

Prefigurative Politics, Catastrophe, and Hope

Does the Idea of “Prefiguration” Offer False Reassurance?

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2018 June 12

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Note from CrimethInc.

Anarchists such as David Graeber and Cindy Milstein have used the term “prefigurative politics” to describe the anarchist principle that the ways we organize in the present should reflect the sort of society we hope to create in the future. Yet the concept of prefiguration is drawn from a Christian theology that presumes a future salvation so certain that it radiates backward through time, generating its own precursors. Many Marxists, too, see history as the inevitable unfolding of an ordained process—a sort of secular second coming of Christian millenarianism. Most anarchists, by contrast, take nothing for granted about the future, especially in today’s context of ecological collapse—so it may behoove us to revisit the concept of prefigurative politics to see whether it still serves our needs today. We are pleased to present the following text by Uri Gordon, in which he rigorously explores the origins of the concept of prefiguration and its emergence in anarchist discourse.

“ΕΙΜΑΣΤΕ ΕΙΚΟΝΑ ΑΠΟ ΤΟ ΜΕΛΛΟΝ” (We are an image from the future)

— Graffiti, 2008 Greek riots

“Prefigurative politics” is commonly used to express a radical ethos of unity between means and ends. Less attention has been given to the peculiar way of *imagining time* that this concept invokes. On the one hand, there is the familiar ethical revolutionary practice, chiefly indebted to the anarchist tradition, in which the fight against domination is connected to the immediate construction of social alternatives. On the other hand, however, this concept is based on “prefiguration”—a *temporal framing*, drawn from Christian theology, in which the future is thought to radiate backwards on its past.

Where does this idea come from? Is the idea of projection from the future necessary to maintain unity between means and ends? Or should the terminology of prefiguration be abandoned on account of the false reassurances it offers?

First, Gordon uncovers the theology of prefiguration, tracing it from the Church Fathers to politicized resurfacings in the Diggers and the New Left. He argues that this temporal framing is indeed connected to a mental “process of reassurance,” common among many revolutionaries who drew confidence from the notion that they were realizing a pre-ordained historical path. Second, he offers the first systematic review of means-ends unity, as expressed in the anarchist tradition. Here, Gordon argues that in contrast to “prefiguration,” such expressions were framed in terms of a *generative* temporal framing, in which the present influences the future, and not the other way around. The third and final part argues that the idea of prefiguration—even if not taken literally—may nevertheless serve as an echo of false reassurance. This may conveniently sidestep a generative disposition towards the future, now that traditional promises of revolutionary transformation are replaced with prospects of eco- and industrial collapse. In closing, Gordon suggests replacing the concept of “prefigurative politics” with “concrete utopia”—an idea that lacks reassurance, but can offer hope even in the face of anxiety and catastrophe.

The following text involves a somewhat abstract discussion of ideas and their histories, but a discussion that has a bearing on our struggles and the attitudes we bring to them. At best, readers

will be able to take a fresh look at their disposition towards the future as it relates to their current actions.

An extended academic version of this piece is available here⁽¹⁾. For their helpful comments, thanks go to Ben Franks, Francis Dupuis-Déri, and audience members at the House of Bugaboo and the Sydney Anarchist Bookfair, where earlier versions were presented.

Prefiguration, Recursion, and Reassurance

The term “prefigurative politics” did not emerge among activists. It was introduced by two social theorists: Carl Boggs, who published two articles in 1977 referring to a prefigurative *tradition, model, or task*, and Wini Breines, who reformulated the term two years later as “prefigurative *politics*” in her discussion of the New Left. The concept’s recent popularity reflects attention to the radical end of the alter-globalization protests of the early 2000s. Unlike the trade unions, NGOs, and political parties who also participated in these protests, radical groups rejected top-down organization, lobbying, and programs aimed at the seizure of state power. Instead, they promoted anti-hierarchical and anti-capitalist practices: decentralized organization in affinity groups and networks; decision-making by consensus; voluntary and non-profit undertakings; lower consumption; and an effort to identify and counteract regimes of domination and discrimination such as patriarchy, racism, and homophobia in activists’ own lives and interactions. “Prefigurative politics” is typically associated with these practices and orientations—not with any temporal framing.

