The path is the goal: utopia as process
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Abstract

As part of a renewed interest in prefigurative politics evident in contemporary activism, important critical work is being undertaken that focuses on the temporal structure of such prefigurative action. The central problem this article therefore takes as its starting point is the nature of our current political utopias – that they are transcendent rather than grounded, or put another way – rather than here-and-now they are nowhere – in an ever-receding future/past, or otherwise in an alternate reality altogether. They are impossible. The paper will argue that if we are to move beyond our current states of bewilderment, disorientation and denial, we will need to establish new (and learn from existing) grounded utopias which rather than being not-now and nowhere, are co-imagined and lived right here and right now. Drawing on classical and contemporary anarchist theory, and from a recent collective visioning project involving a global cross-section of anti-capitalist, ecological, feminist and anti-racist activists, the anarchist concept of permanent revolution will be examined as a way to confront such concerns. The temporal gap between current struggles and imagined futures will be problematised, prefigurative praxes critiqued, and a politics of immanence explored in remedy.

Keywords: Prefigurative politics, permanent revolution, utopia, immanence, collective visioning.

'We do not have to sketch in advance the picture of the future society: It is the spontaneous action of all free men that is to create it and give it its shape, moreover incessantly changing like all the phenomena of life'.

– Élisée Reclus (1889)

'Nothing pre-exists the relations that constitute it'.

– Arturo Escobar (2016, 18)

Introduction

We are living in the midst of an unprecedented planetary emergency. By far the greatest challenge that humanity has faced in its brief history. And one of our own making. The ferocity with which human beings are consuming and fighting over resources is literally destroying our web of life, constructed over billions of

years, upon which all of us, human and non-human, depend for survival. As we hurtle ever closer to this proverbial cliff edge, the deferral of free ecological society to some imagined post-revolutionary moment has become an increasingly untenable position. Encouragingly, we have observed a clear prefigurative turn within contemporary activism, with the co-creation of living, vibrant, material alternatives to the current system which tangibly express the utopian potentiality that exists as an immanent feature of the present. Such spaces exist inside and outside of contemporary society simultaneously. They both configure/prefigure alternative ways of living and being and act as exemplars for wider society to see that such alternatives are actually possible. As part of this renewed interest in prefigurative politics, important critical work is being undertaken that focuses on the temporal structure of such prefigurative action. What are the consequences of concretising a fixed future image of society to be prefigured? How do we navigate the gap between *here* and *there*, and at what cost?

By way of an offering to these debates, this article will examine the anarchist concept of permanent revolution as a way to confront such concerns. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's original formulation of permanent revolution, unlike the Marxist-Trotskyist use of the term that maintained the need for a vanguard party seizing state control (Marx and Engels 1850; Trotsky 1931), involved 'the people alone, acting upon themselves without intermediary' (Proudhon 1848) in order to break the cycle of partial revolutions examined later in the paper. The central problem this enquiry will therefore take as its starting point is the nature of our current political utopias – that they are transcendent rather than grounded, or put another way – rather than here-and-now they are nowhere – in an ever-receding future/past, or otherwise in an alternate reality altogether. They are impossible. The article will argue that if we are to move beyond our current states of bewilderment, disorientation and denial, we will need to establish new (and learn from existing) grounded utopias which rather than being *not-now* and *nowhere*, are co-imagined and lived right *here* and right *now*. Drawing on classical and contemporary anarchist theory, and from a recent collective visioning project involving a global cross-section of anti-capitalist, ecological, feminist and anti-racist activists, the temporal gap between current struggles and imagined futures will be problematised, prefigurative praxes critiqued, and a politics of immanence explored in remedy.

Collective visions

A recent study conducted with activists across Europe found that although the utopian imagination was considered to be a central aspect of their struggles, processes which harnessed this collective imaginary are rarely used as a method for designing strategy and tactics (Pötz 2019, 138). And so, by way of response to this apparent deficit, a process of Collective Visioning has been used to inform and develop the theory in the second part of this article. This approach has been adapted from participatory methods used within the global Occupy movement as a tool for collaboration and collective action. It involves a group

process of intentionally generating a vision that is unapologetically utopian while remaining grounded in grassroots struggle – to be enacted in the here-and-now. Such collective visioning acts to reveal 'glimpses of a future world' (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 37) and of the seeds of liberation already existing in the present. For Ernst Bloch, such imagination is 'productive of the revolution', and revolution is 'the changing of the world' (cited in Brown 2003) – positioning imagination not as mere fantasising, but as a *process* inherently attuned to 'objectively real possibility' (Bloch 1986, 145) and therefore to the 'properties of reality which are themselves utopian' (which already contain future). Similarly, Katarzyna Balug positions imagination as the central driver of cognition and perception, concluding that society can therefore 'only create that which its members can imagine' (Balug 2017, 284). Without engaging in such future-oriented discussion on values, goals and visions it will never be possible to 'take over' that very future (Mannermaa 2006, 4). Utopian political imaginaries have largely been rejected by conventional politics since the end of the Second World War on the grounds that such thought is 'abstract' and 'metaphysical', and that a utopian desire for justice and perfection might well rupture the ordered fragility of the international status quo (Brincat 2009, 585). From this perspective, to be utopian is to be 'hopelessly impractical, or dangerously idealistic, or both' (Davis 2009, 73). And such a negation of imagination has led many political theorists to narrow their focus exclusively to the empirical *now* – thus constraining contemporary political imagination to a fixed (neoliberal) present. Tom, one of the collective visioning participants, reflects on this situation:

