Introduction

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The future belongs to those who prepare for it in the present.
Malcolm X

Why prefigurative politics?

If you are reading this book, you’ve probably heard about the concept of ‘prefigurative politics’ before and are looking forward to knowing more about it; or maybe this is the first time that you’re reading about it. Either way, you are in the right place. This edited volume aims to be an accessible, intriguing, non-exhaustive introduction to what one of the reviewers called the ‘nomadic concept’ of prefigurative politics. Indeed, the idea for this collaborative project came from the realization that despite the increasing popularity and extensive use of the term across the social sciences, it is hard to find articles or books that – rather than taking its meaning for granted – aim explicitly at introducing, defining and discussing it.¹ As will become clear throughout the next chapters, though, this is not an easy task.

The meaning of ‘prefigurative politics’ and the repertoire of actions referred to as ‘prefigurative’ have been in evolution since the 1970s, when the term was used in political manifestos calling for workers’ self-management and democratic councils in the United States. The world we live in today, decades later, is profoundly different. However, social movements and civil society haven’t run out of things to grieve, to protest against and to mobilize for. They also have a lot to prefigure. The gloomy prospect of human-driven ecosystems’ collapse and the consequences for human and non-human life on this planet calls for an urgent and radical rethinking of the ways in which humans are working, producing, reproducing, consuming, travelling, eating and spending; in other words, the entire human way of life.² Prefigurative politics in the form of alternative production, consumption and food networks, cooperatives, transition towns, intentional and ecological communities,
and worker-owned firms are proof that such a transformation, at least on a small scale, is imaginable and realizable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the unsustainability of the status quo more evident. In fact, it is now almost impossible to ignore the importance of care work and emotional and reproductive labour for our collective wellbeing. The pandemic has brought into stark relief the inequalities and fragilities at the heart of our health systems and, more generally, our modern societies; think, for instance, of the burnt out, underpaid, racialized care workers at the frontline of intensive care units in US hospitals during the first wave of the pandemic. In this contemporary context, prefigurative politics in the form of grassroots, solidarity and mutual help groups can provide crucial spaces in which gender and body norms, stereotypes and discriminations, together with capitalist patterns of social reproduction, can be openly debated, deconstructed and sabotaged. Feminist activists and thinkers remind us, though, that democratizing care and strengthening our solidarity ties and mutual aid networks should be a daily practice, not just a lifebuoy we hold onto in cases of emergency (Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, 2020).

The pandemic has also revealed how crucial schools and universities are for the socialization and wellbeing of children and young people. And despite the dramatic disruption to their education, they remain at the forefront of unprecedented mobilizations calling for ‘system change, not climate change’ (for an overview, see Wahlström et al, 2019). These demands for change reflect an openness to think the world anew. This begs the question of whether we can transform educational institutions into spaces where centuries of colonial, racist, patriarchal and capitalist norms, values and beliefs can be questioned and unlearned. For the moment, activists’ assemblies, local/neighbour solidarity groups and radical independent schools constitute safe environments where critical pedagogy, experimentation, learning by trial and error and doing otherwise is encouraged.

But it is not only our economies, our consumption patterns, our lifestyles and our educational institutions that need to be rethought. The way we live together, articulate our emotions and manage conflict also need to be addressed. The pandemic’s toll on mental health, with a rise in anxiety, depression and addiction rates, has been particularly pronounced among certain groups: those who are unemployed and precarious workers, the elderly, sexual and gender minorities, women and single parents (see, for example, Cullen et al, 2020; Moreno et al, 2020). Some of these fragile parts of society are finding support in prefigurative initiatives. For instance, many intentional communities are helping their members to find constructive ways of supporting each other collectively when individual feelings of rage, distress and anxiety emerge. This effort is connected to the ongoing experimentation with non-violent communication methods and inclusive horizontal decision-making mechanisms within these communities.
At this point, it is important to stress that the main message of this book is not that prefigurative politics and prefigurative movements are the panacea to all of the problems in this world. The world is characterized by a great deal of violence, oppression, inequality, injustice and abuse of power that must be tackled through other means. However, prefiguration still has an essential role to play. In his last book, the late Erik Olin Wright (2019) concludes that in order to transcend capitalism and move towards a more just and sustainable socio-economic system, capitalism needs to be not only openly contested and opposed but also eroded from within. And prefigurative politics can be thought of as the ensemble of temporary or long-lasting movements, initiatives, collectives and networks that foster this erosion. The main takeaway of this book, then, is that prefigurative politics can be one way, among many (and very necessary) other ways, of bringing about progressive social change.

