



Geographies of the future: Prefigurative politics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/phg**Craig Jeffrey**  and **Jane Dyson**

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Abstract

This paper uses an examination of prefigurative politics – popularly imagined as ‘being the change you wish to see’ – to reflect on geographies of the future. We argue that prefigurative politics, which has become common since the mid-1990s, typically proceeds through multiple forms of improvisation. Successful prefigurative politics is usually institutionalised within organisations and movements and reshapes practices, discourses, and structures of power. We demonstrate how a focus on prefigurative politics can inform scholarship on the ‘anticipatory politics’ associated with dominant institutions and geographies of the future more broadly by highlighting ways in which people seek to enact visions of the future and illustrating the impact of these oppositional practices of future making. We argue that prefigurative politics could be a springboard for investigating means-ends alignment as a characteristic of political action and the present as a terrain of politics.

Keywords

anticipatory politics, geographies of the future, improvisation, prefigurative politics, the present

1 Introduction

Notwithstanding a rapid rise of geographical work on the future (Anderson, 2010; Kraftl, 2013; Castree, 2014), investigations of local, situated efforts by people to imagine different futures have been less apparent. While substantial attention has been directed towards how dominant institutions pre-empt futures in order to manage the present (e.g. Anderson, 2010; Amoore, 2011; Kraftl, 2013), the production of ‘counter-futures’ by marginalised or minoritised populations lags behind as a theme (but see Dodds, 2013; Shaw and Sharp, 2013; Dyson and Jeffrey, 2018). This paper addresses this point through offering an introduction to the interdisciplinary field of prefigurative politics, highlighting the efforts of multiple sets of people in different parts of the world to try to prefigure

the social relations, political structures, and cultural practices they would like to see generalised in the future. We identify three common aspects of prefigurative politics as it has emerged since the mid-1990s: a tendency for prefigurative politics to involve productive improvisation; the importance of institutionalised spaces of relative protection in the fuller development of prefigurative politics; and the capacity of prefigurative politics to impact wider society. Throughout we focus on progressive forms of prefigurative politics.

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Analysis of oppositional prefigurative politics answers a call among geographers for grounded work on how counter-futures are constructed, discussed, imagined, lived, and defended (Anderson, 2010; Kraftl, 2013; Cas-tree, 2014). It highlights similarities, differences, and connections between dominant efforts to manipulate the future for partisan ends and oppositional action aimed at creating different futures. It also demonstrates the value of reflecting across the discipline of geography on the extent to which means-ends alignment characterises social and political action. Finally, the examination of prefigurative politics suggests the value of considering from different perspectives where and how the present becomes an object of intense reflection.

The remainder of the paper is split into five sections. The next section introduces anticipatory politics. The following section introduces prefigurative politics and outlines our argument. The subsequent three sections examine different aspects of prefigurative politics – improvisation, institutionalisation, and impact. The conclusions relate our discussion of prefigurative politics to wider themes within geographies of the future.

II Anticipatory politics

Anecdotally, during student protests in Oxford in the late 1960s, someone scrawled on Balliol College Wall: ‘Due to a lack of interest, tomorrow has been cancelled’. This may have been prescient: the last quarter of the 20th century involved, in one view, a ‘slow cancellation of the future’ (Berardi, 2011, quoted in Anderson, 2017). This was manifest in major synoptic treatments of the global condition, such as Francis Fukuyama’s (1989) oft-cited essay ‘The End of History?’, and in the changing form of some social movements, which, according to anarchism expert Uri Gordon (2012), commonly moved from seeking to anticipate a better future to simply celebrating the present for its own

sake. But the graffiti in Oxford 50 years ago looks odd from the perspective of early 2020. Governments, corporations, multilateral institutions, NGOs, and a wide variety of citizens are increasingly mobilising the idea of ‘the future’. The causes of this apparent effervescence of ‘the future’ are complex and vary regionally but relate to a set of converging global crises, most notably around climate change, technological transformation, and the inability of contemporary capitalism to address the social needs of the majority of the world’s population. The rise of the future is also connected at the same time to a generalised ‘bonfire of certainties’ associated with the decline or reformulation of organised religion and waning belief in the major political philosophies characteristic of the 20th century, including liberalism.

Geographers studying the ubiquity of future talk during the 2010s tended to focus on how dominant institutions manipulate the future. In a seminal article, Ben Anderson (2010) discussed the contemporary importance of the process through which national governments, in particular, use visions of the future to manage the complex process of governance. He argues that states frequently engage in a type of ‘anticipatory politics’ where discourses of emergency, crisis, and threat are used to justify various acts and interventions. As Anderson (2010: 782) puts it, anticipatory politics proceeds ‘by (re) making life tensed on the verge of catastrophe in ways that protect, save, and care for certain valued lives, and damage, destroy, and abandon other lives’. Anderson goes on to show how governments’ political manipulation of the future works through linked processes: prophesying the future, engaging in complex technologically driven tasks in relation to that future, and then enacting changes that have the general effect of reordering social and political opportunities in the present. Many geographers have built on Anderson’s work on dominance and the spatio-social production of the future. They have shown, for example, how powerful

institutions use the notion of an impending political emergency to justify coercive or secretive state interventions (Karg, 2013), how the climate emergency has been strategically deployed to promote narrow, partisan agendas (Karg, 2013; Methmann and Rothe, 2012; Granjou et al., 2017), how anti-terror initiatives play on the notion of dangerous interlopers to rationalise securitisation (Anderson, 2012), and how law enforcement officers punish those deemed to embody a future criminal threat through a process that Wilson and McCulloch (2015) term ‘pre-crime’.