> There are a lot of people who say that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism and I think that means that their world-view has been so thoroughly dominated by capitalism that this really is the case. For some reason idealism and utopianism are framed as a bad thing. The declaration that we cannot think an end to capitalism is not just defeatist – it shows that a lot of the leftist tradition has failed and it's done.

The argument here does not aim to negate the importance of a political praxis which is responsive to the present and rooted in everyday experience, or as the Zapatistas put it: *'preguntando caminamos'* ('walking we ask questions') – but simply to acknowledge that without visions of how the world might be different, struggles will stagnate and decline. Might it therefore be possible to develop a mode of praxis which imagines futures that realign movement trajectory while simultaneously grounding itself in present moment realities – an imaginative/responsive ongoing process? Ruth Levitas suggests reframing Utopia as method, an 'imaginary reconstitution of society' which addresses both the new society and the transition to it - thus maintaining a 'double standpoint' between present and future and, she suggests, 're-reading the present from the standpoint of the future' (Levitas 2013, 218). Taking this logic even further, Laurence Davis (2012, 136) draws a clear distinction between *transcendent*

utopias which imagine and strive for perfection in an impossible future, and what he terms *grounded utopias* which imagine qualitatively better forms of living latent in the present – transforming the restrictions of the 'here and now' into an 'open horizon of possibilities'. Davis believes that we may well be witnessing a paradigm shift in utopian thinking in this early part of the twenty-first century, with a new conception of utopia as an 'empirically grounded, dynamic, and open-ended' feature of the 'real world' of history and politics (Ibid, 127). He builds upon Friedrich Kümmel's idea of time as a temporal coexistence between past, future and present, with the relation of these temporal components not merely conceived as one of succession but also as one of conjoint existence (Kümmel, 1968). And he presents a concept of time in which 'the future represents the possibility, and the past a basis, of a free life in the present' (Davis 2012, 131). From this perspective such grounded utopias both emerge out of, and support the further development of, historical movements for social change – and thus are not 'fantasised visions of perfection to be imposed on an imperfect world' (Ibid, 136) but rather provide the space for a utopian re-imagining of current (and therefore future) social relations which are firmly grounded in contemporary grassroots struggle.

This particular Collective Visioning process involved the thoughts, feelings, ideas and imaginings of a global cross section of ecological, anti-capitalist, feminist and anti-racist activists from South Africa, Mexico, *Trouwunna* (Tasmania, Australia), Ireland, UK, Syria, Uganda, Germany, Italy, Canada, the Netherlands, Turkey, USA and Jordan. A specific and sustained effort was made to maintain a diverse representation of participants from both the global South and North in order to encourage a 'cosmopolitan ecology of knowledges' (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2008, xiv). We have therefore striven for an epistemic diversity in the (co)production of new theory, with full cognizance of the long history of oppression/suppression against so much of the knowledge(s) produced in the South – on which the Western academy has built its current hegemony of imperial knowledge and consequently the systems driving our current socio-ecological crises. The latter part of this article will bring the voices of some of these activists into a dialogue with both classical and contemporary theory, illuminating a vibrant politics of utopia, immanence, and permanent revolution.

Unfinished business

For over three centuries, efforts to animate radical social change have been largely focused on the state, with the main debates concerning how to win state power, whether by parliamentary or by extra-parliamentary means (Holloway 2002, 1-6). Throughout this period, it has been possible to observe how one-by-one the mass movements of the time have been co-opted by political parties in order to gain power for their own self-interest rather than completing the task of dismantling the institutions of domination. And as a result, all such parties have grown to resemble the very state systems they have claimed to oppose, both in their organisational structures and in the limitation of their imagination.

Ekrem describes his sense of disappointment and missed opportunity in relation to the authoritarian counter-revolutions that have occurred in recent years across the Arab world:

> This is not why we spent so many hours and days in Tahrir Square. It is history repeating itself – there was military rule, [Mubarak] went, and now there is military rule again! And this has happened right across the Arab spring. It's a concrete living example – people came together, social movements came together, and it ends up all the same. People come together to face a challenge as a community, as a society, and then later on when they have attained their goals the revolution is stolen from them.