Throughout the chapters, the reader will encounter many definitions and attempts to characterize prefigurative politics, drawing from a range of social science disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, political economy, social movement studies, organization studies, and political ecology, thus reflecting the interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity of the concept. Indeed, the contributors to this volume have embraced a broad, encompassing understanding, rather than a narrow one, of what constitutes prefigurative politics. One particular feature, though, makes prefigurative politics unique with respect to other forms of political engagement: its ontological and epistemological nature. Unlike conventional or contentious politics, prefigurative politics focuses on the creation of alternative ontologies: alternative ways of being in the world and, one might even dare to say, ‘alternative worlds’. Change is sought on multiple and interconnected levels: the private and the public, the individual and the collective, the socio-economic and the subjective–emotional. This ‘holism’ (in the literal meaning of the term, which comes from the Greek ὅλος, holos, meaning ‘entire’ or ‘whole’) captures not only the ontology, but also the epistemology of change in prefigurative politics (on this, see Monticelli, this volume).

Because of this ‘holistic’ ambition, prefigurative politics has attracted many criticisms; for instance, that it is an ineffective, purely performative exercise (see, for example, Blühdorn, 2017, criticizing the politics of hope). Such criticism must be taken into account and dealt with seriously when assessing the impact, effectiveness and usefulness of prefigurative politics. Indeed, the contributors to this volume – as demonstrated in the chapters by Monticelli, Yates and de Moor, and du Plessis and Husted – are well aware of the limitations of prefigurative politics; hence, they provide cautions that one should bear in mind while studying prefigurative movements. At the same time, though, critics sometimes fail to acknowledge that, as some scholars of prefiguration have previously pointed out (Brissette, 2016; Monticelli,
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2021), we can’t deploy the same epistemological lenses used to assess the effects of conventional and contentious politics to study prefigurative politics. To put it bluntly, it would be like using the instruction manual of a fridge to learn how to drive a car. More work is nevertheless needed to complement the existing body of empirical research with reflexive theoretical and methodological contributions. The chapters gathered in the third and last part of this book, together with the thoughtful afterword by Davina Cooper, are excellent steps in this direction.

In sum, this volume will not provide the reader with a crystallized definition of prefigurative politics, one to be used as a litmus paper to assess whether certain social phenomena are prefigurative or not. Rather, the point is to offer a critical overview of some of the most salient debates that a reader interested in prefigurative politics should be aware of. The chapters are written by scholars who are, and have been, working on prefigurative politics for a long time, some of them for more than a decade, producing scholarship that now constitutes the ‘go-to’ for anyone interested in the topic. At the beginning of this book project, each of these scholars was given the task of condensing her/his/their specialized knowledge into one short and punchy text, no longer than 6,000 words. As editor of this volume, I found curating the contents to have been a phenomenal learning experience. While trying to identify the best order in which to present the chapters, it was possible to recognize some recurring themes forming an invisible red thread. In the next section, I introduce those I believe to be the most significant.

Unpacking prefigurative politics

The first observation is that prefigurative initiatives are often described as being willing to oppose state power or state authority. However, looking closely at some of the examples in the chapters, such as the intentional community of Auroville in India (Clarence-Smith, this volume), Christiania in Copenhagen (Traganou, this volume) and the Jineolojî communes in Rojava (Piccardi, this volume), it is apparent that many prefigurative initiatives, more than opposing state power, are trying to reimagine these constituencies so that they follow radically different values and belief systems. As Davina Cooper poignantly reminds us in her work on prefiguring the state, ‘state bodies can also be reimagined, including as democratic, horizontal, responsible, caring, permeable and stewardly’ (Cooper, this volume). A key example of this is radical municipalism and the networks connecting several radical municipalities around the world, such as Fearless Cities or C40 Cities.