Much of this work follows Anderson in focusing especially on the spatial dynamics through which the state governs techno-scientific futures. Amin (2013) examines how governments and corporations have colluded in the development of a highly spatialised ‘neoliberal calculus of risk mitigation’ in order to deploy ideas of preparedness and resilience that further commercial interests (see also Kinsley, 2012; Amooore, 2011). Leszczynski (2016) discusses the spatial dynamics through which governments anticipate future cities, harnessing processes of data gathering to conjure and then promulgate future scenarios. Other work analyses the manner in which dominant powers treat the bodies of certain citizens as requiring management (Olson, 2015), and there is also a rich vein of work on the use of spatial technologies to address climate change (Granjou et al., 2017). Across all these examples, the narrative of emergency depends upon governing as if the subject of that emergency is already there in embryonic form in the present (Anderson, 2010, 2017). Governments therefore engage in a type of ‘prefiguration’ where the ‘figure’ – be it a trans-species epidemic or terrorist threat – serves as a harbinger of a danger threatening to engulf society.

Anderson (2010, 2017) argues that this spatially and temporally complex mobilisation of ideas about the future has never been the sole prerogative of the state, and he appeals for more

studies of oppositional approaches to the future that might confound or short-circuit dominant emergency narratives (e.g. Pinder, 2013). With some important exceptions, such as Shaw and Sharp’s (2013) studies of fantastical futures associated with gaming and Kraftl’s (2013) analysis of utopic visions in education, however, geographical analyses have not very often followed this injunction. Consideration of the interdisciplinary literature on oppositional prefigurative politics highlights one way of addressing this gap.

III Prefigurative politics

Carl Boggs (1977: 2) defined prefigurative politics 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’. Unlike straightforwardly protesting against a dominant regime, prefigurative formations involve activists directing effort into performing now their vision of a ‘better world’ to come. Prefigurative politics is an inherently spatial and performative genre of political activism in which people enact a vision of change – through organisation, design, architecture, practices, bodies, or something as simple as a gesture or demeanour – and promote this as indicative of an imminent or more distant ‘future’.

Commentators typically trace the salience of the idea of prefigurative politics to anarchist writing of the late 19th and early 20th century (see Springer, 2014a). In contrast to the claim of some Marxists that submission to a party structure was required in order to realise an egalitarian society, anarchists argued that the goals of a movement must be embodied in its practice (e.g. Kropotkin, 2009 [1898]); social movements should be ‘coherent’ in the sense of aligning how they go about struggling for change with the idea of what a post-change ‘better world’ will look like. Prefigurative politics also owes a considerable debt to feminist scholarship

and action since the 1960s, particularly the emphasis in this writing on the importance of matters of process and the notion that ‘points of difference should be embraced and incorporated into evolving visions of the future’ (Klodawsky et al., 2013: 541). Many forms of gender politics have a strong prefigurative element via the instantiation of demands, perceived injustices, and hoped-for futures within the bodies of social actors (e.g. Silvey, 2004; see Longhurst and Johnston, 2014).

A crucial proximate cause of the recent effervescence of literature on prefigurative politics is the rise of major movements, including feminist formations, between the mid-1990s and early 2010s. Often disenchanted with mainstream multilateral forums of discussion and the performance of national governments, these movements and institutions sought prefigurative action as a way to achieve change. This included organisations such as the World Social Forum (Fominaya, 2010), the Occupy Movement (Brissette, 2013; Halvorsen, 2017), and various facets of the collection of uprisings and assertions known as ‘the Arab Spring’ in North Africa and the Middle East (see Tadros, 2015). Occupy is usually taken as emblematic. Occupy Movement activists directed energy into ‘societies in waiting’ in which economic, social, and everyday practice anticipated the urban futures to which they aspired. Occupy protest camps in major cities often contained clinics, kitchens, healthcare facilities, media centres, and democratic decision-making structures that activists presented as prefigurative (Graeber, 2013). The many other examples of prefigurative politics that emerged during this period include participatory environmental organisations (Mason, 2014), online networks (Kulick, 2014), queer festivals (Eleftheriadis, 2015), alternative schools (Kraftl, 2013), alternative economies (McCarthy, 2006; White and Williams, 2012), and everyday forms of prefiguration (see Jeffrey, 2013; Dyson and Jeffrey, 2016), to name but a few. Many of these

formations are broadly consistent with the emphasis in geography on the rise over the same period in what Paul Chatterton and Jenny Pickerill (2010: 730) term ‘autonomous geographies’ defined as ‘those spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation’.