Thus, the new 'revolutionary' party arises in the name of free society, but actually causes its demise. As new state institutions are created there might well be a newfound sense of hope and optimism among the newly liberated populace. But in most cases the very tyrants who the revolutionaries sought to replace rapidly return to power, or they are replaced by new and often more refined systems of domination as the hierarchies inevitably re-emerge within the stasis of the institution. In 1898, twenty years prior to the October Revolution, Élisée Reclus prophetically warned his 'revolutionary friends' in Russia of the dangers of conquering state power and in turn adopting the very tools of domination that their revolution was seeking to displace:

> If the socialists become our masters, they will certainly proceed in the same manner as their predecessors, the republicans. The laws of history will not bend in their favor. Once they have power, they will not fail to use it, if only under the illusion or pretense that this force will be rendered useless as all obstacles are swept away and all hostile elements destroyed. The world is full of such ambitious and naïve persons who live with the illusory hope of transforming society through their exceptional capacity to command (Reclus 2013, 145).

These words of Reclus are as pertinent now as they were then, perhaps even more so. For as Murray Bookchin similarly reminded us: 'political parties are *products* of the nation-state itself, whether they profess to be revolutionary, liberal, or reactionary' (Bookchin 1996, 7). Thus, the fundamental difference that distinguishes one party from another is merely the kind of nation-state it wishes to establish. Yet in spite of this, conventional political histories examining revolutions have focused exclusively on the rivalries between liberal, radical, and revolutionary parties for control of the state, ignoring this far more important political battle which takes place between the state-centric revolutionary party and the new, usually directly democratic institutions co-created by the people on the ground. In fact, it has been possible to observe such a pattern in most, if not all, modern classical revolutions. The English

revolution saw the communalism of the Levellers and Diggers subverted by Cromwell's state-centric parliamentarians resulting in the mass enclosure of common land and greatly assisting the eventual rise of industrial capitalism (Ibid, 128). Similarly in the French revolution, when the previously centrist Jacobins were locked in a power struggle with their rival Girondins, a revolutionary rhetoric was adopted as an attempt to gain mass support. And in Russia the Bolsheviks, who were highly authoritarian, adopted an almost anarchist rhetoric in their own power struggles with the Mensheviks, the Social Revolutionaries, and their liberal rivals. Of course, once power was in their hands the Jacobins decimated the sections, and the Bolsheviks the soviets, transforming France and Russia into increasingly authoritarian nation-states and effectively ending their revolutionary processes (Ibid, 9).

The Spanish Revolution again followed a similar path. In January 1933, following a wave of uprisings across Barcelona, Madrid and Valencia, the residents of the small Andalusian town of Casas Viejas took to the streets and declared *comunismo libertario* (libertarian communism). In order to supress the uprising, the local civil guards set fire to a building shielding some of the revolutionaries, killing eight women and men. They then rounded up and shot a further twelve men in the town square. The tragedy reverberated throughout the country, energising resistance to the state, and becoming one of the catalysts leading to the social revolution in the subsequent years (Mintz 1982, 1-9). In fact, by 1936, millions of ordinary Spanish people applying the organisational forms of the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* – Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalist Labour Unions (CNT) and the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* – Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) had taken large sections of the economy into their own hands. These new free areas, cooperatives, and village communes were collectivised and self-administered, with the efficiency of their collective enterprises far exceeding that of comparable ones in the nationalised or private sectors (Bookchin 1990, xi-xxxix). As an example, in Barcelona all healthcare was organised via the Medical Syndicate which managed 18 hospitals (6 of which were created anew in this period), 17 sanatoria, 22 clinics, 6 psychiatric establishments, 3 nurseries, and one maternity hospital – an incredible achievement given the wartime context (Leval 2018, 270). In his *Homage to Catalonia* George Orwell describes the 'special atmosphere' of liberation and hope he witnessed on arriving in Barcelona in 1936: 'There was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine' (Orwell 1938, 7).

From mid-1936 however a broad alliance of parties was formed aiming to reconstruct the state, including the Marxist *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT), the Communist party, Republicans, and Catalan nationalists. Subsequently a new national government was declared and the UGT leader Fransisco Largo Cabellero was made prime minister. In a much-criticised move senior figures of the CNT then began negotiations to enter this government claiming to do so in the 'spirit of anti-fascist unity' (Yeoman 2019, 438). Alarmed, the FAI argued that this was not only a violation of their core