Inevitably, reimagining and enacting different state bodies through prefigurative initiatives requires (re)negotiating their relationship with
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existing institutions, laws and regulations (at the supranational, national, regional and local levels). Emblematic of this is the case of Auroville, which, after decades marked by independence and peaceful coexistence with the federal Indian government, has recently been put under pressure by the nationalist government of Narendra Modi to develop and expand its infrastructure (Kothari, 2022). This has caused tensions within the community, with factions either supporting or opposing the development plan, and it has ultimately pushed the inhabitants to gather in assembly to discuss their positioning with respect to the Indian government (see Clarence-Smith, this volume). Another notable example is the urban intentional community of Christiania. As a response to pressure coming from the Danish government, Christiania has passed from an area of illegal squatting to the community setting up a bank loan to legally purchase the land that it has inhabited since 1971 (for an overview of Christiania’s history, see Traganou, this volume). For both of these communities, the process of renegotiating is forever in flux.

Another distinctive element common to many chapters in the book is the relationship between prefigurative politics and capitalism. Many prefigurative communities and initiatives form ‘diverse economies’ with many coexisting types of labour, enterprise, transactions, property and finance. This term, coined by feminist economists Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, refers to the existence of a plurality of different economies within the dominant context of capitalist economy characterized by waged labour producing for the market (Gibson-Graham et al, 2013). In this sense, prefigurative communities and initiatives do not exist outside capitalism. They exist within and despite capitalism, inextricably intertwined with it (on this, see also Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). As a result, some prefigurative communities and initiatives end up being repressed or co-opted by the state and the market.

Whatever relationship exists between prefiguration and capitalism, this entanglement generates a set of theoretical and empirical questions that a researcher studying prefiguration must be aware of. How should one assess the transformative potential of prefigurative initiatives when these are following the frameworks, metrics and organizational forms of capitalism? In other words, should scholars interested in prefiguration solely analyse initiatives that envision alternatives to capitalism or should they also examine alternative capitalisms? Another question concerns whether prefigurative initiatives are always destined to be insular niches or whether they have the potential to eventually ‘become sufficiently prominent in the lives of individuals and communities that capitalism could eventually be displaced from its dominant role in the system’ (Wright 2019, p 60). Finally, to keep citing Wright, is there a ‘viable, achievable and desirable’ way of making them ‘sufficiently prominent’ (2019, p 60)? This last question is linked to the long-standing critique of prefiguration as lacking ‘scalability’ and societal
impact, which is addressed in several chapters of the book (for example, those by Yates and de Moor, and du Plessis and Husted).

Suffice it to say that any radical transformation\(^4\) is, by definition, ‘multi-dimensional’, ‘intersectional’ and ‘multi-scalar’ (Temper et al, 2018). Such a transformation entails a ‘shift in society’s value-normative system and shifting relations across the personal (beliefs, values, worldviews), political (systems and structures), and practical (behaviours and technical responses) levels simultaneously’ (O’Brien and Sygna, 2013, p 19). Rather than being ‘scaled up’ from the grassroots to the mainstream institutional level, many prefigurative initiatives follow non-linear, rhizomatic, network-like and place-based patterns of change diffusion (on this, see Forno and Weiner, 2020). Finally, prefigurative politics – and the embodiment of alternatives it implies – integrates, rather than supplants, conflict and resistance-based social movements and collective actions (Temper et al, 2018, p 754; Monticelli, 2021).

Another reflection is that research on prefigurative politics hasn’t paid enough attention to how the intersectionality between class, gender, race and ethnicity affects individual access to, and participation in, prefigurative initiatives and movements. In fact, some critics have pointed out that prefigurative politics is inherently exclusionary, attracting mostly Western, white, middle-class, highly educated individuals (see, for instance, Smucker, 2014, on the Occupy Wall Street movement). Indeed, looking at both the contributors’ list and the examples discussed throughout the chapters, this book reflects such a bias. This is unfortunate because there are plenty of thriving prefigurative movements around the world and in the so-called Global South – some of which are discussed in Arturo Escobar’s foreword. But as Ana Cecilia Dinerstein rightly points out in her chapter, titled ‘Decolonizing prefiguration’, it is not only that the focus of research ought to be expanded, but also that the epistemological framework through which the empirical cases are analyzed needs to be decolonized.