Many authors who discuss these practices do so in ethical terms, without temporal implications. In such discussions, the idea of “ends” is understood in terms of goods and values (as in, “an end in itself”), rather than as a potential future state of society (as in, “an end result”). Benjamin Franks, for example, emphasizes the intrinsic value of means, contrasting this to the instrumental or “consequentialist” valuation found among authoritarian vanguards. Gabriel Kuhn also uses ethical rather than temporal language in associating prefigurative politics with “the belief that the establishment of an egalitarian society enabling free individual development is dependent on political actors implementing the essential values of such a society immediately, in their ways of organizing, living, and fighting.” Finally, Cindy Milstein’s ethical statement is explicitly dissociated from the future:

“We’re not putting off the good society until some distant future but attempting to carve out room for it in the here and now, however tentative and contorted... consistency of means and ends implies an ethical approach to politics. How we act now is how we want others to begin to act, too. We try to model a notion of goodness even as we fight for it.”

Still, a temporal sense of prefiguration does surface in some statements, which directly relate current practices to a possible future. Brian Tokar defines the concept of prefiguration as “the idea that a transformative social movement must necessarily anticipate the ways and means of the hoped-for new society.” In their book *Anti-Capitalist Britain*, John Carter and Dave Morland write that it is “a strategy that is an embryonic representation of an anarchist social future.”

⁽¹⁾ <https://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/46972/1/Prefig%20final.pdf>

Finally, using terms that are very significant to our discussion, sociologist Steven Buehler defines prefigurative politics as a strategy in which “pursuit of utopian goals is recursively built into the movement’s daily operation and organizational style.”

These statements introduce terminology that goes well beyond the ethical: anticipation, hope, maturation, recursion, representation, utopia. To begin unpacking this future-orientation, I would like to expose the roots of the idea of prefiguration, which may not be familiar to activists using the term.

The prefigurative idea entered the Western imagination through Christian biblical interpretation. Since its beginnings, Christian theology has approached the Hebrew bible as an Old Testament “having a shadow of good things to come” (Heb10:1). Stripped of its normative and national character, the Hebrew bible’s Christianized significance lies in its foreshadowing of the Gospel, such that, in the words of Cardinal de Lubac, “Christ appears to us preceded by the shadows and the figures which he himself had cast on Jewish history.” Thus Paul the Apostle says that Adam was “a figure [τύπος, *typos*] of him that was to come” (Rom 5:15), and that the trials of the Israelites in the wilderness “became examples [τύποι, *typoi*] for us” (1Cor.10:6). In his seminal essay on the term “figura,” literary scholar Erich Auerbach identified Tertullian (c.160-225CE) as the earliest Church Father to develop Paul’s occasional references to prefiguration into a systematic approach to the interpretation of scripture, known today as Typology. Thus, among many other examples, in *Adversus Marcionem*, Tertullian treats Moses’s naming of Joshua (Num. 13:16) as “a figure of things to come” [*figura futurorum fuisse*], linking Joshua to his namesake, Jesus of Nazareth, and Joshua’s leadership of the Israelites to Jesus’ leadership of the “second people”—the Christians—into the “promised land... of eternal life.”

According to Auerbach, “from the fourth century on, the usage of the word *figura* and of the method of interpretation connected with it are fully developed in nearly all the Latin Church writers.” The earliest usage I could find of the specific term “prefigure” is in the Latin translation of *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus (made around 380 CE). Here, he writes that “the first testament... exhibited a type [*typum*] of heavenly things... prefiguring [*præfigurans*] the images of those things which exist in the Church.” Soon after, St. Jerome (347–420) centered his 53rd Epistle (to Paulinus, *De studi Scripturarum*) on how Christ is “predestined and prefigured [*prædestinatus autem, et præfiguratus*] in the Law and the Prophets.” Thus, Deuteronomy is a “prefiguration of evangelical law [*Evangelicae legis præfiguratio*],” and Jonah “calls the world to repent, his shipwreck prefiguring the Passion of the Lord” [*passionem Domini præfigurans*]. Many other examples use different terminology, from Joshua’s lay of the land “describing the celestial spiritual kingdom of Jerusalem,” to Esther who “in the figure of the Church [*in Ecclesiae typo*] liberates her people from danger.”

It was St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), however, who “developed this idea... profoundly and completely” according to Auerbach. Auerbach gives many examples, to which we may add Augustine’s statements in *City of God* that Cain, “founder of the earthly city... signifies the Jews who killed Christ the shepherd of men, which Abel the shepherd of sheep was prefiguring [*præfigurabat*];” and that “the kingdom of Saul... was the shadow of a kingdom yet to come” and therefore David passed over the opportunity to slay Saul (1 Sam 24.1–7) “for the sake of what it was prefiguring” [*propter illud, quod præfigurabat*].