principles but also a strategically poor decision that essentially 'disarmed the movement' (Ibid, 439). And in a combined policy document between the CNT and UGT the scale of compromise was made starkly apparent. Relinquishing its central anti-statist position, the CNT objected only to 'a totalitarian form of government', instead opting for a 'true social democracy' – a 'Social Democratic and Federalist Republic' (Peirats 1998, 286). They then further agreed to open a 'new constitutional period' during which they would go so far as to participate in the state elections. The Peninsular Committee of the FAI were astonished by this reversal of ideological position and immediately responded to the declaration: 'There is no doubt that the proposal is consonant with the desires long harboured by the current government to render void whatever revolutionary transformation has been made in Spain' (Ibid, 292). However, these concerns were quickly dismissed in a circular from the National Committee of the CNT: '[W]e shut the mouths of the defeatists, pessimists, those who will not listen to reason and those who take advantage of the circumstances to speak of revolutionary losses, cave-ins, treasons and liquidations' (Ibid, 290). Tragically, yet unsurprisingly, in the following months the Republican army proceeded to dismantle hundreds of collectives and dissolve the regional council, arresting hundreds and with many being tortured and killed. By the summer of 1937 most urban and rural collectives had been legalised and brought under state control, and the CNT-FAI members of the national government and Generalitat removed from their positions. The social revolution was effectively over. The CNT-FAI, although retaining a considerable membership, had little power to act as republican Spain collapsed, with Nationalist troops finally entering Barcelona in January 1939 (Yeoman 2019, 437-442). Vernon Richards argued that the CNT were guilty of falling victim to the very illusions they had so frequently criticised in the socialists – believing that power was only a danger when in the 'wrong hands' and for a 'wrong cause' (Richards 2019, 225). If we are to judge the results of the decisions made by the CNT in the Spanish civil war, he concluded, we can draw only one conclusion: 'Where the means are authoritarian, the ends, the real or dreamed of future society, is authoritarian and never results in the free society... [G]overnment – even with the collaboration of socialists and anarchists – breeds more government' (Ibid, 232).

And this pattern has continued into our present era. As Ekrem previously mentioned, a striking contemporary example of this phenomena can be observed in the *Arab Spring* wave of revolutions. On January 4th 2011, 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi died from self-immolation in response to ongoing police harassment – leading to massive protests across the country. By January 14th Tunisian dictator Ben Ali had been forced from power and had fled the country. Inspired by this spontaneous uprising, and similarly animated by the death of a young man Khaled Said who had been beaten to death by police just weeks previously, Tahrir Square in Cairo was occupied by Egyptian protestors on January 25th who once again ousted the dictator (this time Mubarak) just 18 days later. Over the course of the following months a wave of leaderless, horizontal, decentralised and anti-hierarchical

uprisings spread throughout the region to countries including Libya, Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, Sudan, Omar and Morocco. Across the world we held our breath as this seemingly unstoppable series of movements emerged as a multiplicity in accordance with local conditions. Not all the revolutions succeeded in overthrowing their governments, but for the ones who managed to displace the old regime a familiar and tragic pattern could then be observed as one by one the power of these mass movements was once again co-opted by political parties and the revolutions effectively stolen. The Muslim Brotherhood and Nour parties in Egypt, An-Nahda in Tunisia, the Parti du Justice et Développement in Morroco, all effectively ending the revolutionary process. In a similar way, the so called 'Second Spring' of 2019 in Sudan and Algeria that adopted similar organising strategies successfully brought down the long-term dictators Omar al Bashir and Bouteflika respectively. Unfortunately, the second spring has followed much the same pattern as the first, with the new governing parties maintaining a continuity of core state policies.

This is not to say that change does not occur, for how else would we account for such momentous events as the fall of feudalism, the abolition of slavery, or the end of the divine right of kings? Without doubt significant social and economic societal progress has been achieved by this movement of movements throughout history. It is rather to say that the actually-existing free society constituted in the revolutionary moment is rapidly dismantled and replaced by default forms of social organisation, and thus the full potential of the moment is lost. And so, this repeated pattern of stolen revolutions has left us all – every one of us – living a poor imitation of what might have been. Rather than revolution becoming a 'permanent condition of life' (Bookchin 1996, 9) these struggles have been abstracted as historical footnotes and their truth subverted by state powers. As each of these revolutions attempted compromise with the state, a space was immediately opened for counterrevolution and defeat. This principle, argues Bookchin (1998, 118), can be taken as absolutely fixed: 'The vacuum that an unfinished revolution leaves behind is quickly filled by its enemies, who, sometimes presenting themselves as "compromisers", "realists", and "reasonable men" try to harness the revolution and steer the energy it has churned up towards its own destruction'. For the parties, the direct action that drives the revolution is seen as transitory, a means to an end – no more no less. And thus, the party system must eventually supress this power from below in order to sustain itself, squandering the promise of 'government of the people by the people' by imposing a 'government of the people by *an elite sprung from the people'* (Duverger, cited in Arendt 2016, 281). It was witnessing at first hand the French revolution of 1848 being subverted in this way by the provisional government that confirmed for Proudhon that 'all parties, without exception, as they affect power, are varieties of absolutism', leading him to conclude: 'the political revolution, the abolition of authority among men is the goal; the social revolution is the means' (Proudhon 1849, 3). And it was this realisation that led him to call for the 'permanent revolution' this article pursues. And so, for contemporary activists, if truly resolved to imagine, co-constitute and then

sustain free ecological society, our revolution must become similarly permanent. It must become an ongoing process without end.