Against the backdrop of this effervescence of prefigurative politics, commentators have raised new questions about precisely how to define the concept (see Swain, 2019). Confusion has arisen in the literature about whether prefigurative politics refers to particular autonomous groups (e.g. see Kraftl, 2013) or whether prefigurative politics – as in Boggs’ original definition – simply means any instance in which people try to model the future in the present, which could include reactionary movements, such as Golden Dawn in Greece. In this paper we focus on forms of prefigurative politics that are broadly ‘progressive’ in the sense of being opposed to unjust political structures and committed to individual equality and freedom of expression. We nevertheless cast our net wider than the ‘autonomous groups’ described by Chatterton and Pickerill and well beyond simply examining urban anarchism or those committed to decentralised democracy. Definitional issues also hinge on the extent to which a formation has to be ‘prefigurative’ in order for it to be identified as such and the related issue of whether prefigurative politics requires that people self-consciously understand their action as prefigurative. In our view, the term loses its explanatory power and specificity unless it is viewed as a self-conscious effort to direct energy into practising in the present the future that is sought. Finally, the ‘politics’ part of prefigurative politics is contested. We believe that to qualify as prefigurative politics, a set of practices must involve issues of power, conflict, and transformation. With all these points in mind, prefigurative politics can be defined as the self-

conscious channelling of energy into modelling the forms of action that are sought to be generalised in the future in circumstances characterised by power, hierarchy, and conflict.

Oppositional prefigurative politics thus defined and the anticipatory politics discussed in the previous section are to some extent responses to the same set of changing global conditions and make some of the same assumptions about the future or futures. Both these forms of politics are connected to a sense among governments and citizens that key aspects of human existence, for example ecological and climate processes and our relationship to our own bodies, will be substantially different in an imminent future. Technological, climatic, and political uncertainties have encouraged this sense of the possibility of radical difference. In addition, and partly at odds with this notion of being caught up in inevitable and bewildering change, capitalist and other organisations have instilled in institutions and individuals a sense of a capacity for being able to act on the present in highly effectual ways, in the process of achieving self-fulfilment (Guyer, 2007) or reshaping the world through dramatic action (Schneider, 2013). But anticipatory politics and prefigurative politics respond to this mixture of uncertainty and an imagined capacity to act on the present in somewhat opposing ways. Anticipatory politics tends to orient itself towards preserving the present against the deprecations of hypothesised dangerous futures. By contrast, those involved in oppositional prefigurative politics seek ways of changing the present. They typically do so not only to manage dangerous futures and but also to address existing crises – ones that may not have been emphasised or spotlighted as emergencies by dominant powers, but which affect the living conditions, security, and affective states of marginalised and minoritised populations. One of the general effects of oppositional prefigurative politics is thus to highlight the selective and partisan

nature of the anticipatory politics of dominant organisations.

In what follows we draw on the work of geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and those in related fields to argue for the importance of analysing oppositional prefigurative politics for what it tells us about how people comport themselves in relation to the future and how to relate anticipatory politics to other aspects of future making. We attend to what we see as three dimensions of the development of many forms of oppositional prefigurative politics. First, we show how prefigurative politics typically proceeds through an intensive commitment to improvising with available ideas, materials, spaces, and bodies, and affective states. Second, we suggest that the aggregation of prefigurative practices tends towards the institutionalisation of effort, such that prefigurative actors often create protected spaces where counter futures can be further developed. Finally, we discuss the extent to which institutionalised practices impact wider systems, for example by altering the momentum of dominant projects, changing perceptions, or shaping spaces and society. In moving through the focus on improvisation, institutionalisation, and impact we debunk the notions that prefigurative politics is typically concerned with realising a fixed utopia, that it usually proceeds through individual self-transformations, and that it is commonly ineffective.

Through this discussion, we show that prefigurative politics, like anticipatory politics, is predicated on the idea that the future will be different from the present and developed through the production of spatial processes, material engagements, embodied practice, and affective atmospheres. But we also highlight a crucial difference between the two forms. Most notably, prefigurative politics seeks to embrace the potential of the future to be more inclusive, sustainable, and equitable than the present, whereas institutions engaged in anticipatory politics usually imagine the future as threat.

We also argue that prefigurative political actors sometimes confound the visions of the future disseminated by dominant institutions and alter the discursive and spatial environments in which dominant powers operate.

IV Improvisation

A key dimension of prefigurative politics is its commitment to action. This fundamental orientation towards enacting futures separates prefigurative politics from anticipatory politics, which can deploy prefiguration as a tactic but is not closely wedded to the idea of doing so. It also separates prefigurative politics from many other forms of oppositional politics which are concerned with acting *on* dominant powers rather than acting *out* social alternatives.

Some scholars have argued that, in order to be defined as prefigurative, a political form must have a fully worked out vision of utopia (Gordon, 2018; cf. Swain, 2019). Notably, Gordon (2018) traces the idea of prefigurative politics back to medieval and early modern European millennial movements that positioned insurrection as preparation for the imminent arrival of Christ (see also Levitas, 2013). For example, in the 1660s in southern England, Gerard Winstanley began a ‘diggers movement’ in which he occupied and directly cultivated former common land in defiance of local landowners. Winstanley emphasised that the act of digging was a harbinger of an emerging social rebellion and a foreshadowing of the arrival of the ‘Spirit of Christ’. Such examples, for Gordon (2018), demonstrate a wider point: that all adherents of prefigurative politics inevitably follow a blueprint. It follows from this argument, too, that prefigurative politics is typically a synecdoche: a miniature version of the society desired (see Swain, 2019). In this optic, all that is required of prefigurative politics is for it to expand outwards from its founding space.