Prefiguration, then, is a *recursive temporal framing* in which events at one time are interpreted as a *figure* pointing to its *fulfillment* in later events, with the figure cast in the model of the fulfillment. In the statements just reviewed, the interpretation is backward-looking: both the figure

and its fulfillment (i.e. Old Testaments events and the events of the Gospel) precede the interpretation. In the same retrospective way, we could say that Paul's statements "prefigured" the fuller accounts of typology in Jerome and Augustine. However, prefiguration can also be forward-looking, with current events said to prefigure future ones. This prospective sense is the one in which John the Baptist anticipates "he that comes after me" (Matthew 3:11)—announcing his own prefiguration of Jesus. Equally important to the Christian scheme, such prospective prefiguration is carried over to notions of End Times, with each figure-fulfillment pair pointing to a third, final fulfillment and completion in the Second Coming. In this light, argues Auerbach,

"the history of no epoch even has the practical self-sufficiency which... [in the modern view] resides in the accomplished fact... the event is enacted according to an ideal model which is a prototype situated in the future and thus far only promised... every future model, though incomplete as history, is already fulfilled in God and has existed from all eternity in his providence."

Given how central this temporal framing was to the Christian worldview, it is not surprising that oppositional movements in medieval and early modern Europe often used prefigurative language. A case in point is Gerrard Winstanley, the Diggers' leader, for whom prefiguration became the cornerstone of a complete revolutionary theology. In his 1649 pamphlet *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*, Winstanley explicitly justifies the Diggers' direct action strategy—expropriating formerly-common lands and withholding of wage labor—in terms of its supposed fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Winstanley believed that the Kingdom of God could be brought into being, not through divine intervention, but through human action—by establishing an equal society in his own time. Instead of a literal Second Coming, he expected the final rising of the "Spirit of Christ, which is the Spirit of universal Community and Freedom" to take place in the persons of those who "lay the Foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury." Therefore, he declares, "they that are resolved to work and eat together, making the Earth a Common Treasury, doth joyn hands with Christ, to lift up the Creation from Bondage, and restores all things from the Curse." Later on, Winstanley uses his own typology in addressing concerns about repression and hardship:

"And we are assured, that in the strength of this Spirit that hath manifested himself to us, we shall not be startled, neither at Prison nor Death... For by this work we are assured... that Bondage shall be removed, Tears wiped away, and all poor People by their righteous Labours shall be relieved, and freed from Poverty and Straits; For in this work of Restoration there will be no begger in Israel: For surely, if there was no Begger in literal Israel, there shall be no Begger in Spiritual Israel the Anti-type, much more."

Winstanley's final statement (which does not, in fact, refer directly to scripture, but to an observation he himself made frequently in his writings) describes the work of the Diggers as a fulfillment of an Old Testament figure. In the terms defined above, Winstanley's prefiguration is backward-looking, albeit in the present perfect tense. The Diggers and their actions are not a figure, but the fulfillment of the "Spiritual Israel" prefigured in the Bible. As we shall see, however, an explicitly forward-looking use of prefiguration is also a feature of the revolutionary imagination.

In the meantime, however, I would like to argue that Winstanley's prefigurative thinking is an example of the "process of reassurance," identified by historian Reinhard Koselleck among numerous "groups of activists who wished to... be part of a history moving under its own momentum, where one only aided this forward motion." In his essay *On the Disposability of History*, Koselleck describes the process of reassurance as "a means of strengthening the will to hurry the advent of the planned future." This certainly applies to Winstanley's assurance that the Diggers' actions are the foretold fulfillment of biblical figures. It is a framing that, according to Koselleck, "serves... as a relief—one's will becomes the executor of transpersonal events—and as a legitimation which enables one to act in good conscience."

I would like to point to a resurfacing of this process of reassurance in Andre Gorz's "The Way Forward," published in the *New Left Review* shortly after the French uprising of 1968. This article stands out because its use of prefiguration predates Boggs by almost a decade, while strikingly integrating the term into an authoritarian Marxist framework. This gives us a unique opportunity to examine a secular and political version of prefigurative reasoning *in isolation from* the anarchistic ethical strategy which the term normally refers to. Indeed, Gorz employs familiar stereotypes of anarchism as "relying on mass spontaneity, seeing insurrection as the royal road to revolution" and as "the theory of all or nothing according to which the revolution must be a quasi-instantaneous act." Arguing also against "the immediate construction of socialism and of communism," Gorz calls for a "Guevarist" strategy, in which the revolutionary vanguard becomes an educator of the masses. The vanguard party "prefigures the proletarian State, and reflects for the working class its capacity to be a ruling class." In Gorz's scheme, means do not prefigure ultimate ends, but other means. Rather than prefiguring a "post-revolutionary society," the party's "central organs, by their cohesion and capacity for political analysis, will prefigure the central power of the transitional period."