For anarchists such as Reclus, Gustav Landauer, and Peter Kropotkin, revolution and evolution were two sides of the same coin – each leading to the other in a perpetual cycle of alternation. As Kropotkin (2010, 360-361) describes: 'If we represent the slow progress of a period of evolution by a line drawn on paper, we shall see this line gradually though slowly, rising. Then there comes a revolution, and the line makes a sudden leap upwards'. He concludes however that once this height has been achieved 'progress cannot be maintained'. As can be witnessed through history the line sharply drops, and 'reaction follows' (Ibid, 361). After this point, although the line of progress is often at a permanently higher level than before, it remains only a partial revolution, and the next stage of evolution proceeds from this point. Kropotkin argues that these moments of revolution, where a sudden leap toward freedom is achieved, are arrived at through a 'wave of brotherly love' that acts to 'wash the earth clean... [and] sweep away the shards of refuse accumulated by centuries of slavery and oppression' (Kroptkin 2014, 531). But he then very quickly (and perhaps prematurely) concludes that 'we cannot hope that our daily life will be continuously inspired by such exalted enthusiasms', nor the free society be founded on 'such noble passions' (Ibid). If we follow Kropotkin's logic – that it is in fact a wave of love that results in the moment of revolution – then would not the extension of such a wave in turn extend this free society as a process of permanent revolution? Surely it is exactly such 'noble passions' that a free society *must* be founded on? Landauer appeared to believe so, arguing that the ultimate destiny of revolution – to awaken '*le contr'État*: the state that is no state' – will be arrived at through one connecting quality: 'love as force' (Landauer 2010, 168-170). And so, it might be argued, grounding social reproduction in such relations might then offer a stream of continuation from the old to the new – and thus work to avert the usual post-revolutionary vacuum in which the counterrevolution occurs.

If, however, a free society is to be founded on such relations, and without 'assistance' from a vanguard revolutionary party, then what of a manifesto? What of strategy and planning? In a famous attack on the revolutionary ideas of Marx, Michael Bakunin addressed this question by setting himself in opposition to what he saw as the foolishness of rigidly aligning to a preconceived idea of how revolutionary change should occur: 'We do not, therefore, intend to draw up a blueprint for the future revolutionary campaign; we leave this childish task to those who believe in the possibility of the efficacy of achieving the emancipation of humanity through personal dictatorship' (Dolgoff 1973, 357). From this perspective then, and without a clear map to guide us, the question of how to get from the *here* of struggle to the *there* of free society continues to present us with a perplexing dilemma, because as Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin explain in their book *Prefigurative Politics*, it is not a question of whether political means and ends *should* be linked, because 'they *already are*' (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 36). Namazzi argues that the reason why so many revolutionary movements have failed is because 'the people were clear about

what they wanted to move from, but they were not clear on where they were heading', and thus those in power have been able to 'take advantage of this gap in strategy'. But this very sense of trajectory from here to there/somewhere, as expressed by Namazzi perhaps illuminates a more central problem – that as long as freedom is deferred while in transit between a past we aim to escape and an imagined utopian future, there indeed remains such a gap to be enclosed and colonised by oppressive forces. But as we are now beginning to discern, it is this very sense of trajectory from here to there, and the resultant gap between the two temporalities which obscures what might be the ground upon which free society can finally be constituted – in the immanence and accessibility of the now.

As discussed previously, in his work on *grounded utopias* Davis (2012, 130-132) builds on Kümmel's idea of time as a temporal coexistence between past, future and present, with the relation of these temporal components not merely conceived as one of succession but also as one of conjoint existence – with both past and future intertwined with the present. From a movement perspective this state of profound contingency calls on us to open many more spaces for radical imaginaries focused on building political projects in the here-and-now, grounded in historical praxis and extending toward an ever changing yet hopeful future. But this relocation to the present is by no means a rejection of utopian thinking – far from it – for visions of future worlds animate struggle in the present. The real danger lies in clinging to and concretising any one fixed vision of the future (or indeed the past) as it will implicitly trap us within what David Abram calls 'the oblivion of linear time' (Abram 2017, 272). It will trap us, that is, within the same 'illusory dimension' that has already enabled us to lose connection with and fragment apart from the natural world. Temporally speaking then, the most strategic and efficacious location for constructing free society is in this moment, and then the next, and the next – in perpetuity. And so, as Anna explains: 'Acting from the here and now is revolutionary... Rather than having a fixed vision that the future will look like xyz – it is rather left open – really trusting in where we are coming from and what our intentions and motivations are. More humane, more relational, more caring'. From this perspective any truly inhabitable utopia can therefore only be arrived at, or lived, as a dynamic process in the here-and-now. Kurdish revolutionary Bager Nûjiyan (2019) described his own struggle in Rojava as such a grounded utopia firmly rooted in the present. For him and his comrades free society was not just an abstract idea, but their 'concrete way of living', and their 'way of connecting with struggle and utopia on a daily basis'. Thus, from Nûjiyan's perspective the temporal gap between that which we struggle to escape and our imagined destination had been closed, and the free society relocated to the immanence of the here-and-now where it can finally be reclaimed and occupied.

