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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Revolutionary practice and prefigurative politics: A clarification and defense

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a growth in movements like Zapatismo, 21st Century Socialism, the Movement of the Squares, Occupy, and others who combine commitments to a radical conception of democracy, human emancipation, and what is sometimes called "prefigurative politics." Prefigurative politics is discussed among the anarchists prominent in Occupy (Bray, 2013; Graeber, 2009, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2011, 2012; van der Sande, Sitrin, & Azzellini, 2014; Yates, 2015; 2015); Zapatismo and other Latin American social movements (Holloway, 2010; Sitrin, 2012; Zibechi, 2012); and anarchist and syndicalist organizations (Ness, 2014); autonomist Marxists (Holloway, 2010; Negri, 2009); theorists of 21st Century Socialism (Lebowitz, 2010, 2010; Mészáros, 1995) and even some progressive Trotskyists (Swain, 2015).

The aim of this article was to develop three arguments for the necessity of prefigurative politics for bringing about the kind of free and democratic socialist society envisioned by many of the aforementioned groups and thinkers, on the basis of Karl Marx's theory of practice.[1] These three arguments address the importance of prefigurative politics for radically free and democratic social change. Prefigurative politics is important for developing (a) revolutionary subjects with the powers and capacities needed to organize a radically free and democratic society; (b) revolutionary subjects with the required needs and motivations to work to bring such a society about; and (b) this sort of socialist consciousness.

This article shows how certain components of Marx's thought are relevant and interesting to the theory and practice of radical democratic movements today, showing non-Marxist radical thinkers how Marx's theory of practice can help to make sense of and contribute to the important topic of prefigurative politics, and thereby helping to bring this aspect of Marx's thought into dialogue with some related radical democratic and anarchist thought. In fact, since I believe the original anarchist arguments for prefigurative politics spring from a theory of practice shared by Marx and Bakunin (Schmidt & van der Walt, 2009),[2] I contend that this offers a potentially fruitful way of bringing Marxism and anarchism into, if not convergence, at least closer contact (Franks, 2012, Ness, 2014; Prichard, & Worth, 2016). Prefigurative politics is a key point of disagreement between anarchists and many Marxists, going back to debates in the First International (see Eckhardt, 2016), but casting it as a difference between Marxism and anarchism in general is misleading in light of the strategic varieties of Marxism, some of which embrace it (Choat, 2016). If its argument

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succeeds, this article shows that prefigurative politics has support not only in anarchist ideas but in Marxist thought as well, which suggests that a fruitful dialogue between anarchist and Marxist ideas is worthwhile.

The structure of the article is as follows. It begins (section 2) with an overview of Marx's theory of practice (sometimes written "praxis"[3]) through an analysis of his conception of human powers, needs, and consciousness, and of how they interact in human activity. Next, I link this conception of practice to the idea of prefigurative politics, distinguishing in section 3 three different senses of prefiguration that are potentially relevant for my discussion. I explain my defense of a narrower, strategic conception of prefigurative politics, focusing on specific organizational structures. I go on to argue in section 4 that, on the already-developed theory of practice, prefigurative politics in this narrower sense is crucial for bringing about a free and democratic socialist society. Finally, section 5 defends my position against some prominent criticisms of prefigurative politics.

2 | MARX'S THEORY OF PRACTICE

Marx thinks about practice in terms of the development and reciprocal determination of human powers (*Kräfte*) and needs (*Bedürfnisse*). A power here is defined loosely as an ability or capacity, and more precisely, as a person's real possibility to do or to be (Ollman, 1971, ch. 3; Raekstad, 2015, 2016). This is a complex consisting of two things. First, an internal power consisting of whatever internal capacities a person needs for her to do something. Second, a context or set of conditions that enable or preclude the exercise of these internal powers. To have a power is to have both the requisite external context and to have the required internal powers to take advantage of them (see Raekstad, 2015, section 1).

Human beings exercise their individual and social powers in order to meet their needs, and in so doing continuously develop and determine their powers and needs in different ways. For instance, if we exercise our powers to practice playing an instrument, our powers to play that instrument will increase; not doing so will result in those powers gradually deteriorating. Since human powers are continually determined through humans' life-activity, and since different societies and historical periods structure this life-activity differently, humans' powers vary across social and historical contexts.