Gorz's repeated use of prefiguration cannot be dismissed as mere literary flourish. It relies, no less than Winstanley's theological framing, on a universal point of view that bridges past, present, and future within an unfolding plan. In his case, this is the orthodox Marxist revolutionary program. His framing is clearly forward-looking, with a present figure looking towards its future fulfillment. The desirable role of the vanguard in the present is thus worked out backwards from the endgame in which it seizes state power. Only the grand narrative grounding this program, with its specific account of class and party, can offer a clear enough image of the future (the workers' state) to form a model for the present. Only a revolutionary scenario that is a "given" can make such symbolic projection from the future intelligible. This is not to endorse ambitious claims about a messianic streak at the heart of Marxism. The point is that in this prefigurative scheme, the one possible—if not guaranteed—path towards revolution is already decided.

Even more importantly, Gorz uses prefiguration as an almost-transparent conceit. The educative role Gorz describes is supposed to strengthen the workers' movement and lead it to fulfill its potential. Why not place such a process of education within a generative temporal framing, developing forward in time without recursive projection from an imagined future endgame? Gorz wants the party to educate by modeling the given image of its victory, hurrying on the development of class consciousness. In other words, the prefigurative language is openly intended to activate a process of reassurance among the working class.

As we shall see later on, it is the absence of reassurance that prefiguration now papers over. For now, though, I would like to look more closely at the generative temporal framings which have accompanied the ethos of means-ends unity. These appear earliest and most consistently

in the anarchist tradition, which none of the originators of the concept “prefigurative politics” served very well.

Ethical Practice and Generative Temporality

Carl Boggs published his article “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers’ Control” in the ten-year double issue of *Radical America*, a magazine started in 1967 by Paul Bhule and members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), but which “long outlived its seedbed” to become “an eclectic left publication, bound to no single strategy and certainly to no organization.” The article’s primary interest is in council insurgencies in Russia, Italy, and Germany between 1917–1920, and it defines the term “prefigurative” as “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.”

Boggs’s definition above may be called a *formal* definition, limited to the very correspondence between ultimate goal and ongoing practice, while remaining silent on their actual content. Contrast this to his statements in the article he published in the academic journal *Theory and Society* the same year, “Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy and the Dilemma of Power.” Here, he refers to the prefigurative task as one “which expresses the ultimate ends of the revolutionary process itself: popular self-emancipation, collective social and authority relations, socialist democracy.” Here, instead, is a *substantive* definition, which unlike the formal one gives particular value-content to both practices and goals. A substantive definition is also used by Wini Brienes, in her paper first presented at the 1979 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, revised for publication in *Social Problems* and later expanded into her book *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968*. Brienes, who credits Boggs, defines prefigurative politics as the “attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values... to develop the seeds of liberation and the new society (prior to and in the process of revolution) through notions of participatory democracy grounded in [non-capitalist and communitarian] counter-institutions.”

Notice that the formal definition leaves prefigurative politics open to association with widely varied practices, from the courts-in-waiting of crown pretenders to parliamentary shadow cabinets to white nationalist groups who “prefigure” Aryan dominance. What bridges the formal and substantive definitions, however, is a particular political context. This is the opposition to authoritarian variants of Marxism, whose ends and means do not correspond in this way. On its opponents’ account, while authoritarian Marxism does posit a stateless communist society as its end-goal—in Lenin’s own words, one “without force, without coercion, without subordination”—it proceeds via top-down structures and the seizure of state power. There is no correspondence between means and ends, and revolutionary organization and action are approached instrumentally. This critique and the alternative now identified with “prefigurative politics” were first worked out, not by the New Left, but by anarchists starting a century earlier.