There are of course a number of well-argued critiques of such a politics of immanence which deserve further engagement. In her classic *Political Protest & Cultural Revolution* Barbara Epstein contends that the U.S. non-violent direct-action movements of the 1970's and 1980's were weakened by an emphasis on prefigurative politics and community building (Epstein 1991, 192).

By conceiving of community building as politics, she argues, the movements undermined their strategy. She believes very strongly in the efficacy of utopian politics and that it must 'hold out a vision of a non-violent and egalitarian society' which must then 'build the new society in the shell of the old by creating a space within which these values can be realised as far as possible' (Ibid, 269). Ultimately however she concludes that for a movement to achieve real political impact it must be willing to 'sacrifice community' (Ibid, 192). Raising related concerns, Uri Gordon has argued that a politics of the here-and-now leads to our struggles becoming trapped in a 'recursive prefiguration' similar to that which can be found in Christianity, in which a future 'radiates backwards on its past' (Gordon 2017, 521) – an 'absorption of the revolutionary/utopian horizon into the present tense' (Gordon 2009, 261). Such a temporal framing, he argues, works to 'undermine a generative disposition towards the future', allowing a collective denial of both the 'absent promise' of revolutionary transformation in the near future, and the very real prospect of imminent ecological and societal collapse (Gordon 2017, 522). Prefiguration from this perspective is little more than a way of modelling an imagined future in the present moment as a way of dissociating from the very real and immediate ecological and social crises that cascade around us – 'fiddling while Rome burns' so to speak. Gordon thus argues that adherents to such 'presentism' sidestep these crises by 'avoiding any disposition towards the future altogether' (Ibid, 532).

Darren Webb similarly critiques what he describes as attempts to 'reconfigure utopia' and to 'rid it of its totalistic and prescriptive dimensions' in order to avoid the risk of 'closure and control', claiming that such an approach merely succeeds in nullifying its utopian potential (Webb 2009, 757). He believes that much of the 'vitality, power and direction' that a utopian approach might offer is lost when attempting to circumvent its perceived 'bad' connotations. He repeatedly rejects what he refers to as 'the standard liberal critique' of blueprint utopianism (Webb 2013, 280-290), one assumes in order to ridicule similar arguments made by those on the left, without acknowledging that such critique has a long and established history in anarchist thought. Moreover, the many anarchist revolutionaries and theorists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who were clear in their opposition to such vanguardist concretised visions of a future society were making their observations within living memory (and often through direct experience) of the devastating consequences of such an approach. He is right however in his assertion that without visions of the future, utopian praxis risks becoming 'an empty and endless project that romanticises the process while losing sight of the goal' (Ibid, 287). And in his critical case study of Occupy Wall Street he makes a similar argument: 'Movements heralding themselves as cracks in capitalist space-time through which transformed social relations are emerging here-and-now might just end up becoming dead spaces in which the inchoate utopian desires that originally gave them life wither away through neglect' (Webb 2019, 358).

And of course, he is once again correct – they 'might'. But must they? Are a politics of immanence and a generative praxis, as these scholars claim, really so

mutually exclusive? The dangers are certainly real and must be taken seriously
– a politics of immanence could well be (and at times is) subverted to provide
reassurance and denial in the face of ecological and social systemic collapse.
But such an impatience with our collective lack of revolutionary progress in the
present, while entirely understandable, might just as easily lead us yet again
into a blinkered march towards a frozen future-image conceived of in the past,
the abandonment of the now, and the repetition of previous mistakes. Any
future utopia we might imagine through the limitations of our current
conceptual frameworks will inevitably at some point be found lacking as our
capacity to imagine better worlds evolves beyond our original starting point,
condemning us to a future 'caught within the paradigms of the present'
(Newman 2009, 211). As Katie explains:

> I think it's often hard to know what the best course of action is – or at
> least it's hard to know five years in advance! I think the best one can
> tell is often just in that moment. To the extent that the impact of
> one's actions in the world can be unclear, I think a commitment to
> having those actions be loving – that the intention is that they be
> loving – is a powerful thing. So, for me that's the place I want to start
> from. It's about the large choices but also about the tiny choices right
> in front of us – two inches from our own nose – those choices as well.

