the most unique aspect of the collective experimentation that took place at Zuccotti Park in Fall 2011 was the physical occupation of urban public space, which prefigured the desire to reclaim the urban commons for all residents. The ways in which movement participants administered day-to-day operations, mobilized actions or relief, or spread the message were seen to be prefigurative of the ways in which the society they envisioned would function. Consensus decision in the nightly General Assembly prefigured a directly democratic society in which centralization would be replaced by local councils and anti-exclusion tactics were utilized to ensure that traditionally marginalized voices were heard. The creation of counter-institutions such as the People's Library, Meditation Space, and Free Kitchen, were run collectively and autonomously. Workshops, teach-ins, and the free publication and distribution of participants' stories all worked to raise consciousness in non-authoritarian and anti-capitalist ways. Each of these mechanisms, structures, and processes embodied the principles of egalitarianism, solidarity, autonomy, equality, and justice; principles which activists deemed impossible to enact through established political channels. Similarly, the modes of social dynamics modeled a desired cultural shift and allowed the revolutionary process, as well as the vision of where the process would lead, to be defined by its participants (Chomsky 2012, Milkman et al 2013).

Conclusion

Boggs and Breines are considered to be the first authors to use the adjective "prefigurative" to describe what they saw as an emerging praxis based on a philosophical critique of state socialism and a physical embodiment of radical social change. Since their publication, and exponentially so due to the

global revolutionary movements of the 1990s and 2000s, there has been a proliferation of publications by social scientists, leftist academics, and activists who have analyzed, supported, and/or critiqued prefigurative politics and its role in radical social change. In the past century there has been a multitude of contexts in which to examine not just the ends but the means of radical grassroots movements, many of which actually emphasized the methods over the goals. From as early as the IWW's "building a new world in the shell of the old" to as recent as Occupy's "the movement is the message", experiments in new forms of protest, direct action, and counter-institutions have brought attention to the principles and methodologies behind prefigurative social organization as well as their application in real world scenarios.

References

Boggs, Carl. 1977. "Marxism, prefigurative Communism, and the problem of workers' control." *Radical America* 11 (6): 99-122.

Breines, Wini. 1980. "Community and Organization: The New Left and Michels' "Iron Law"." *Social Problems* 27 (4): 419-429.

Chomsky, Noam. 2012. *Occupy*. New York: Zuccotti Park Press.

Deseriis, Marco, and Jodi Dean. 2012. "A movement without demands." *Possible Futures*, January 3.

Epstein, Barbara. 1991. *Political protest and cultural revolution: nonviolent direct action in the 1970s and 1980s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Graeber, David. 2002. "The new anarchists." *New Left Review* 13: 61-73.

Maeckelbergh, Marianne. 2011. "Doing is believing: Prefiguration as strategic practice in the alterglobalization movement." *Social Movement Studies* 10 (1): 1-20.

Milkman, Ruth, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis. 2013. *Changing the subject: A bottom-up account of Occupy Wall Street in New York City*. New York: The Murphy Institute, The City University of New York.

Sancho, Guiomar Rovira. 2014. "Networks, insurgencies, and prefigurative politics A cycle of global indignation." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 20 (4): 387-401.

Schaffzin, Gabi. 2011. "Pre-Occupied With Occupation: Habermas, Prefigurative Politics, Effective Protest Center." *MIT Center for Civic Media Blog*, December 23.

Van de Sande, Mathijs. 2013. "The Prefigurative Politics of Tahrir Square–An Alternative Perspective on the 2011 Revolutions." *Res Publica* 19 (3): 223-239.

Yates, Luke. "Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements." *Social Movement Studies* 14 (1): 1-21.

About the Author:

Louisiana Lightsey is a PhD student in the cultural anthropology program at the University of Georgia. Her central research focus is political ecology and indigenous community resistance in Latin America. She received her Master's Degree in 2016 from the University of Arizona where she studied Latin

American literature and cultural studies in the Department of Spanish & Portuguese.

How to Cite:

Lightsey, Louisiana. August 17, 2017. "Prefigurative Politics." *Global South Studies: A Collective Publication with The Global South.* Accessed date.