If powers are continually determined in and through such practice, and thus in part determined by, and vary across, different social and historical contexts, the same is true for human needs. Although some basic needs will remain universal—such as hunger—even their content will vary across contexts. As Marx writes:

> *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. . . . The object of art—like every other product—creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. (Marx, 1992, p. 92; see also pp. 353–354 and 391)*

In other words, the ways in which we satisfy our needs by exercising our powers in turn affects those needs, in an ongoing process (Raekstad, 2015).[4]

Finally, human practice, as a specifically human thing, is characterized by humans' unique powers of consciousness:

> *Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species-being. . . . Only because of that is his activity free activity. (Marx, 1992, p. 328)*

He goes on to discuss further the distinction between human beings and animals:

> *It is true that animals also produce. They build nests and dwellings, like the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc. But they produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young; they produce one-sidedly, while man produces universally; they produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need. (Marx, 1992, p. 329)*

Consciousness enables human beings to reflect on, deliberate on, direct, and alter that activity as needed. It enables them to produce universally, as opposed to merely the benefits of their own and those close to them, and to produce even when they are free from immediate physical needs—such as the push of simple, instinctual impulses.

For Marx, this is associated with two things that are important for thinking about social change. It is part of his explanation for the greater developmental plasticity of human beings as opposed to other animals. Unlike other animals, human beings can consciously set their own standards or yardsticks for their behavior to adhere to, critically reflect on them, and alter them in response to their needs and interests. This, in turn, relates to an explanation for human beings' greater behavioral variation across different natural, social, and historical contexts. Different contexts imply different standards, yardsticks, etc. that need to be met in order to achieve our needs and interests, as well as the nature and contents of those needs and interests themselves. As a result, the standards and yardsticks of human activities will tend to be altered according to their shifting needs and interests (though not necessarily in a uniform or deterministic fashion) by human beings exercising their powers of consciousness.

This background is critical for understanding and drawing lessons from Marx's thinking about revolutionary practice. For Marx, as we will see, revolutionary organization requires the development of revolutionary subjects with the right powers, needs, and consciousness. Revolutionary subjects need the powers to really bring about a free and democratic socialist alternative and to organize production and consumption in ways that are free and thoroughly democratic in nature. They must feel a real need to do so. And they need the consciousness that makes it possible for them to introduce and maintain such a society. I will argue that developing these capacities requires prefigurative organization. To make this argument, it is first necessary to clarify what prefigurative politics means in the context of this article.

3 | PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

Three main senses of prefiguration need to be distinguished. The first was developed by the early Christian church fathers. The religious origins of the term are sometimes mistakenly confused with the origins of the political idea now referred to as prefigurative politics. In its early Christian sense, prefiguration is a form of "phenomenal prophecy"; it is "something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical" (Auerbach, 1984, p. 29).

Although this word later came to be used to denote political organizations aiming to institute in the present some aspects of what they aspire to in a future society, there are crucial differences. First, to prefigure something in this sense is not actually to do it or to try to do it. For Moses to prefigure Christ does not entail that Moses aspires to the same goals as Christ, or that Moses consciously and deliberately works towards what Christ achieves. By contrast, for a revolutionary organization to prefigure the future society it aspires to bring about is for it consciously and deliberately to aim for that future form of society as a goal and to use this aim to structure the way it organizes in the present. Second, whether something is prefigurative in the first sense is determined only retrospectively. We are able to imagine that Moses prefigures Christ only after Christ has come and gone. Since it is impossible to tell beforehand whether something prefigures anything else, and since prefiguration is disconnected from the intentions and goals of the agents doing the prefiguring, prefiguration in this sense does not offer practical guidance to a social and political movement or organization. The contemporary understanding of what today is called prefigurative politics developed in the 19th century without reference to the religious meaning of the term, and only over a century later did the term start to be used to denote this sort of politics (Boggs, 1977; Eckhardt, 2016).

We see one of the formulations of what we would, but they did not, call prefigurative politics in the Sonvillier circular of 1871, which states that

> *(t)he society of the future should be nothing other than the universalization of the organization 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. (Cited in Graham, 2005, pp. 97–98)*

The same idea is today expressed today in the Industrial Workers of the World's famous commitment to "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old" (2014, p. 4) and in the International Workers' Association-Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores commitments to, in the words of their British section, "building a new society within the shell of the old." (Solidarity Federation, 2014).