And so, although it might be possible to identify the impacts and successes of
previous struggles with the benefit of hindsight, it is never possible to envisage
the whole process in advance. In fact, rather than inevitably undermining a
generative disposition towards the future as suggested by Gordon, or merely
leading to the kind of 'dead space' described by Webb, such a politics of
immanence might alternatively provide the agency to transform our multiple
entangled relations in the here-and-now, and consequently the extent to which
they will lead to social relations of domination or liberation in the future we aim
to affect. Interestingly, such a process was reported to be a common experience
among the activists contributing to this enquiry, manifested as a radical
solidarity, as political direct action, and as long-term methods of struggle.
Strategically developing political praxes grounded in these immanent processes
might therefore provide the basis upon which to co-constitute free society here-
and-now – as an imaginative/responsive ongoing process rather than reverting
to default capitalistic, patriarchal, racist or anthropocentric modes of
reproduction, and provide a means for sustaining such a system in the absence
of domination. Of course, critics of grounded utopianism might still
legitimately ask how realistic such a profound reconfiguration can actually be.
But the answer, somewhat unsurprisingly given the sheer scale of struggle
visible today, is that it is entirely possible to find living, vibrant examples of
such societal formations across the world right now that might inspire us.
Perhaps, as Ariel Salleh (2017, 269) suggests, political theorists have simply
been 'too culturally blinkered to see it'. For instance, the indigenous onto-
epistemology that so radically transformed the original Marxist insurgents and

consequently the entire trajectory of the Zapatista experiment to date has been the indigenous Tsotsil concept of *O'on* or 'collective heart' – a concept masterfully translated for a non-Tsotsil audience in Dylan Eldredge Fitzwater's book *Autonomy is in Our Hearts* (2019). In the Tsotsil language thoughts and feelings are considered to be one and the same, thus better framed as *thought-feeling*, and are understood to manifest in this collective heart as the realisation of its 'inherent potentialities'. This underlying potentiality is called *ch'ulel* - a means of describing the 'inherent or immanent potentialities' that are always present and ready to shape and form the 'dynamic relationships that compose reality' (Ibid, 32-33). Xuno López Intzin, a contemporary Tsotsil scholar and activist explains how ch'ulel thus potentiates the kind of profound interrelationality that resonates with the politics of immanence we are discussing:

> From this understanding of the ch'ulel in everything, the human being establishes relations with all that exists, in other words the human being interacts with their environment and the environment with the human being on a material and immaterial plane. From this plane or universe of ch'ulel existence is ordered, and social relations are ordered with all that exists (cited in Fitzwater 2019, 33).

And similarly, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as *Rojava* – an extraordinary experiment in horizontal participatory democracy involving a multicultural population of around 3 million people – offers another contemporary example of such an approach. Once again this is a utopia of the here-and-now – a politics of immanence firmly grounded in (and generative of) the day-to-day life and struggles of the communes. It is a process of free society continually creating and recreating itself. As Abdullah Öcalan (2017, 140) explains:

> On this voyage, the question of when the construction of the democratic nation will be completed is a redundant one. This is a construction that will never be finished: it is an ongoing process. The construction of a democratic nation has the freedom to recreate itself at every instant. In societal terms, there can be no utopia or reality that is more ambitious than this.

Utopia as process

For Bookchin, the real issue for activists in modern times was no longer a question of 'reason, power, or technê,' but this 'function of imagination' in giving us direction, hope, and a sense of place in nature and society (Bookchin 2005, 421). But of course, as we have just established – we must simultaneously resist the temptation of then freeze-framing this radical imagination into one (impossible) future. And as Tom makes clear: 'any utopia that we are going to

have is going to be built grounded in what we already know'. A free ecological society must be (can only be) co-constituted right-here and right now, in a multiplicity of practices and forms, and from the ground up. And as we are now discovering somewhat encouragingly, this open, responsive, unfolding of utopia as a process in the here-and-now has played an increasingly central role in movement strategy over previous decades. On the praxis of the alterglobalisation movement for instance Marianne Maeckelbergh (2011, 2) reflects: 'What [made] the alterglobalisation movement different from previous movements is that the "alternative" world is not predetermined; it is developed through practice and it is different everywhere'. And a similar reclamation of the present could be observed in the US Student Occupation Movement that began in New York in 2008 and peaked in California in 2009 – which can be traced as one of the factors that led to the emergence of the Occupy movement in 2011. The pamphlet *Communiqué from an Absent Future* articulates how the student activists saw their tactic of occupation as potentiating a radical imagination which moved the struggle way beyond simply making demands to those in power towards a complete reimagining of the current system: '[T]he point of occupation [is] the creation of a momentary opening in capitalist time and space, a rearrangement that sketches the contours of a new society…' (Clover 2012, 98). And the sheer range and diversity of such praxes that are observable today, rather than indicating a 'confusion or incoherence', provides clear evidence that such an approach offers a unique flexibility and applicability across multiple diverging contexts (Franks 2018, 34).