Brienes credits anarchism and radical pacifism as the “real forerunners” of the New Left, but does not go beyond naming Paul Goodman and Murray Bookchin as influential representatives. In his article for *Theory and Society*, Boggs dedicates all of one page to the anarchist contribution, dismissing it as having merely “emerged in response to organized Marxism... flailing away helplessly from the outside,” “trapped in its own spontaneism” and “preoccupation with small face-to-face ‘organic’ institutions.” In *Radical America*, while acknowledging that the prefigura-

tive tradition “begins with the nineteenth century anarchists,” he outdoes himself (and Gorz) in alleging that the anarchists “scorned politics,” showed “contempt for ‘theory’ and ‘organization’ in any form” and were “basically romantic and utopian,” looking “to an idyllic past rooted in a primitive collectivism”—all without a shard of evidence. What is more, having first commended prefigurative strategy for viewing “statism and authoritarianism as special obstacles to be overturned,” Boggs seems to recoil from the consequences of his own argument, and almost immediately refers to prefigurative structures as “a nucleus of a future socialist state,” while praising Councilism for not “contemptuously dismiss[ing]” the “contestation for state power.” While recent writers on prefigurative politics have done more to acknowledge its indebtedness to anarchism, what follows is a systematic examination of key utterances on means-ends unity in the anarchist tradition. As we shall now see, these consistently used a generative temporal framing, as opposed to recursive prefiguration.

The formative conflict between the authoritarian and libertarian factions in the First International came to a head after the fall of the Paris Commune of 1871. When the closed General Council of the International resolved that workers must form their own political parties, anarchists held a counter-conference at Sonvilier (Bernese Jura). They produced a circular that defined the counter-program of the social revolution as “‘Emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves,’ free of all directing authority, even should that authority be elected and endorsed by the workers.” The Circular closes:

The 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, be careful to ensure that this organization comes as close as possible to our ideal. How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? 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 leaning towards authority and dictatorship.

This argument, with its embryonic metaphor, refers to what today might be called a “path dependency” between revolutionary practices and results. The road one travels determines the destination one reaches. Choices about revolutionary organization (top-down or bottom-up) end up determining both the form of the revolution (seizure of state power or abolition of the state) and its end result (modified hierarchical structures or free communism). Note that, although connected to “principles,” the Circular’s argument from path dependency actually justifies means-ends correspondence in instrumental terms. The seizure of state power is not rejected solely on ethical grounds, despite being deemed an effective revolutionary means. Rather, it is rejected as ineffective, since it does not result in a classless society but in dictatorship.

In the same year, Bakunin also insisted that the International should organize “from the bottom up, beginning with the social life of the masses and their real aspirations” and “not by forcing the natural life of the masses into the straitjacket of the State.” This led him to praise the Communards’ disinterest in seizing state power:

“Our friends, the Paris socialists, believed that revolution could neither be made nor brought to its full development except by the spontaneous and continued action of

the masses, the groups and the associations of the people... [society] can and should reorganize itself, not from the top down according to an ideal plan dressed up by wise men or scholars nor by decrees promulgated by some dictatorial power or even by a national assembly... [but] from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers.”

By “spontaneous,” Bakunin does not mean impulsive or improvised, but self-directed and voluntary. Such social reorganization, carried out directly at the grassroots, is therefore opposed to artificial top-down structures, which maintain the same alienation of power against which revolutionaries are struggling. Like the Jura anarchists, in calling for immediate social reorganization, Bakunin is thinking about the long-term effects of present actions and structures, and the choices that become locked-in once a certain path is taken. By extending and defending their own bottom-up forms of organization, revolutionary masses can directly achieve some of their objectives. In instrumental terms, such organization not only avoids the pitfalls of authoritarianism and bureaucracy, but also creates a stronger social base for strikes and insurrections.

This emphasis on immediate implementation would later become part of the central anarchist concept of direct action. This concept goes beyond disruptive tactics to a wider principle of action without intermediaries. Through direct action, a group or individual uses their own power to prevent an injustice or fulfill their desires, as opposed to appealing to an external agent to do so for them. Kropotkin thus called on workers to expropriate productive resources and infrastructures, as “the first step towards a reorganization of our production on Socialist principles.” While Kropotkin had a mass uprising in mind, more localized examples of direct expropriation include land and factory occupations, urban squatting, and digital piracy. With equal importance, direct action includes immediate reconstruction of social roles and relationships, to the extent possible. The expansion, deepening, and defense of equality and non-domination achieves its aims immediately, just as a mass trespass directly stops fracking. In both cases, the achievement may be temporary or fragile, but it does not involve intermediaries. There is an evident parallel between this wider sense of direct action and current movements’ preference for “prefigurative politics” over lobbying, litigation, and party politics. At stake in all cases—disruption, expropriation, and reconstruction—is the non-alienation of collective power and a rejection of the politics of representation.