There are two main ways in which this commitment to prefigurative politics is interpreted today, each of which is compatible with building a new society within the shell of the old. Thus, the second sense of prefiguration I distinguish here refers to a narrow strategic interpretation, according to which a critical part of revolutionary socialist strategy is to develop organizations that embody structures of deliberation and decision-making that the future society is to contain. There might seem to be a paradox here: if nobody knows what a future society will look like in detail, how can it be prefigured it in contemporary practices? Since prefigurative politics, in this sense, means that the means of the present must be appropriate to some broad sort of vision of a future society, prefigurative politics also implies the "hypothetical formulation of alternatives and their continuous reformulation through 'trial and error'"; as such, prefigurative practices must be "inherently experimental and experiential" (Sande, 2015, p. 189). This idea is famously captured in the Zapatista slogan: "Asking, we walk." The future society envisioned by these anarchists (Leipold, 2015; Schmidt & van der Walt, 2009) is one without the state or capitalism, in which federations of workers' and local councils govern society from the bottom up according to a mode of participatory democratic planning, eliminating the capitalist division of labor, and distributing goods and services in a wholly different way, usually (but not always) according to need. It is clear that this conception of a future society is broadly identical to that of Marx (Raekstad, 2015, 2016).

The commitment to prefigurative politics can be read another way, according to the third sense of prefiguration, as discussed by Carl Boggs, among others, where it refers an organization or movement that itself embodies "those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are [its] ultimate goal" (Boggs, 1977, p. 100). The explicit inclusion of culture and human experience that Boggs talks about is broader than the focus on structures of deliberation and decision-making of the second definition. In addition to breadth, there are two further points of contrast between the second and third senses that need to be mentioned: one historical and one conceptual.

The historical point of contrast is that the original formulations of prefigurative politics in the 19th century refer to the second sense of the term. This is clear from the discussions in the First International, where prefigurative politics is consistently invoked in debates about the deliberation and decision-making structure of the International, not about the importance of broader things like daily life, culture, and human experience (Eckhardt, 2016). The association of prefigurative politics with broader questions of lifestyle and culture developed gradually later on, and then went on (especially in the USA) to influence the New Left. Although such experimentation was often part of anarchist politics, it was not thought of in terms of prefigurative politics. In his history of US anarchism in the 20th century, Andrew Cornell shows that the new generation of anarchists in the 1940s and 1950s "adopted the prefigurative element of anarchist politics," but they modified it considerably:

> *In the Wobblies' vision, the structure of their democratic unions prefigured the organizational form that would stitch together all of postcapitalist society. Postwar anarchists developed the metaphor in new directions, however. They urged anarchists to begin creating the new world in all aspects of their daily lives. . . . Earlier anarchists had developed their own cultural worlds. . . . In the postwar period, however, anarchists' prefigurative lifestyles and communities were less and less embedded in broader working-class traditions and neighborhoods, and they were not paired with confrontational class struggle. (Cornell, 2016, p. 208)*

The shifting emphasis from the structure of revolutionary organizations to modes of life and culture, coupled with moving away from participating in such organizations, indicates one way that a commitment to prefigurative politics along

our second and third definitions can conflict. A notion of prefiguration overly focused on counterculture and lifestyle and rejecting large-scale revolutionary organizations would certainly come into conflict with a notion of prefigurative politics focused on how large-scale revolutionary organizations are structured. From the perspective of a revolutionary committed to the necessity of social change through large organizations (such as all the historical anarchist organizations quoted above), the former kind of commitment to prefigurative politics can be read both as a distinct strategic position of its own and as problematically unstrategic in nature (Breines, 1982). Consequently, since my concern here is about a strategic question for organizations and movements, the second definition is the more appropriate one for my purposes.

Since this third definition is clearly broader and vaguer than the second and is in my view less fruitful for a discussion of strategy for social movements being pursued here, this article focuses solely on arguments for prefigurative politics in the second sense. Thus, prefigurative politics is defined here as the strategic commitment to developing revolutionary organizations that embody the structures of deliberation and decision-making that a post-capitalist society to contain.