Such anarchistic approaches are not aimed at 'vertical transcendence' but are rather brought back down to earth in a grounding exercise of 'radical immanence' – an act of 'unfolding the self onto the world, while enfolding the world within' (Braidotti 2013, 193). And it is through the co-creation of such living, vibrant, material alternatives that we can tangibly express the utopian potentiality always within grasp – as an immanent feature of the present moment. Such approaches are of central importance, Simon Springer asserts, because they remind us of the latent agency present in the here and now: 'all we have is immanence, this precise moment of space-time in which we live and breathe, and because we are *it*, we can change, reshape, and ultimately transform *it*' (Springer 2014, 161). And therefore, as Jack explains: 'what we are bringing into perception in this moment, that is the world we are living in, and that is the relationship.' And so, for him also the idea of an abstracted yet concrete utopia is clearly 'a bit silly.' Our struggles must remain dynamic or else they end up being 'in opposition to life and the dynamism of who we are.' He continues: 'We are infinite beings with infinite dimensions. It needs to be in movement. It needs to be an ongoing dance – grounded in the moment… How we embody the world can be different for everyone – a multiplicity of connecting fantasies that we keep re-visioning.' A politics of immanence thus bridges the gap between theory and practice, between utopia and the now. For a utopian politics to truly act as the foundation for free society it cannot remain but an idea – it must become a lived experience. Alisha describes such a practice as *alchemy*:

> I decided to go out into nature and purposefully try to engage in some
> way. And what happened over time was the immersion allowed me to
> start to see the world as animate – everything animate – stones and
> mountains – looking at it as a kaleidoscope of changing sensations.
> And then there was more love for the natural world, and more grief…
> And now my commitment is towards the birds and the animals, and
> to the earth itself – to keep engaging. And the activism is like an
> alchemy – somehow through the reflection and the artistry in it
> something is formed in my soul… And what drives me on is
> threading that into my life on a daily basis.

It is in this dynamism that we can see examples of political praxes which are far less constrained by the ideological purity that existed in many previous historical movements. Saul Newman describes these contemporary movements as founded in 'contingency, open-endedness, and freedom of thought and action'. Without a requisite adherence to a concretised ideological 'shape', Newman argues that such activism has more freedom and flexibility to think and act autonomously, to work on multiple fronts, and in different contexts and settings (Newman 2019, 298). And this fluid, responsive nature makes them difficult to enclose in the usual theoretical classifications. As Marina Sitrin enquires: 'What is the name of this revolutionary process: Horizontalidad? Autogestion? Socialism? Anarchism? Autonomy? None of these? All of them? It is a process that does not have one name. It is a process of continuous creation, constant growth and development of new relations, with ideas flowing from these changing practices' (Sitrin 2019, 674). Thus, an engagement with the world which frames it as 'solid and confined', argues Alisha, will cause your activism to 'get shut down pretty quick'. In remedy, she recommends forms of activism that are 'relational to others, to ideas, to the sensual world, to everything' – containing an energy which can act to 'propel you forward' into further action and further creation. More often than not, direct-action tactics are framed as preventative or disruptive, aiming to stop or hinder a project we might be in struggle against – and this is of course an effective and necessary use of direct action. But an alternative and complementary way of framing direct action can also be as a constructive tactic – as the creation of alternative social spaces and relations beyond hierarchy and domination. Thus, our struggles can be seen as communal processes through which 'subjects emerge' – with the apparent dichotomy between individual and community destabilised (Eisenstadt 2016, 36). Such an approach can therefore be politically transformative both subjectively and inter-subjectively.

Benjamin Franks (2006, 114) asserts that such a political praxis will act to 'collapse the problematic distinction between means and ends' which we have seen as leading to tragic consequences for multiple failed revolutionary movements. And Landauer goes so far as to claim that there is ultimately no separation between cause and effect. He conceives of cause and effect flowing from one to another in an 'eternal' process that he terms 'reciprocal effect'

(Landauer 2010, 100). He even proceeds to suggest getting rid of the word 'cause' entirely, exclaiming: 'The cause is dead, long live the living effect!' Inverting Schopenhauer's claim that all reality is effectiveness, Landauer instead asserts that 'effectiveness is reality' – and therefore all that can be actual and existing is 'also present and in the moment' (Ibid, 103). But a politics of immanence need not (indeed must not) displace the future, on the contrary it should recognise it as an entangled aspect of what we term the present. Thus, what is generative must also be processual – with imagined future(s) and an ever-changing present in a constant dialogical process. And so rather than prefiguration, perhaps a more useful frame might be that of an imagined future being constantly *reconfigured* in a process of entangled relationality with the continually shifting present, which in turn reconfigures itself in relation to this new trajectory, and so on and so forth. Such a reframing might then ensure that the 'anxious and catastrophic forms of hope' that Gordon and CrimethInc (2018, 14) rightly argue will be necessary to create the urgently needed radical alternatives to our current dystopian conditions remain firmly grounded in the possible, while generative of the (what for some might seem) impossible. From this perspective then, we might consider reframing the sequencing of means and ends from a linear to a non-linear temporal form. And so rather than prefiguring a path which leads to a particular goal, we frame the path *as the goal*. Therefore, if our goal is freedom, then praxes must be established that realise freedom in the present – not as a distant promise but as the liberation of the here-and-now. If, as Proudhon suggested, revolution is ever to become a permanent process, it will be in this dynamic space between the *no longer* and the *not yet* that we must locate our shared political projects, and the new world(s) we co-imagine.

Acknowledgements

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