The aftermath of the October revolution vindicated anarchists’ warnings about means and ends, occasioning Emma Goldman’s landmark statement in her Afterword to *My Disillusionment in Russia*. Concluding her memoir, Goldman asserts that “No revolution can ever succeed as a factor of liberation unless the means used to further it be identical in spirit and tendency with the purposes to be achieved”:

All human experience teaches that methods and means cannot be separated from the ultimate aim. The means employed become, through individual habit and social practice, part and parcel of the final purpose; they influence it, modify it, and presently the aims and means become identical.

This is again a statement of path dependency. Notice, however, the abundance of temporal allusions in these final passages (original emphases):

To-day is the parent of to-morrow. The present casts its shadow far into the future... Revolution that divests itself of ethical values thereby lays the foundation of

injustice, deceit, and oppression for the future society. The means used to prepare the future become its *cornerstone*... the ethical values which the revolution is to establish in the new society must be *initiated* with the revolutionary activities of the so-called transitional period. Revolution is the mirror of the coming day; it is the child that is to be the Man of To-morrow.

Like the embryonic metaphor in the Sonvilier Circular, Goldman's account of means gelling into ends has the present generating the future. With the possible exception of the mirror metaphor, this is a generative temporal framing situated in forward-looking time, without recursion. Revolutionaries' visions for the future are themselves things of the present—drawn from current mental experiences and discursive exchanges. More importantly, the interpretation of the present is self-contained, dependent on ethical values rather than on a promised or imagined prototype. Maturation is not guaranteed (the child “is to be,” not “will be”). Yet what is already accomplished has the “practical self-sufficiency” which Auerbach associates with the modern view.

This is shown to be a major difference, rather than a matter of mere phrasing, when we consider how lived ethics have an experimental and novel quality, which undercuts the possibility of recursive reasoning. Rejecting the assured blueprints of utopian socialists and Soviet planners alike, anarchists have tended to privilege repeated, concrete experiences of social struggle which give rise to unexpected forms of collective power and solidarity. Goldman thus describes revolution as “first and foremost, the *transvaluator*, the bearer of new values. It is the great teacher of the *new ethics*, inspiring man with a new concept of life.” She employs the Nietzschean term “transvaluation” (*Umwertung*) without mentioning the philosopher's name, yet it is clear that she took from Nietzsche an attitude that embraces radical open-endedness in the creation of new social visions and practices. The emergence of relationships transcending domination is an uncertain process, playful as well as dangerous. However, this implies that the ends expressed in practice undergo constant re-evaluation. Such an open-ended politics makes it hard to sustain any fixed notion of a “future accomplishment,” rendering it too unstable to coherently act as a source of recursive prefiguration. Such a partial indeterminacy of ends only makes sense within a generative temporal framing, in which the future is seen as the unknown product of the affordances and contingencies that will have preceded it.

Absent Promise, Crisis and Hope

So far, we have seen that the temporal framings accompanying anarchist accounts of ethical strategy have been generative rather than prefigurative in the temporal sense, seeking to shape an as-yet-unknown future out of the present. Its experimental nature pulls such a framing away from the “process of reassurance,” and towards a more modest view of future-oriented designs. However, if non-hierarchical social relations are to be extended and defended with neither the assurances of historical momentum, nor a full determinacy of ends, what remains of activist imaginations of the future?

One response—“perhaps nothing”—marks a recent strand in activist expression that attempts to absorb revolutionary accomplishment entirely into current ethical practices, dissociating it from the future altogether. To take a few illustrative examples:

The revolution exists in every moment of our lives... in the present, not in some mythic possible future.

— “Monkey,” 1999

It is crucial that we seek change not in the name of some doctrine or grand cause, but on behalf of ourselves, so that we will be able to live more meaningful lives... rather than direct our struggle towards world-historical changes which we will not live to witness.

— CrimethInc., 2000

The revolution is now, and we must let the desires we have about the future manifest themselves in the here and now as best as we can. When we start doing that, we stop fighting for some abstract condition for the future and instead start fighting to see those desires realized in the present... as a flowering of one’s self-determined existence

— Hodgson, 2003

Approvingly, anarchist geographer Simon Springer theorizes such outlooks as a micro-political anarchism, which rejects “end-state politics,” prefers “permanent insurrection” to “final revolution,” and “abandons any pretext of achieving a completely free and harmonious society in the future and instead focuses on the immediacies of anarchist praxis and a prefigurative politics of direct action in the present.” Furthermore, in such expressions the very desire to inhabit non-dominating social settings is often presented as the main motivation for constructing them. In such statements, individual liberation and social struggle each supplying the other’s motivation. Recalling the slogan also attributed to Goldman —“If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution”—this approach to anarchist practice turns away from a politics of self-sacrifice towards a politics of self-realization and revolutionary lifestyle.