A final observation relates to the (yet unexplored) potential of cross-pollinating scholarship on prefigurative politics with other emerging areas of research within and outside of the social sciences. A promising example is represented by the ‘New Materialism(s)’ turn within the humanities (for an overview of the concept, see Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012). The thrust towards a ‘flat’, immanent ontology – one where dichotomies such as human/non-human, agency/structure, mind/matter, anthropocentrism/ecocentrism are overhauled – is aligned with the holistic character of prefigurative politics. The chapter by Laura Centemeri and Viviana Asara, where new socioecological ontologies are expounded as being prefigurative, epitomizes this affinity. Although not explicitly discussed in this volume, a dialogue between scholars working on these themes is set to produce compelling and cutting-edge scholarship in the near future.
An invitation to read: overview of the book and its chapters

The book is structured in three thematic parts and is meant to be read following the order in which the chapters are presented. In fact, the various chapters ‘speak’ to each other, and the reader will find the thorough cross-chapter referencing quite useful. That said, the reader is of course also welcome to browse through the table of contents and jump to the chapters that are particularly appealing. The volume begins with Arturo Escobar’s foreword, which allows the reader to get a curated overview and to spot unforeseen interconnections. In it, he describes prefigurative politics as ‘an idea whose time has come’, drawing fruitful parallels with his famous notion of the pluriverse. Through paragraphs punctuated by concerned yet hopeful words, he contrasts decolonial, anti-racist and anti-capitalist prefigurations of the future with ‘technopatriarchal’ ones, characterized by ambitions of interstellar colonization and promises of ‘life beyond biology’.

The first part of the book, titled ‘Contextualizing prefigurative politics’, offers a comprehensive discussion of the broader historical, philosophical and sociological debates revolving around the concept. My opening chapter considers the extent to which prefigurative politics can develop alternatives to capitalism within capitalism, and it defines prefigurative politics as possessing an onto-epistemic character – that is, a type of politics conceiving social change in an ontologically and epistemologically different way than conventional and contentious politics. Paul Raekstad then delves into the use of prefigurative politics in anarchist, Marxist and syndicalist theory and strategy, ranging from the First International in 1864 to Bernie Sander’s recent calls for democratic socialism. He concludes with a strong case for prefigurative politics as a tool to overcome the ‘paradox of self-emancipation’: how can we achieve a free and equal society when dominant institutions prevent us from doing so?

In the chapter that follows, Ana Cecilia Dinerstein cross-pollinates Ernst Bloch’s theory of hope with a reflection on the ‘resilience of the colonial’ in the epistemological understandings of prefiguration. Dinerstein argues that Bloch’s concept of multiversum can usefully complement the concept of pluriverse (coined by Arturo Escobar and other post-development scholars) because it incorporates the workings of multiple, non-synchronous temporalities. Moving the discussion along, Aris Komporosoz-Athanasou and Chiara Bottici’s chapter scrutinizes the relation between prefigurative politics and radical imagination understood – deploying Castoriadis’ work – as the capacity to produce ideas and visions of the future able to materially condition the present. Seen in this light, prefigurative politics is a (radical) ‘imaginal practice’ that collapses the future into the present, thus working as a ‘homeopathic strategy’ against the spectacle of contemporary capitalism.
In a similar vein, the first part is brought to a close by Antonia De Vita and Francesco Vittori’s chapter. Drawing from Paulo Freire’s scholarship on the pedagogy of the oppressed, prefiguration is thought of as a set of informal collective ‘learning practices’ that are based on ‘affinity for affinity’ (Day, 2005); these practices shape social relationships that the hegemonic system of power (capitalism) is not able to assimilate or suppress.

