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by RICHARD MOSER
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Both the Commune and Revolution



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The environmental crisis grows ever more dire but we are no closer to a grand political solution because that requires nothing less than a revolution: we must replace corporate power with economic democracy and war with peace. In the US we are caught between the reckless climate denial of the Republican Party and the opiate incrementalism of the corporate Democrats. One side denies that environmental destruction is real, the other denies that there is much we can do about it. Both serve the insatiable demand for war, power and profit that sends us hurtling toward the cliff. While we must pursue every

means we have to assert democratic control over government and capital we cannot wait for a new day to dawn. We must act in the here and now. Take climate destruction into your own hands; join the commune.

Many Roads to Revolution

The “commune” referred to in the title of this essay is short for *prefigurative politics*. Prefigurative projects attempt to create living examples of the social changes we aspire to for the whole society even while still inside of the corporate regime. We need changes now and we need to experiment with projects that might be useful as models for the future.[1]

Prefigurative politics try to restart the kind of communal life which was widely practiced by humans prior to rise of the patriarchal family, private property and the state back in the early days of so-called civilization. Sometimes we can glimpse the future by looking deeply into our past.

Indigenous people around the world still struggle to hold on to communal institutions — [communal land most importantly](#) — despite the colonial and corporate onslaught.

Prefigurative politics became part of the European tradition of resistance as far back as the [English Civil War](#). Scores of utopian communes were established in the years before the U.S. Civil War and inaugurated an almost unbroken chain of cooperative experiments among everyday Americans. In 1871 the Parisian working-class made revolution by organizing a new kind of government they called “the democratic and social republic.” Known to the world as the “Paris Commune,” this brief experiment merged revolutionary upheaval with participatory democracy and workers’ control.

India’s struggle against the British Empire reintroduced prefigurative politics to the social change movements of the 20th century. A famous saying from that period, attributed to Gandhi, tells us: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

Another strain of this tradition was articulated through Martin Luther King’s concept of the “beloved community.” For King, nonviolence was the revolutionary means and the beloved community, the revolutionary end. For King [love and truth became a political force](#). The desire for “peace and love” touched millions of people around the world and was, in many regards, the brightest part of hippie culture and the new social movements. By fusing love and truth to power, King helped us reimagine what a revolution could look like.

Another strain of this tradition was initiated by organizers in the civil rights and student movements. They worked to create organizations that challenged hierarchical models of

political action by practicing participatory democracy at the grassroots. [Ella Baker](#), herself a veteran of the cooperative movement, was instrumental in creating modern organizing methods focused on the development of local leadership and local empowerment.

Ella Baker and many others went on to organize the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) (SNCC) as the first youth-lead organization that consciously aimed at double-edged transformation. They argued that the movement to change themselves and change the world was the same inseparable process. SNCC focused on empowering working-class blacks rather than promoting themselves as leaders. This organizing approach reshaped political thinking and helped to birth other student and youth movements. When the [Students for a Democratic Society](#) wrote their founding document, the Port Huron Statement, participatory democracy was its strategic cornerstone.

The other essential strain of prefigurative politics is the centuries-old tradition of alternative economic projects. Community gardens, farmers' markets, permaculture, worker-owned enterprises, individual and collective energy production, and alternative health care all contribute to improving life now.

The [Democracy Colaborative](#) is a think tank and information clearinghouse for the practice and theory of worker-owned enterprise. [Cooperatives](#), communes, and collectives of all sorts show us how the future might look and feel.

Today there is a rising movement of city-centered communes. One of the leading examples is [Cooperation Jackson](#) with its emerging network of democratic political institutions and cooperative economic projects.

Organizer Larry Stafford sees the cooperative movements of Jackson Mississippi this way: "Jackson Rising is important because it teaches us how to build and sustain community power; it does not just tell us what we should oppose. It provides a microcosmic model of what community power should look like." [2]

And, prefigurative projects do more than model the future. They begin the difficult work of setting up a dual power — alternative institutions that can lay claim to peoples allegiances and ideals — within a world dominated by corporate power.