This immediately allows us to see that one prominent criticism of prefigurative politics does not apply to the sense defended here; namely, that it amounts to rejecting all strategy or to a strategy of its own (Breines, 1982; Farber, 2014). On the second definition, prefigurative politics involves rejecting some strategies that give no role to prefigurative practices, such as social democracy and Stalinism, but a wide range of others are all in principle compatible with a commitment to prefiguration. For instance, the system of *caracoles* and good government councils in Chiapas, the network of cantons in Rojava and the networks of recuperated factories in Argentina are all very different and potentially prefigurative in nature. Similarly, some key strategic disagreements in anarchism take place between anarcho-syndicalists and anarchist communists[5] over whether the rural communes or syndicalist trade unions are best suited to prefiguring a future society, but their different strategies are all arguably prefigurative in nature. So, too, are rather different experiments with 21st Century Socialism in Venezuela, greatly influenced by Mészáros's theory of transition, which emphasise developing a network of communal councils and cooperatives to constitute the seeds of emancipatory socialism within the shell of the old polity and economy. The sense of prefigurative politics defended here is a strategic one and it does not amount to a revolutionary strategy all on its own or to rejecting all other strategies.

Finally, this strategic sense of prefigurative politics is not to be confused with any absolute ethical imperative, and it is not arrived at based on a desire to ensure the moral rectitude of one's actions per se. Such notions of prefigurative politics certainly exist and have been defended, but the sense defended here is different. My strategic conception of prefigurative politics is instead based on an empirical claim about what bringing about a free and democratic socialist society requires:

> *What the strategical interpretation of prefigurative politics says is that the correspondence between vision and praxis is necessary in order to achieve revolutionary objectives. . . . On such an account, the failure of all historical attempts to reach anarchy/communism by way of a vanguard socialist party are not due to the shortcomings of particular individuals (Lenin, Mao, Castro), nor to the adverse "objective" circumstances in which such attempts were made and which led them to "degenerate." . . . Rather, . . . these attempts were doomed from the start due to the separation between the revolutionary process and its desired results, a separation which resides in the uncritical reproduction of authoritarian and bureaucratic structures within the revolutionary movement. This is not a matter of practising what one preaches for the sake of it, but because [of] strategical arguments about the appropriate revolutionary path. (Gordon, 2007, p. 61)*

Such a strategic conception need not place absolute and irrevocable restrictions on anyone's actions, and may admit exceptions when necessary. For instance, many (but not all) anarchists advocate retaining top-down battlefield command powers for military commanders during battlefield operations to defend a revolution from assault by internal reactionaries or foreign invasion—as occurred, for example, during the Ukrainian, Manchurian, and Spanish revolutions. However, their commitment to prefigurative organization typically rules out (a) allowing such powers to be permanent or the norm in general social decision-making and (b) allowing organizations that they argue do not generally

require such exceptions like top-down battlefield command powers on the battlefield—organizations of revolutionary activists, trade unions, neighborhood councils and federations, and others—to embody them.

The next section provides three arguments for this strategic commitment.

4 | THREE ARGUMENTS FOR PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

Socialism, for many Marxists and anarchists alike, is above all a question of freedom as self-directed activity. Since human beings are naturally social animals, this means that the question is one of collective self-direction. The capitalist mode of production, by subjecting workers to a host of alien powers, and by having the labor process commanded and overseen by a separate layer of managers and bureaucrats, prevents self-directed activity in the workplace and in economic life more broadly. A future society, on Marx's view, will do away with these alien powers and enable collective self-direction by restructuring society such that it is governed by federations and workers' and local councils, coordinated by means of bottom-up democratic planning, eliminating the capitalist division of labor, and distributing goods according to need. (Raekstad 2016, ch 4). This in turn requires replacing the way that everyday work is planned, organized, overseen, and carried out.

This is possible only if there already are, at least to some extent, revolutionary subjects who have developed the powers to organize social life in different, namely free and democratic ways, and have the needs and consciousness that drive and enable them to do so. This does not assume that all the powers, needs, and consciousness of a future society are possible under capitalism, or can fully develop in the latter system. All that is needed is to assume that the requisite powers, needs, and consciousness can be developed *to some extent* despite capitalism, that is, within the struggle against it, and that doing so is necessary to transition beyond it. István Mészáros, the 'pathfinder' of 21st Century Socialism (Foster, 2015, p. 9), writes:

> *Marx's overall conception had for its strategic objective the comprehensive social revolution, in terms of which men must change "from top to bottom the conditions of their industrial and political existence, and consequently their whole manner of being." Accordingly, the forms and instruments of the struggle had to match the essentially positive character of the undertaking as a whole. (Mészáros, 1995, p. 676)*

And as Al Campbell has recently argued:

> *People must, through both education and collective experiences, both come to see conscious collective cooperative self-determination as both desirable and possible, and they must (as a process) develop enough capabilities to begin to exercise it. (Campbell, 2006, p. 119)*

Any revolutionary practice needs to (a) advance the present struggle and (b) generate the envisioned social change. The latter, (b), is possible only if the concrete organizations and movements that carry out (a) succeed in developing people's powers, needs, and consciousness in the right way. On this view, prefigurative politics is not at all opposed to the struggle against capitalism and the state; it is a thesis about how this struggle needs to be carried out in order succeed in bringing about a free and democratic socialist society.