In our view, however, oppositional prefigurative politics’ strict adherence to a model for a

future society is a myth, albeit one that maintains a hold over discussions of prefiguration within academia and among practitioners (see Fominaya, 2010). We should enter some caveats, however. The notion of an impending dramatic change and the metaphor of the synecdoche may be relevant for analysing the strategic use of prefiguration by dominant organisations (anticipatory politics), for example where a state obsessively concentrates on a single case of disease as harbinger of an epidemic (Anderson, 2017). Moreover, the idea of prefigurative politics as a preparation for some imminent future shock may have exercised a hold over the imaginations of some participants in prominent recent prefigurative agitations, as reflected for example in the intuitions of some Occupy activists that they represented a brave new world ‘just around the corner’ (see Schneider, 2013). But the majority of studies of oppositional prefigurative politics in the period between the mid-1990s and early 2010s make clear that the contents of the prefigurative struggle are rarely fixed in advance (see also Vasudevan’s (2015b: 345) critique of Simone on this point), and nor are participants typically very confident that their prefiguration actually presages a near-term future. Prefigurative activists are more like uncertain actors improvising around a theme than religious subjects adhering to a creed, and trial and error are core founding components of most prefigurative action.

Tadros’s (2015) research on feminist activists’ prefigurative politics is illustrative in this regard. Working in the midst of the anti-Mubarak protests of late 2010 and early 2011, Tadros identified a cadre of young women who sought to raise awareness of long-term gender-based violence and discrimination. She argues that activists trialled different ideas in order to arrive at a vision of how social relations should be organised in urban Egypt. This involved testing different ways of relating to each other and those outside the movement, occupying and

crafting urban space in new ways, and judiciously developing the patrols that sought to guarantee women's safety, all the time jettisoning unsuccessful actions and retaining those that provided momentum. Jenna Maeckelbergh (2011) makes a similar point in her work on the alter-globalisation movement, carried out as a participant in this movement over a period of ten years. She charts the capacity of the sections of the movement to change the terms of debate regarding inequality. Prefigurative improvisation was central to this success. Maeckelbergh writes (2011: 1): 'By literally trying out new political structures in large-scale, inter-cultural decision-making processes [...] movement actors are learning how to govern'. She concludes that what distinguishes the alter-globalisation movement from previous movements was in part the sense among activists that much about the form, spatiality, and direction of the activism was open and up for debate. Such accounts connect with much of the work on social movements emerging in the last third of the 20th century, notably Antonio Melucci's (1989: 208) argument, that: 'The submerged networks of social movements are laboratories of experience' in which 'new problems and questions are posed... [and] new answers are invented and tested'.

Alex Vasudevan's research on the history of squatting and related actions in European cities since the 1960s is important in developing this theme of prefigurative improvisation, not least because his work pegs the process of improvisation back to the themes of spatiality and materiality that underpin much of the recent work on anticipatory politics. Vasudevan argues that process of occupying buildings and seeking to inhabit and alter them is part of a wider set of strategies and tactics among urban marginalised populations of creative improvisation. With due acknowledgement of the dangers of imposing political sensibilities on populations who may not be activist minded, Vasudevan writes that to squat 'is to open space for piecing together an

alternative urban life' (2015a: 321). Building on Simone's (2004) writing on the reworking of urban materials in pursuit of social opportunities in several African cities, Vasudevan charts the diverse, creative, and unusual ways in which squatters retrofit spaces and build social relations simultaneously. For example, Vasudevan notes that some squatters in Berlin in the 1960s and 1970s occupied abandoned spaces that required renovation, and, in doing so, not only connected these houses to utilities but also reworked their physical structure and meaning, creating more shared spaces, reusing found materials, and queering established notions of domesticity and the home.

The themes in Vasudevan's work – of the energetic improvisations of urban denizens, of the enrolment of multiple spaces and materials in their activity, and of the capacity of such improvisation to recast assumptions – are repeated in many other recent geographical accounts of prefigurative urban life. This includes Jonathan Silver (2014)'s work with slum dwellers in Accra, Ghana, who improvise electricity and housing provision in 'incremental infrastructures' that survive in large part because they are in a constant state of adjustment; Vanesa Castán Broto and Harriet Bulkeley's (2013) analysis of how climate activists have sought to prefigure alternative practices within cities across the world, innovating around environmental practices in often remarkable ways; and Asara's (2017) account of the Indignados movement in Spain, where the square became a crucible for social invention.

One of the common themes across much of this work is of the reflexivity of those engaged in prefigurative improvisation. Fominaya (2010) notes that the World Social Forum activists that she studied were constantly debating the relative value of prefigurative action vis-à-vis actions that might involve diverging from means-ends alignment but yield strategic benefits. In other settings, reflexivity is focused on

the precise content of the message that activists are seeking to communicate – for example, how much is core and how much can be renegotiated (see Schneider, 2013). In still other cases, and as part of this, participants in prefigurative action appear to be especially concerned with monitoring their practice for ‘signs’ that might provide clues to what should or should not be part of the post-struggle landscape they are seeking to create. Words, actions, objects, material practices, spatial plays, moods, gestures and performances are all scrutinised for their ability to either build a new order or detract or dilute that order (Gordon, 2012; Schneider, 2013; Carroll, 2015). For example, Carroll (2015) argues that a characteristic feature of the Transnational Alternative Policy Groups (TAPGs) that he studied is that they seek to identify elements of utopian futures that already exist within present practices, develop these practices, and provide them with support so that they become sustained. The importance of the present emerges in a different way on literature on urban anarchism in the second half of the 20th century in Europe (Gordon, 2012; Ince, 2012). Gordon (2012) argues that anarchists believed that even the most ‘enlightened’ activists in their organisation unwittingly espoused ideas that future generations would regard as complicit with domination. Anarchists also believed that patterns of domination that had been tackled in a previous era could resurface and that their activity was prone to co-option. Activists therefore scrutinised the present for prejudices and slippages as well as for guidelines of how to imagine a better future. There are connections here between prefigurative politics and Anderson’s characterisation of anticipatory politics, where, similarly, ‘The here and now is constantly assayed for the futures that may be incubating within it and emerge out of it’ (2010: 782).