The second part of the book, titled ‘Prefigurative politics in practice’, fleshes out the concept of prefigurative politics through concrete examples and rich case studies. In the opening chapter, Ana Cecilia Dinerstein and Frederick Harry Pitts examine the prefigurative potential of (human) work. Distancing themselves from depictions of postwork and fully automated futures – currently quite popular among the Left – the authors criticize the view that transcending work equals transcending capitalism; work doesn’t necessarily mean capital work. Indeed, instead of rejecting court the idea of work, one should focus on the relations of social reproduction characterizing work in contemporary capitalism. But what would such a prefigurative society look like? In the chapter that follows, Suryamayi Aswini Clarence-Smith takes the reader on a vivid journey through Auroville, one of the oldest and largest intentional communities in the world: ‘the universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and harmony … to realize human unity’ (The Mother, 1968). Thanks to her personal experience as a born and raised Aurovilian, Clarence-Smith’s auto-ethnographic work provides a nuanced description of daily practices, social relations and value/belief systems in a ‘utopian prefigurative’ microsociety. In doing so, she also opens up a much-needed dialogue between utopian studies and prefigurative scholarship.

But prefigurative modes of living are not found exclusively in intentional communities. In fact, as Francesca Forno and Stefan Wahlen’s thought-provoking chapter shows, the mundane can be prefigurative, political and politicized. By focusing on three key facets of everyday life – time, space and modality – the authors contend that the ‘everyday’ is a locus of resistance, change and prefiguration. Through the case of alternative food networks, they go on to illustrate how food production, provisioning and consumption can be reimagined and re-enacted in more sustainable, fair and democratic ways. The politicization of the mundane can, in turn, raise political awareness and willingness to engage in other forms of political participation outside the everyday sphere. If, according to Clarence-Smith, prefiguration is by definition utopian, in the following chapter Laura Centemeri and Viviana Asara convincingly add that prefiguration can also be ‘ecotopian’ – emphasizing social as well as ecological relations. Such ecological prefiguration can shape new ontologies, new forms of coexistence between humans and non-human nature. By way of illustration, the authors examine the permaculture movement and show that it is more than just a
social movement; it’s also a value practice and a design method useful to envision uncontaminated socioecological relations.

The next chapter turns to the question of how prefigurative politics affects the surrounding world, especially physical space. In Jilly Traganou’s view, prefigurative politics is ‘dissenting through making’. This making often involves the planning, creation and maintenance of autonomous spatialities, materialities and infrastructures. Because, as touched on earlier, prefigurative initiatives are never completely insulated from the outside world, these processes of spatial creation and maintenance are rarely predictable; indeed, they are often contentious and can sometimes lead to paradoxical outcomes. In her chapter, Traganou describes the results of her research stay in Christiania Freetown, an urban intentional community in the heart of Copenhagen, Denmark. Through a close examination of this case, the above-mentioned processes are dissected and problematized against the backdrop of rising tensions between Christiania’s insiders and outsiders. The book’s second part closes with Eleonora Gea Piccardi’s chapter on the Kurdish Rojava revolution, geared towards the subversion of patriarchal and colonial relations and the establishment of a liberated socioecologically just society. Central to this contribution is the description and analysis of Jineoloji, a matristic epistemology that condenses the philosophical beliefs and world view of the Kurdish women’s struggle within the Kurdistan Workers’ Party. Thanks to her immersive period of militant ethnographic research in Rojava, Piccardi avoids essentialist or romanticized accolades, succeeding instead in delivering an incredibly informative piece of research on one of the most significant contemporary examples of prefigurative politics.