To develop adequately these powers, needs, and consciousness requires that the organizational means employed in the present must, to a significant extent, prefigure the social organization aimed for in a free and democratic socialist society. The reason for this is straightforward. Really free and democratic structures and institutions do not yet exist in the economy or polity. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know how to organize production in a free and democratic way if one has no prior experience of organizing in such ways; it is hard to feel the need to live in such a way if you have never experienced anything like it; and it can be hard for people to believe it is even possible in the absence of any experience of it. Prefigurative practice can change all this, and it can do so without argument, in fact, without uttering a single word. The importance of prefigurative practice is considered below under three headings: powers; needs and consciousness.

4.1 | Powers

Marx's conception of revolutionary practice is built on a rejection of the simplistic old materialist view that it is possible to change human beings and society simply by putting into power the right educators or leaders and having them followed. This view forgets that "it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society," something Marx clearly thinks is nonsensical (Marx, 1992, p. 422). Marx finds the source of this mistake in the old materialism's standpoint of civil society; by contrast, his standpoint, "the standpoint of the new, is human society, or social humanity" (Marx, 1992, pp. 422–423). Here Marx is not criticizing the educator–educated model as an authoritarian mode of revolutionary practice per se, but the ideas that such a model presupposes.

Marx's alternative builds on the belief that "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice" (Marx, 1992 p. 422). Marx and Engels expand on the implications of this in *The German Ideology*:

> *Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew. (Marx, & Engels, 1975, pp. 52–53; cf. 439)*

Years later, reflecting on the Paris Commune, Marx writes that the proletariat

> *know that in order to work out their own emancipation . . . they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming both circumstances and men. (Marx, 1996, p. 188)*

Here Marx is clearly stressing that revolutionary struggles are necessary not just for changing society, but also specifically for transforming their participants in the right way to enable them to do so. This article contends that part of this necessary transformation of human beings involves developing revolutionary subjects with the right powers, needs, and consciousness to introduce a free and democratic socialist society, and that this in turn requires organizational forms that prefigure that future society.

It is in this connection that we should read Marx's consistent stress on working class self-emancipation: "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves" (Marx, & Engels, 1955, p. 288). This concern is echoed in recent work, such as Lebowitz's critique of "one-sided Marxism" (Lebowitz, 2012, ch. 8). Following Marx, Lebowitz argues that "it is necessary to develop new institutions that permit people to transform themselves while transforming circumstances" (Lebowitz, 2012, p. 187). This is because in "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" (Lebowitz, 2012, p. 188). Similarly, Raúl Zibechi writes that in contemporary Latin American movements an "emancipatory climate, which is conducive to the construction of the new world" is being developed, building towards revolution by "enhancing the capabilities buried within the people" (Zibechi, 2012, pp. 52–53).

This gives us the following argument for prefigurative revolutionary practice. Achieving a free and democratic future society requires people with the powers to organize themselves and others in free and democratic ways. These powers cannot simply be handed down by an enlightened elite to the masses; instead, they must be developed by the masses themselves through their practices. The organizational means employed in the present must, to a significant extent, prefigure the social organization aimed for in a free and democratic socialist society, because the only way for people to develop their powers and capacities for collective self-organization is through experiences of and experiments of doing so.

By contrast, if socialist movements fail to plant the seeds of the future society in present modes of collective deliberation and decision-making, they will never be able to attain a free and democratic socialist society, because the revolutionaries will not have developed the powers to organize in these ways. Highly centralized so-called "vanguardist" organizations will, therefore, on a proper Marxist understanding of practice, never be able to carry out a genuinely emancipatory socialist revolution: their very structure means that their participants lack the powers to do so.