A final dimension of the improvisation that accompanies prefigurative action is a tendency among participants to enact practices that are quite radically at odds either with the

environment in which they operate or in terms of their own prior experience – to act, as it were, ‘unrealistically’. This could be viewed as a form of ‘prolepsis’: ‘anticipating greater competence and possibility for success even before such skills and opportunities have emerged’ (Swain, 2019: 13; see also Brescó de Luna, 2017). If prefigurative politics refers to instances in which people channel energy into modelling a desired future, proleptic prefigurative politics involves particularly audacious attempts to ‘reach ahead’ and sets up an especially stark contrast between prefiguration and the surrounding milieu. For example, Fiona McConnell (2009) shows that Tibetan activists sheltering in India advanced their right to re-establish themselves in their homeland in part through creating a government in waiting within the Indian polity, complete with ministerial appointments, daily business, and the trappings of office. This elaborate dress rehearsal reinforced their claim to sovereignty and provided the social ties, and some of the political skills, required to keep the movement alive, even as it might appear ‘unrealistic’ with respect to the wider politics of the region. In a somewhat similar vein, Davina Cooper (2020) has discussed a prefigurative law reform movement in the UK that explicitly sought to operate ‘as if’ radical reforms around gender were already under close discussion. Through reference to this and other examples, Cooper (2020: 5) points out that such proleptic action ‘Can sometimes bring into being the missing elements of authority, recognition, science or entitlement required to make an enactment real’. In work based in Uttarakhand, India, Dyson and Jeffrey (2018) similarly discuss young women proleptically prefiguring new visions of female agency. These women often describe overcoming trepidation about talking in public meetings by simply speaking out in those forums, even though they are aware that they are forbidden by custom to do so. Some young women argue that the act of speaking out feels like a type of out-of-body

experience that ultimately provides them with a new sense of their own capacity (see also Dyson, 2018). The work of McConnell, Cooper, and Dyson and Jeffrey points to the advantages of incorporating prolepsis into wider improvisational strategies. Acting ‘as if’ can challenge dominant claims about there being no alternative to existing structures of power, reinforce a sense of what is possible, enhance cohesion among participants, and unsettle dominant paradigms of ‘the real’.

V Institutionalisation

Mahatma Gandhi probably never said the words ‘be the change you want to see in the world’, and certainly what is striking about Gandhi’s work, and about the activity of the many NGOs and activists he has inspired, is not the concentration on strident acts of individual distinctiveness implied by the phrase ‘be the change’. What is notable, rather, is the importance of slowly widening circles of trust and inclusion through processes of consensus-building, compromise, and conviviality. Likewise, what seems to ensure the durability of the types of improvised prefigurative action is the institutionalisation of that practice. A second act of myth busting is therefore exposing how far prefigurative politics diverges from heroic notions of ‘be the change’ individual agency (see Dyson, 2014, and Holloway et al., 2019, on this point on social agency), especially in the process through which it unfolds socially, comes to be embodied in institutional arrangements, and spreads across networks. A caveat should be entered here, however. It is evident that some forms of prefigurative politics depend upon not developing a definite institutional form (see Gordon, 2012). Our interest is in institutionalisation as a type of thickening of social practice rather than the inevitable emergence of named organisations.

One way of illustrating the importance of institutionalisation in this sense would be to turn

to Heinrich Von Kleist’s classic novella *Michael Kohlhaas* (1902). Set in medieval Germany, the book charts the travails of a man, Michael Kohlhaas, who is cheated by a local nobleman. The nobleman borrows Kohlhaas’s prized horses, puts them to work in the fields, and returns them haggard and exhausted. The remainder of the novel charts Kohlhaas’s fruitless attempts to seek justice, typically in the face of extreme discouragement, all the while tracking Kohlhaas’s belief that he is a harbinger of a more just future world. The book documents in rich detail the futility of trying to ‘be the change’ while refusing to enrol others, compromise, or reflect on one’s position.

Social science literature adds greater weight to this tale by highlighting the importance of sociality, compromise, and alliance building in much prefigurative politics. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2010 and 2011 in Barcelona, Spain, Yates (2015) notes how the urban squats that she studied became seedbeds for oppositional mobilisation. This often began with trialling different ways of sharing around possessions, food, and leisure, and then became institutionalised as individual squats become ‘social centres’ – a type of ‘free space’ offering organisational and cultural resources for oppositional movements. This process of squats morphing into collective centres for resistance did not occur via individual leaders expressing distinct visions. Rather, it involved commitment among participants to being challenged about their preconceptions, for example around what constitutes urban living and how to manage prejudice.