The turn to the present has often raised controversy, being described as a symptom of activist networks becoming mere cultural scenes, abandoning revolutionary politics for self-seeking pursuits. Another critique has been that the short-term focus on both cultural reproduction and confrontational tactics neglects movement-building and class solidarity. My own critique is a bit different. I would like to argue that such expressions of “presentism,” in their eagerness to avoid a Leninist deferral of revolutionary ends, also conveniently sidestep the consequences of a generative temporal framing. While the statements above dismiss the future as “distant,” “mythical,” or “abstract,” no threat to lived ethical practice is actually posed by imagining long-term social scenarios, or thinking generations ahead. Instead, I would suggest that presentism covers for a reluctance to confront the absent promise of revolutionary accomplishment, as well as the bleak prospects that become evident once activists approach the future generatively.

For transformative movements, the imagination of the future is no longer structured by traditional revolutionary expectations. A century or more ago, anarchists like Bakunin who had experienced the revolutions of 1848 and 1871 could still [expect](bit.ly/2oziXdd0) that “when the hour of the People’s Revolution strikes again” it would raise the “simultaneous revolutionary alliance and action of all the people of the civilized world” against reaction. Kropotkin too was convinced that “a great revolution is growing up in Europe” which would see “a rapid modification of out-grown economical and political institutions” and “a displacement of wealth and political power,”

over a short period “lasting for several years.” Such expectations did not require an appeal to historical inevitability; they were based on an instinctive understanding of cycles of contention, and an appreciation—too high, in hindsight—of the generative power of mass movements invested in their material and cultural base. Today, however, even such a guarded promise of revolution in advanced capitalist countries seems far-fetched. The past century has continued to see democratic and socialist political revolutions, as well as military coups and civil wars, but none have achieved a classless society. The tremendous growth in states’ military and surveillance powers, the continuing appeal of nationalism, and the understanding that there is no keystone center of power open to definitive attack, have also rendered such optimistic expectations obsolete.

Even more crucially, any generative disposition towards the future must now account for industrial civilization’s transgression of multiple planetary tipping points, as global resource-use continues to grow unabated. Hence, any expectations for social change must be projected into a future shaped by runaway climate change, energy depletion, ecosystem collapse, inequality, deprivation, and conflict. My argument is that prefigurative language may offer false comfort in the absence of revolutionary promise, papering over the awareness of converging planetary crises. The affective space attached to disposition towards the future, long vacated by reassurance and even expectant optimism, is now filled with anxiety, frustration, and guilt. “Prefigurative” terminology sidesteps this crisis by avoiding an explicit disposition towards the future while at the same time hinting, however vaguely, at the reassurance that the accomplished future is already radiating backwards on activists’ actions today.

Readers can decide for themselves whether I am on to something here, or whether I am overthinking. Either way, the urgent task in this area would seem to be a reworking of generative framings to account for protracted, uneven, and irreversible collapse.

But if the term “prefigurative politics” should indeed be abandoned, what could replace it? A focus on substance, as in “anti-hierarchical politics,” could certainly go quite far. But can means-ends unity and ethical practice be framed even more productively, in a way that (a) suggests generative, rather than recursive temporality and (b) encourages an attitude other than reassurance, which can still sustain the confrontation with converging crises? In closing, I would like to offer initial thoughts on one possible way to address this question, drawing on Ernst Bloch’s concept of “concrete utopia.”

In his greatest work, *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch charts a utopian and non-authoritarian variation on Marxist thought. He looks beyond “utopia” as a literary description of a model society to what he calls the “positive utopian function” of imaginings that “extend, in an anticipating way, existing material into the future possibilities of being different and better.” The anchoring in present reality separates such imaginings from what Bloch calls “abstract utopianism,” which ranges from social blueprints to personal daydreams. This is because concrete utopianism “does not play around and get lost in an Empty-Possible, but psychologically anticipates a Real-Possible.” Theological prefiguration and its lingering resonances clearly belong in the abstract category. In distinction, Bloch’s “not-yet” faces all possible future states of the real world, while drawing hope from the tendencies and latencies of a self-transforming present. As a result, he writes, concrete-utopian impulses correspond not to fantasy, but to hope and action:

Utopian function as the comprehended activity of the expectant emotion, of the hope-premonition, maintains the alliance with all that is still morning like in the world. Utopian function understands what is exploding, because it is this itself in a very con-

densed way: its Ratio is the unweakened Ratio of a militant optimism. Therefore: the *act-content* of hope is, as a consciously illuminated, knowingly elucidated content, the *positive utopian function*.