4.2 | Needs

Moving on to needs, in 1844 Marx writes that

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

This fundamentally follows the lines of what Graeber calls contaminationism:

> *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. (Graeber, 2013, p. 89)*

In both cases the core idea is the same: people join an organization to fight for particular, extrinsic ends (global justice, better wages and working conditions, and others); the organization they join instantiates a certain kind of practice that they therefore come to participate in; the experience of this participation causes them to think about the world in different ways and to change their needs, goals, and desires (Raekstad, 2015).[6] This theme is echoed throughout discussions of the affective aspects of prefigurative organizing today (Holloway, 2010, throughout; Sitrin, 2012, ch. 4, Zibechi, 2012). Here I adopt the materialist conception of experience developed by Cox and Nielsen:

> *Experience . . . is best understood as the practical and tacit knowledge that human beings produce about the social and natural world in which they live as they engage and interact with this world. In other words, experience is constituted by practical-tacit knowledge about social being garnered through social being. (Cox, & Nilsen, 2014, p. 33)*

This suggests another argument for prefigurative practice. Achieving a free and democratic society of the sort implied by an emancipatory socialism requires not only people with the powers to organize it but people who feel the need to do so. Experimenting with, and experiences of, free and democratic social structures are inherently empowering and enjoyable. One of the effects of these experiences is that people come to acquire a radical new need for the freedom, equality, community, and democracy that they embody. Here radical needs are defined as needs that "require the transformation of the social formation in which they originated" (Cox, & Nilsen, 2014, p. 43). These needs drive participants to seek such things not only in their activism but in other areas of social life as well, such as their workplaces and local communities. As a result, the new and oppositional powers and needs developed in and through revolutionary organization "push against" the wider social structure they are part of and "contain the potential to transcend it" (Cox, & Nilsen, 2014, p. 42). Note that the argument here is not that only prefigurative organizations and movements can generate the necessary experiences of freedom and democracy, or that only they can generate radical needs. Rather, the argument is that prefigurative organizations and movements are likely to be the best at doing so.

By contrast, organizations and movements that fail to embody the deliberation and decision-making they aim for in an emancipatory socialist society will not only fail to develop revolutionary subjects with the necessary powers to bring about such a society; they will also be worse at developing revolutionary subjects with the needs and motivations to bring it about. Having never experienced such a thing, their members might assume it to be impossible, and thus reject it as a real goal. They will not know what success or failure would really be like, much less which steps need to be taken

in that direction. And not knowing what these deliberation and decision-making structures are like in any meaningful way, they will not be able to believe it is a tangible goal to work effectively towards.

4.3 | Consciousness

Finally, prefigurative politics is important for generating revolutionary consciousness. Recall that, on Marx's view, consciousness is a human power that is never "elevated above the this-worldly realm of human practice" (Cox, & Nilsen, 2014, p. 32), but is situated within ongoing human practices just as other human powers. As Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*:

> *The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life. . . . Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these . . . Consciousness* [das Bewusstsein] *can never be anything else than conscious being* [das bewusste Sein], *and the being of men is their actual life-process. (Marx & Engels, 1975, p. 36)*

I emphasize that this passage is not primarily about the distinction between practice and consciousness: it sets out the nature of their connection. Marx and Engels claim here that there can be no development of consciousness that is detached from lived and experienced practice. This is important because it means that developing a radical free and democratic socialist consciousness requires the creation and development of the forms of practice of which that consciousness is conscious.

This shows us a third way in which prefigurative practice is important in a Marxist conception of revolutionary practice. Bringing about an emancipatory socialist society requires revolutionary subjects with the right revolutionary consciousness. Consciousness of free and democratic modes of deliberation and decision-making, which is necessary for an emancipatory socialist society, can develop only on the basis of participation in, and experience of, such activities. Free and democratic modes of deliberation and decision-making must be practiced in some way in order to be understood, that is, in order for people to develop consciousness of them in a meaningful way. Consequently, only organizations and movements that prefigure the free and democratic structures of deliberation and decision-making they want to see in a future socialist society will be able to develop the consciousness that is necessary to bring such a society about. As Graeber pointed out apropos contaminationism, experiencing real processes of "people making collective decisions without a leadership structure, motivated only by principle and solidarity" has the power to "change one's most fundamental assumption about what politics . . . could actually be like" (Graeber, 2013, p. 89).