Serafini’s work on arts activism in the UK offers another example of how prefigurative action can evolve from relatively individualised or small group improvisation to more organised activity through intense social effort. Serafini (2015) describes a group of actors in the UK who came together to develop a set of theatrical interventions aimed at forcing oil companies out of artistic sponsorship. These self-styled

activists – or ‘actorvists’ – began testing and modelling the type of relationships between artists that they felt should be more widely generalised in society: a democratic system of self-allocating tasks, the absence of ascribed ‘leaders’, and efforts to critique professionalised and neoliberal notions of artistic practice. Crucially, they institutionalised their action through forming a group called ‘BP or not BP?’ and linked themselves to other organisations seeking to critique oil sponsorship in the UK. This partial institutionalisation – and its development through the emergence of cross-regional ties – provided participants with a vehicle through which to co-design and activate transgressive practices, as, for example, when they staged a mock Viking funeral for BP in the British Museum; it also provided a safe space of collaboration and conviviality.

Another example of institutionalisation emerges from the research of Dey (2016) on workers’ movements in Argentina. In the early 2000s the Argentinian state created conditions in which big businesses could file for deceitful bankruptcies. These changes shored up large businesses’ position but led to factories closing and left workers unemployed. A minority of workers refused to accept the closure of their enterprises and began to occupy and recover abandoned factories. Beginning through small-scale set improvisation, by the mid-2000s some 15,000 workers were part of a worker-occupied enterprise movement. Dey reads these occupations not as illegal acts but as examples of a withdrawal from the impending influence of the neoliberal state and an attempt to recover principles of public ownership. Since the factories had received taxpayer subsidies, workers were simply taking back control of the means of production and, through their bodily occupation, creating spaces protected from the imprecations of the neoliberal state. Dey (2016) emphasises the strongly social nature of these efforts. Examining the same

movement, Huff-Hatton (2004) quotes one worker who had occupied a book publishing firm:

It [the enterprise] wasn’t won by its eight workers [...] It was also won by the neighbours, the teacher, the plumber, the grandmother for the neighbourhood who came out and fought off the police, who helped stop the eviction attempt (quoted in Dey 2016: 570).

Once free to redefine how factory work should operate, the workers departed from former hierarchical modes of organisation and instituted democratic assemblies, an ethos of mutual support, and non-oppressive working conditions underpinned by values of democracy, justice and equality. These aspects of the factories’ new organisation – what Dey sums up as the prefiguration of post-capitalist modes of existence – in turn strengthened the role of the factories as spaces of protection.

It is important to note that improvisation is a constant characteristic of much prefigurative action, and thus that the three key elements of prefigurative politics that we are discussing – improvisation, institutionalisation and impact – are not part of a linear sequence. Halvorsen’s (2017) account of the Occupy Movement in London, based on field research in 2011–12, illustrates this argument. Halvorsen stresses the adaptive and changing nature of social mobilisation at the Occupy site near St. Paul’s. For example, he notes that during Occupy London the burden of ensuring the reproduction of the camp at a daily level and also guaranteeing the care of vulnerable participants typically fell to women. In response, women developed their own spaces of representation at a tangent from the main symbolic effort of the movement. They also tried mobilising outside Occupy, ultimately using contacts with the Global Women’s Strike organisation to develop a women’s network of occupiers across the UK. Through testing and then utilising the skills and experiences of established feminist networks, these women

developed mechanisms of mutual support that emerged in parallel to other elements of Occupy. The Occupy movement was a type of institutionalisation that in turn provoked new improvisations.

As noted in the cases of BP or not BP and Argentinian workers reoccupying factories, the institutionalisation of prefigurative politics often involves engaging across regional boundaries, and this engagement is obviously also international. The Occupy Movement, which began in New York's Zuccotti Park on 17 September 2011, had, by 9 October, led to protests in 951 cities across 82 countries. The Transition Towns movement, begun in the Devon town of Totnes, modelled an alternative means of building urban life founded on principles of mutuality, shared learning, and environmental sustainability, which has become highly influential and spread across the world (Aiken, 2011; Biddau et al., 2016). In the economic sphere, the Mondragon cooperative movement, established in 1956 in the Basque region of Spain to offer secure employment and decision-making power to its worker-owners, has now spread to multiple international sites (Fominaya, 2010).

A range of institutions and technologies has also emerged precisely aimed at integrating localised prefigurative organisations into wider processes of thinking through alternative futures. For example, Carroll (2015) describes the emergence of TAPGs – such as the Third World Network, the Tricontinental Centre, and Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era – that integrate general critical frameworks of global justice with local concerns on the ground. Carroll argues that TAPGs addressed coordination problems through use of digital technologies, a theme also developed by Sancho (2014) on insurgencies emerging out of the Global Justice Movement and Juris and Pleyers (2009) on the alter-globalisation movement's

combination of direct action and social media activity.