The third and final part of the book, titled ‘Doing research on prefigurative politics’, presents valuable reflections, including limitations, cautions and caveats that scholars should keep in mind. Luke Yates and Joost de Moor begin with an overview of the (implicit and explicit) use of prefigurative politics in modern social movements from 1968 to 2019. Systematically examining literature from social movement studies, the authors demonstrate how the term ‘prefigurative politics’ has been used to refer to distinct yet overlapping logics of activism: the imagination of alternatives, the practical implementation of alternatives, or the political/decisional processes through which these alternatives are implemented. The chapter ends with a useful appraisal of potential areas for future research on prefigurative politics. In this respect, a promising strand of research is emerging from critical management studies and organization studies. Mikko Laamanen’s chapter draws from and, at the same time, contributes to the research conducted within these fields by reflecting on the (apparent) paradox of what it means to ‘organize prefiguratively’. The chapter is based on the author’s first-hand action research in the Finnish time bank organization Stadin Aikapankki, which has approximately 4,000 members. Reading Laamanen’s chapter, we
are reminded that translating prefigurative ideals into inclusive and horizontal day-to-day practices, while also guaranteeing the organization’s survival and functioning, is a challenging endeavour that entails a constant process of (re)structuring and (re)negotiation. In sum, and not so paradoxically, it a constant process of organization.

Prefigurative organizing is also central to Marianne Maeckelbergh’s chapter. She deploys her own previous work on the alter-globalization movement in the 2000s, as well as the wave of assembly-based movements in the early 2010s, to explore how horizontal decisional practices and structures are implemented. By defining two types of temporalities – event-time and process-time – Maeckelbergh stresses how blurred the lines are between success and failure within prefigurative social movements, and how significantly the outcome of this assessment can change when choosing different time frames. Part three of the book draws to close with a chapter that is, as stated in the title itself, ‘a sympathetic polemic’. Following on from the meta-analytic exercise of Luke Yates and Joost de Moor, du Plessis and Husted present five challenges for future research on prefigurative politics: the assumption of effectiveness; the (excessive) puritanism of ideals; the exclusive focus on progressive movements (rather than conservative or regressive ones); the conceptual confusion and conflation between prefiguration as a premise and as a point of arrival; and, finally, the uber-performativity often implied by the term. These challenges are not meant to deter anyone from conducting research on prefigurative politics. On the contrary, they are intended as an encouraging invitation to chart new lines of enquiry and push the boundaries of existing knowledge.

The book ends with a masterly afterword by Davina Cooper, who provides a compelling reading of this edited volume through the prism of three central questions: What is being prefigured? What does prefiguration do and need? And what academic methods support and advance prefigurative work? In answering these questions, she crucially reminds us that prefigurative politics implies the prefiguration of new meanings along with the common understanding that prefigurative politics entails remaking organizational and decisional processes, and developing new everyday practices and subjectivities. Finally, by describing how new meanings of ‘state’ and ‘gender’ – which Cooper has worked on extensively – can be reimagined and enacted, she emphasizes the importance of incorporating reflections on power, capacity and meaning in the study of prefigurative politics.

As the reader will by now have understood, scholarship on prefigurative politics represents a vibrant, thriving and interdisciplinary area of research. And this trend is set to continue as the demand grows for sociological research that can help envision alternative futures and elucidate ways to transition to more just, democratic and sustainable societies. This volume hopefully constitutes a valuable companion for current and future cohorts of scholars.
willing to explore why, drawing on the words of Malcolm X, the future belongs to those who prepare for it today.

Notes
1 A recently published book titled *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* by Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin (2020) is an excellent exception.
2 That said, as Jason Moore, Raj Patel, Stefania Barca and other political ecologists remind us, we are not all equally responsible for what is happening. The ‘imperial mode of living’ of the few is undermining the possibility to live for the many (Brand and Wissen, 2021).
3 An overview of what is currently happening in the intentional community around the federal government’s development plan is available via the Twitter account @SaveAuroville.
4 Some scholars working on socioecological transitions and sustainability innovations distinguish between radical transformations and reformist transitions. Temper et al describe a radical transformation as ‘confronting the basic structural reasons for unsustainability, inequity and injustice, such as capitalism, patriarchy, state-centrism, or other inequities in power resulting from caste, ethnic, racial, and other social characteristics’ (2018, p 752). These involve ‘diverse, emergent, and unruly political alignments’ (Stirling, 2015, cited in Temper et al, 2018, p 748) that challenge the status quo, such as citizen-led initiatives, grassroots innovations and place-based social movements.

References