I contend that this point can be generalized to the experience of prefigurative politics more broadly. Once one has experienced free and democratic modes of deliberation and decision-making, seen that they really work, and enjoyed them, one must reject one's previous assumptions that such things are impossible. Such experiences raise participants' consciousness and pose fundamental questions about how it might be possible to re-organize social life so it no longer displays the alienation and domination of capitalism and the state. This is similar to what 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" (Williams, 2002, p. 254).

Before I move on, I argue against one common mistake that is often inspired by Lukács about the role of consciousness. We must not reduce the development of human powers and needs described above simply to a development or change of consciousness, or substitute the latter for the former.[7] Developing consciousness is far from unimportant, but some important things are missed if consciousness is all we think about under the rubric of revolutionary practice. A social revolution requires subjects with the right powers and needs. It requires people who can organize themselves in free and democratic ways, who can organize others in such ways, who have the right habits and experiences to solve inevitable problems and hiccups, and who feel a real need to live in these ways rather than in the ones that dominate present society. Consciousness—in the sense of theoretical knowledge, outlooks, values, and so forth—is not sufficient for *any* of these things. No amount of knowing that such-and-such will endow us with the knowledge of how to do this

and that. We may consciously think that we want to have habits and tendencies other than those we possess, but this is something very different from actually having developed such things. To want to be able to organize oneself and others in certain ways is very different from actually being able to do so—much less being able to do so well. A desire for an abstract promise of freedom and democracy sometime in the future is something very different from a desire for the kind of freedom and democracy one has already experienced. Consciousness is an important part of revolutionary practice, but it is one important part among others which should not be reduced to, or substituted by, changes in consciousness only.

5 | REPLIES TO CRITICISMS

This section responds to three prominent criticisms which are sometimes leveled against advocates of prefigurative politics. First, it is sometimes thought that David Harvey's critique of horizontal forms of organization amounts to a critique of prefigurative politics in general. Briefly put, Harvey argues that strict horizontalism and decentralization is impractical for dealing with issues of the scale and complexity found in modern societies (Harvey, 2012, ch. 3). This does not amount to a critique of prefigurative politics in general, however. If it is true, it claims that (at least some forms of) horizontal modes of organization are impossible or impractical for complex modern societies, which means that such forms of organization cannot be hoped for in the (foreseeable) future, and therefore cannot not usefully be prefigured in contemporary practices either. As such, it argues only that certain organizational forms are unworkable and therefore undesirable under modern conditions. It does not argue that current organizational forms should not prefigure forms that would be workable and desirable in a future society, only that neither of these should be strictly horizontal in nature.

Second, there is the argument that, in Lenin's words, anarcho-syndicalist prefigurative politics and the rejection of state participation inevitably hinders them in efforts "to unite the workers in big, powerful and properly functioning organizations, capable of functioning well under all circumstances" (Lenin, 1972, p. 244). In contemporary discussions this argument is often buttressed by claims that prefigurative organizations have never been able to sustain large memberships, or to survive any significant period of time, and they have failed to play any significant role in anti-capitalist struggles (Meyer, 2015, p. 183; Nimtz, 2015, pp. 173–175).

The first response to make here is that prefigurative politics, in the sense of a strategic commitment to developing revolutionary organizations that embody the structures of deliberation and decision-making that will be contained in a post-capitalist society, does not necessarily entail rejecting all state participation. For example, there are strands of thought—in particular democratic confederalism (Bookchin, 2015) and 21st Century Socialism (Lebowitz, 2010; Mészáros, 1995)—that combine some commitments to prefigurative politics with attempts to utilize existing state institutions. There are important debates about whether these approaches are viable over the long term and whether they will lead to a free and democratic socialist society. Anarchists, council communists, autonomists, and others criticize these approaches on the grounds that participating in state structures will tend, over time, to undermine the prefigurative organizations that attempt to work with them, but that is a debate that is beyond the scope of this article. The important point here is that these examples show that there is no necessary contradiction between a strategic commitment to prefigurative politics and a range of different approaches to dealing with state power.

The other response to Lenin's argument is that it is empirically false. Many prefigurative anarcho-syndicalist organizations like Spanish Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Federación Obrera Regional de Argentina and the Federación Obrera Regional de Uruguay, have been big, and permanent organizations with memberships in the tens or even (in the case of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo) hundreds of thousands of members, and they have organized for their members' interests in a variety of ways (Damier, 2009; Schmidt, & van der Walt, 2009). In fact, according to Eric Hobsbawm, during 1905–1914 "the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist" (Hobsbawm, 1993, pp. 72–73). Furthermore, two of the more promising contemporary experiments of something like a transition to a free and democratic socialism, Chiapas and Rojava, are examples of

prefigurative organizing in the sense defended here and involve large, permanent organizations that have been able to organize 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 big, permanent organizations capable of functioning well.