VI Impact

Notwithstanding the creativity of prefigurative improvisation since the mid-1990s and its institutionalisation across a wider range of areas and networks, there is considerable debate over the impact of oppositional prefigurative politics, both in terms of the large social movements with prefigurative characteristics and the more localised and emergent prefigurative actions we have reviewed. Two lines of critique of prefiguration are important. First, many argue that prefigurative politics tends towards a type of social closure. Cementing ties between a tight group of intimates takes precedence over forging alliances outside the core (e.g. Breines, 1989; Argüelles et al., 2017). For example, Chitewere (2010), in research on ecovillages in upstate New York, has demonstrated that these prefigurative spaces created a sense of internal community solidarity but failed to address social and environmental justice issues. Ecovillages have frequently become socially exclusive enclaves that reproduce class and racial divides. Drawing on similar examples, Argüelles et al. (2017) argue that prefigurative organisations in the UK that seek to develop spaces of relative protection may reproduce privilege because they tend to selectively recruit wealthier sections of society who have the time and luxury of 'living outside the system'. By reproducing the narrative that participants should take responsibility for existing problems, prefigurative actors may obscure a lack of meaningful state intervention, reproduce neo-liberal rationalities of rule, and prevent bridge-building with other sections of society (see also Pearce, 2013). The solipsism of prefigurative improvisation – a search for political purity – may put them into a type of death spiral; Naegler (2018) points to a widespread critique of prefigurative action as unthreatening to

dominant capital and the state, citing the quip: ‘Goldman Sachs doesn’t care if you raise chickens’. The state may permit prefigurative improvisations precisely *because* they are ineffective. In addition, specific spaces may be fetishised. For example, Halvorsen (2017) in his study of Occupy London recalls a protester saying: ‘All they could see was the camp and [they] didn’t see any wider purpose’. Caught between the need to transform society but the desire also to withdraw from it, activists may choose the latter, obsessing over their ‘space’ while neglecting wider structural reform (see Levitas, 2013). Small wonder, then, that prefigurative politics is sometimes viewed as ‘stuck in the local’ (De Smet, 2014), a ‘politics of dispersed singularities’ (Van de Sande, 2015) or a set of ‘militant particularisms’ (Harvey and Williams, 1995).

A second and connected line of argument is that prefigurative politics is especially liable to co-option, limiting its impact (see Kulick, 2014; Van de Sande, 2015). Kulick (2014) argues that prefigurative independent youth media outlets in Europe began as critical efforts to rethink society but, as they up-scaled and encountered pressures to conform, often became complicit in reproducing dominant norms. Even some of the more vibrant forms of prefigurative politics seem liable to co-option. Vasudevan (2015b) argues that in many parts of Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, the state contractually ‘pacified’ squatting settlements, via legislation and the promise of public funding. In some cases, neoliberal planning authorities appropriated squatter settlements, which moved from being critical approaches to rethinking the city to commoditised spaces of ‘alternative living’ (see also Roy, 2005).

Such co-option can involve dominant organisations deploying prefigurative methods in bad faith to defuse oppositional prefiguration. Examples of governments eroding oppositional prefigurative politics via their own prefigurative schemes include the Dutch government

developing a community participation scheme to encourage forms of communitarian ‘be the change’ citizenship which had the effect of undermining more genuine efforts to develop grassroots prefigurative action (De Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016). Another example is Williams et al.’s (2014) study of how David Cameron’s Coalition Government in the UK in the early 2010s imposed visions of localism – ‘the Big Society’ – that undermined more progressive forms of local activism.

But it is necessary to debunk the myth that prefigurative politics is ineffective. Prefigurative political endeavours in the period between the mid-1990s and early 2010s had substantial impact in at least four ways. First, in many cases they led to the up-scaling of initiative beyond an original site. For example, the Recovery Movement in the US and the UK, which rejected aspects of mainstream medical practice through modelling an alternative holistic, community-based integrated means of addressing mental health, transformed aspects of the mainstream health systems in both countries via emulation (Beckwith et al., 2016). The Transition Towns movement (Biddau et al., 2016), Mondragan cooperative, and Occupy Movement (Halvorsen, 2017) are other notable examples (see also Fominaya, 2010).

A second strength of prefigurative politics is that it often creates durable skills, knowledge, or resources. For example, in relation to the Occupy Movement, Brissette (2013) argues that the confidence and sense of shared purpose emerging from urban sites of insurrection amounted to a transferable skill that could be deployed strategically in later protests and for formal processes of policy-making. Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) likewise argue that activists in the UK involved in prefigurative forms of autonomous organising developed dense social networks based on cooperative relations in specific protected locales – a crucial resource for long-term efforts to articulate counter-futures and challenge unjust social structures. It is not

just large-scale movements that have had impact. For example, Tadros (2015), in an effort to try to rethink how to measure ‘impact’, argues that the value of the feminist organisations she studied in Egypt ‘lies in their mobilizational power as this becomes stored in “repertoires” of knowledge, skills, and resources’.

Third, prefigurative action is often notably effective at triggering attitudinal change. For example, Risager and Thorup (2016) show that chief protagonists of university-based opposition to the neoliberalisation of academia altered how many Danish students conceptualised the university. In a related manner, Barron (2017) argues that community gardening has persuaded people to think about the long-term use value of local space as well as its market worth, and Bolton et al. (2016) refer to how Occupy activists challenged dominant notions of idleness and ‘dirt’. A key example of the effectiveness of prefigurative politics in changing attitudes is also in situations in which women seek to bring ‘private’ spaces of the domestic sphere into public settings (see Silvey, 2005; Klodawsky, et al. 2013) or show through bodily performances alternative ways of acting in the world (Tadros, 2015). For example, Klodawsky et. al. (2013) demonstrates how the congregational practices of chronically homeless women in urban Canada served as a model for urban planning; a form of prefigurative politics that began with the struggles of the most marginalised and their visions of the future influenced conceptions of how wider change might occur.