Bloch's temporal framing of concrete utopianism is generative. It is a thought-behavior that "contains within it the forward surge of an achievement which can be anticipated." To be sure, Bloch maintains fealty to the Marxist tradition and some attachment to its determinacy can be felt in his account of concrete utopia. True to colors, he puts his erudite gloss on the obligatory dismissal of anarchism, personified in Stirner and Proudhon's "petit-bourgeois" sensibilities and in Bakunin's "complete monomania of hatred of authority." Alongside its individualism, Bloch asserts, the anarchist image of freedom is "a bit of future in the future, for which no present prerequisites exist anywhere at all," while "certain anarchic themes" are "already to be found in Marxism, sensibly enough not as present postulates but as prophecies and conclusions." Here Bloch does himself a true disservice by failing to link his concrete utopia to what Boggs would later call the "prefigurative tradition" of anarchism and councilism. Even more than the mental act-content of hope, it is the construction of living alternatives that concretely expresses the positive utopian function. With Marxist prejudices at arm's length, however, a "politics of concrete utopia" might indeed replace "prefigurative politics" as a colorful descriptor for means-ends unity.

While the idea of concrete utopia successfully binds ethical practice to a generative temporal framing, Bloch's attached principle of hope, drawn from the not-yet, requires further modification. What becomes of this principle, once anticipation addresses itself not only to the fruition of concrete-utopian efforts, but also to the inevitable consequences of industrial and neoliberal over-reach? A promising answer may be found in the ideas of "anxious" and "catastrophic" hope, elaborated by Bürge Abiral in her work with practical sustainability activists in Turkey. Unsurprisingly, activists promoting community sustainability, bioremediation, energy transition, and permaculture system design are among the most attuned to prognoses of collapse. Abiral thus associates the idea of "anxious hope" with the grain of anxiety always attending the "belief that small actions matter... that it is *not* too late to act."

Instead of being an opposite of hope, anxiety is a companion to it. This hope rests on thin ice. The desired results attached to hope, and the effects that are hoped for may never materialize, and the permaculturists are well aware of it... Instead of driving permaculturists to despair, the anxiety that they feel about the future accompanies their hopeful condition and all the more pushes them to act in the present.

Coexisting with anxious hope is catastrophic hope, an affect that "combines a catastrophic vision of the future with the conviction that good things will continue to happen despite and because of approaching disasters." Catastrophic hope serves as a fallback, providing succor even as it attends to worst-case scenarios short of extinction. Such hope can look forward to the adoption of radical alternatives out of the urgency and necessity of a decaying world, and to the revolutionary openings these may involve. Taken together, anxious and catastrophic forms of hope suggest promising alternatives to the temptations of reassurance, prefiguration, and denial.

Conclusion

Concepts travel accidental paths. “Left” and “Right” are obvious examples of how pure contingency has shaped our political vocabulary. A concept often becomes institutionalized, not because of its inherent richness or explanatory power, but only because of its emergence or appropriation in a certain context and at a certain time, with the ensuing irreversible process of dissemination and repetition across writers. This is also the case with prefigurative politics. In an email conversation, Boggs attested to me that he arrived at the term on his own, inspired at the time by the ideas of Gramsci and Bookchin, but unaware of its use by the Church Fathers or by Gorz. But even if we grant that the term has reached social movements through a broken line of transmission, its temporal resonance remains preserved in its literal pre-fix, and continues to raise troubling questions for those who employ the term.

Following the ethnologist Jane Guyer’s influential discussion of temporal framings as an area in which individuals and groups seek intelligibility, this piece has tried to examine what she called the “still-lingering and newly emergent entailments and dissonances that escape their terms of reference” in the concept of prefigurative politics. In exposing the term’s background, I have sought to wrest lived ethical practice out of the ghostly hand of recursive temporality. To reconceive such practice in terms of concrete utopia allows us to better capture its generative framing in the anarchist tradition, while casting off the confusing theological ideas of recursion attached to the term “prefiguration.” The approach I have offered seeks to confront a toxic future despite the absence of revolutionary promise, drawing on the anxious and catastrophic hope that accompany efforts to build spaces of freedom, equality and solidarity. Facing forward, we have only one another to rely on.

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