Third, there is Engels' argument that prefigurative politics is incompatible with the authoritarian institutions required for (armed) defense against capitalist and state attack (Engels, 1972, pp. 100–104, 1988, pp. 581–598). Here, too, it is worth noting that prefigurative politics as defended here is not incompatible with all forms of state involvement—including for securing armed defense. But it is worth challenging the argument's empirical premise in light of recent evidence. The aforementioned anarcho-syndicalist unions continuously challenged the power of the state and capital. Council communists in Germany did the same, managing, among other things, to force Wilhelm II to stop the First World War. The Zapatistas have been in continuous conflict with the Mexican state, and have organized an impressive network of media, education programs and international solidarity to help them to survive and support other struggles. Finally, revolutionaries in Rojava managed to combat state repression and successfully combat ISIS militarily, they re-organized society in a multitude of different ways, took over and secured public services, organized and coordinated national and international solidarity, and much more, all the while emphasizing prefiguration (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016). In the Spanish revolution, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo and the Federación Anarquista Ibérica broke with anarchist strategy in favor of "popular front" tactics of leaving the army in the hands of the state and joining the state themselves, despite criticisms of the wider international anarcho-syndicalist movement. This led to many of their parliamentary representatives trying to prevent the revolution that was happening throughout Spain and arguably enabled the communist party fatally to betray the revolution altogether (Damier, 2009, ch. 14). In brief, the historical record available to us shows that there is no inherent contradiction between effectively dealing with the means of coercion and defense and prefigurative politics.

6 | CONCLUSION

If the foregoing argument is correct, prefigurative politics in a narrower, strategic sense is a vital component of revolutionary strategy, not just for anarchists and Marxists but for a wide range of radical democratic movements and activists as well. On the other hand, if prefigurative politics in this sense is counterproductive, dangerous, undesirable, or unnecessary, then we need to understand what it is and the strongest arguments that can be made for it. All too often the idea is misrepresented and the reasoning behind it misconstrued by its critics, which does little more than mislead readers and confuse the discussion. For those who still wish to reject prefigurative organizing, I hope at least to have provided a clearer explication of what it amounts to and the case that can be made for it.

I make one final point. In every single instance of a socialist vanguard party taking power throughout the 20th century, the result was either mere social democracy or a single-party dictatorship. In all instances they have failed to bring about the kind of radically free and democratic society that their supporters envisioned. Clearly this falls short of the kind of socialist society that Marx and others always hoped for, raising the question of how socialists can prevent this from happening again. Prefigurative politics offers an answer to this question—an answer that is rooted in a theory of practice and that has some encouraging historical examples to recommend it. If this argument is correct, a central component of any renewed movement for a free and democratic socialist society must take seriously the need for prefigurative politics. This raises a number of questions about how to think about prefigurative politics in concrete detail; about the best ways of prefigurative organizing; about how to interact with other groups, and more. These are important questions, and they deserve much greater consideration than they currently tend to receive.

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NOTES

[1] To some extent this also presupposes that Marx's theory of practice is broadly adequate as a way of thinking about (human) social life and social change.

[2] As this is a very controversial point, this article focuses solely on Marx's theory of practice and the arguments for prefigurative politics that can be constructed on its basis.

[3] Since there is no distinction between the two words in Marx's original texts, I use one and the same word in translation: practice.

[4] This implies some connection between needs and motivations or desires. The precise nature of this connection is complicated and controversial in the literature.

[5] This is a misnomer because many of their opponents, such as anarcho-syndicalists (past and present), shared the goal of anarchist communism.

[6] As I have pointed out above, this presupposes a connection between desires and goals on the one hand and Marx's conception of needs on the other. I explore this issue elsewhere.

[7] I say the error was inspired by Lukács rather than Lukácsian because I do not want to discuss the complex issues of interpreting Lukács, on which a great deal of innovative work is currently being done. However, for some insightful and sympathetic critiques of Lukacs' work in this regard, see Part II of Mészáros (1995).

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