Fourth, prefigurative politics also commonly has an affective importance, galvanising protesters, creating a shared sense of purpose, and widening people’s sense of what might be possible. In a discussion of the black civil rights movement in the US, for example, Epstein (1991: 123) argues that the act of behaving in public places as if they had been granted equality – ordering coffee in a ‘white’s only’ bar, for example – ‘gave civil rights workers the

strength to go on [and provided] a permanently altered sense of what human relations could be’. The prefigurative disposition nurtures a basic sensibility that, whatever the nature of the present, situations can change, and even the most marginalised might participate in effecting that transformation.

VII Conclusions

The last decade has witnessed intense geographical and anthropological interest in individuals’ and societies’ engagement with imagined futures, reflecting a global rise in concern that the future may look very different from the present. Prominent geographical contributions have largely focused in recent years on the work of governments in prophesying future scenarios as a basis for interventions, many of them aimed at limiting freedoms. Analysis of this ‘anticipatory politics’ has been revelatory, but it also raises the question of how others, including those marginalised by the dominant, imagine, invest in, and defend visions of the future. Investigation of prefigurative politics offers one means of addressing this issue. It highlights ways of knowing, acting, and occupying space and social networks that are not lived in the shadow of the temporal strategies of dominant powers, spaces where – as Anna Tsing (2015: 234) puts it – ‘hope and despair huddle together’.

We have emphasised three aspects or moments of prefigurative politics. First, especially in the early stages of prefigurative politics, a type of restless improvisation is a characteristic trait. Prefigurative politics tends to proceed through forms of improvisation that enrol and, in the process, transform objects, materials, flows, landscapes, and affective atmospheres, just as it is shaped itself by processes of social and spatial change. To make this point is to challenge the notion that prefigurative politics is rigidly committed to a single vision of change. Ethnographies of prefigurative politics (e.g. Tadros, 2015; Dey, 2016)

suggest instead that improvised action in the present results in the temporary coalescence of a vision of the future. This guides new improvisations, which – in turn – generate novel ideas about how the future should be imagined.

Our second argument has been that prefigurative politics is most sustainable where it leads to wider social cooperation and the institutionalisation of improvisational practice, often but certainly not inevitably in the form of named organisations/movements, and frequently in ways that provide some protection against outside forces. We have stressed the spatial nature of this process and the importance in particular of safe spaces where prefigurative politics can gain momentum. We have also pointed to the social nature of institutionalisation.

As it institutionalises and develops within relatively safe spaces, there are risks of prefigurative politics becoming inward-looking and exclusive. But our third argument has been that prefigurative politics often has impact. Those involved in prefigurative politics have been able to create new social and economic opportunities, reshape spatial practice, alter how people conceive of themselves, and influence wider affective atmospheres.

This summary provides a basis for specifying more clearly the similarities and differences between prefigurative politics and anticipatory politics (Anderson, 2010, 2017). Those involved in developing both anticipatory politics and prefigurative politics believe that the future will be substantially distinct from the present and that organisations and individuals have the power to shape the present to result in a different future. But whereas, for dominant powers, these insights are commonly used as a pretext for suspicion, control, and the policing of spatial practice, for those involved in oppositional prefigurative politics the idea of a tendentious present implies a refusal to accept current thought and organisational structures as fixed; it suggests ways of living more open to others, surprise, and change.

Second, both forms of politics are highly inventive, in terms of the spatial forms and rhetoric they employ and the manner in which they enrol other people and organisations into their projects. Relatedly, both forms of politics often also expend great effort in scrutinising the horizon of present practice for signs that could guide pathways away from anticipatory politics or towards prefigurative politics in the future.

In addition, prefigurative politics and anticipatory politics shape each other in at least three ways. Anticipatory politics, in building up rhetorically the importance of reflecting on the future and its relationship to the present, has provided part of the context for the rise of prefigurative politics. Second, and most importantly, local, situated projects of prefigurative action, and the wider international movements that they have occasionally triggered, have countered the visions of the future disseminated by dominant institutions through the impact they have had on spaces, discourse, and power relations. Third, the rise of prefigurative politics has not escaped the notion of those engaged in anticipatory politics, who in some settings are developing prefigurative practices with the appearance, but not the intent, of radical change.

The wider implications for geographies of the future are threefold. First, our analysis offers a provisional framework of analysis for other scholars interested in studying oppositional prefigurative politics, notably via our emphasis on improvisation, institutionalisation and impact (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Swain, 2019). Much more broadly, this framework encourages reflection on the extent to which individuals and organisations seek to instantiate their goals in the process of mobilisation. This question is already integral to several bodies of critical work within geography, especially feminist geographies (see Klowdasky, 2009; Lawson, 2007), but it might be usefully elevated as a basis for comparative enquiry across different areas of geography and as a means of opening up interdisciplinary conversations.

Second, analysis of prefigurative politics could trigger new reflection within geography on the issue of the present, as well as the future, as an analytical focus. It might be particularly productive to consider comparatively the historical and geographical circumstances in which the present becomes an object of close political, social, cultural and economic reflection. Addressing this question might link discussions of anticipatory politics and prefigurative politics to a wide array of other work in the social sciences that considers how, why and with what effects people come to experience a sense of living powerfully in the present. This would also involve examining spatialities of ‘now’, including literature on waiting (Honwana, 2012; Jeffrey, 2010), conflict (Gregory and Pred, 2013), grief (Sidaway, 2016), and intense insecurity (Johnson-Hanks, 2002).

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