New World Growing Within the Old

We need something to which we can point and say: "[This is what democracy looks like.](#)" Part of Occupy's global appeal was that people actually got to experience democracy first hand and often for the first time. I am not suggesting that prefigurative politics does not have shortcomings, but as the history of the civil rights movement demonstrates,

prefigurative visions and methods can be fused with protest and organizing to create effective strategies rooted in day-to-day struggles.

Both in raw numbers and liberating potential, local efforts to establish community institutions are a social force changing our culture and civil society in potentially profound ways. This is a quiet revolution happening right under our noses. Prefigurative projects help us envision the positive and rethink what revolution could mean in our time.

Reflecting on decades of experience and activism in Detroit, Grace Lee Boggs argues:

We are in the midst of a process that is nothing short of reinventing revolution. For much of the twentieth century the theory and practice of revolution have been dominated by overarching ideologies, purist paradigms and absolutist views of a static paradise; arguments over which class, race or gender was the main revolutionary social force; and binary opposites between Left and Right. Big victories have been prioritized over small collaborative actions that build communities and neighborhoods: the end has been valued over the means. We rarely stopped to wonder how much this view of revolution reflected the capitalist culture that was dehumanizing us.[3]

We need to reinvent revolution by making it more possible on a more human scale. While the old left culture of ideological struggle is deeply embedded, it makes less sense over time — at least as the dominant culture of progressives — and is often a time-wasting dead end.

Boggs draws our attention to the liberating potential of cooperation, community building and the power that comes from making our ends and means aim the same way.

We should stop wasting energy and losing allies by criticizing people that are pursuing “lifestyle” changes, prefigurative or seemingly utopian projects, or environmentally friendly consumer practices. Those of us committed to a social change model of activism aim for the big changes: large scale protest, sweeping legislative victories, transformative organizing projects, even revolution. But while we are working and waiting on those grand political projects, we should take heart in the real progress being made by this quiet revolution. All sorts of prefigurative activities should be seen as part of a broader [inside/outside strategy](#).

Organizers and the Commune

We can adjust our vision by starting with [Saul Alinsky's](#) classic insight: we engage the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.[4] Millions of people are already involved in alternative lifestyles and community-building projects. Should we ignore or demoralize them? Fatalism is already one of our greatest enemies: let's not add to it.

The job of the organizer is to help people find the tasks and tactics that fit their capacity, interest, and understanding of the world — not necessarily ours. Let the people decide. Apparently millions of Americans have decided that prefigurative projects and lifestyle changes are an important place to start and a worthy end in themselves. Is it so hard for us to imagine how community gardens runs counter to the corporate control over food? It's so easy in fact that people pursuing social change should consider making more environmentally friendly and anti-corporate consumer choices in our daily lives.

If union officials have big houses in elite suburbs, commute long distances in gas-guzzlers, vacation with the powerful at places like Martha's Vineyard, and eat junk food, what message are they sending to working people? Of course, we might think they have simply sold their souls, but it also sets the example that labor and environmentalism are at odds.

Since social change activists usually think that numbers count, consider the possibility that if just 1% of the U.S. population made significant shifts in consumption and local production, that would translate into real impacts and actions taken by 3.5 million. Some observers estimate that up to 10 million Americans are already participants in local initiatives. When was the last time even 1% of the American people joined together in protest? This large body of Americans should be viewed as allies and potential activists in social change movements.

Part of the objection to lifestyle and prefigurative politics is that it's too little, too late or too small to matter. But labor and the social movements have been similarly stuck with baby steps and small victories when not reeling from outright defeats. And as organizers know, relationship building is both means and ends, and that occurs as much in small-scale projects as it does in an organizing drive or protest movement.

We must believe in little things because we Americans are now all "little things." Over the last half-century, corporations have successfully reduced 99% of the people to second-class citizen status, at least on the federal level — the arena in which big changes were often made. Our opinions and views have very little impact on national politics. Local and municipal action is a way to outflank the corporate enemy.

Prefigurative Projects are Cultural Revolution

The swaggering big shots of labor and the social movements are deep in the delusions of the "house servant." Namely, that they have "access;" that they sit at the table as equals; that things aren't really so bad; that there is an incremental solution to our problems. Denial.

We desperately need to get back to the fieldwork; that is where we belong. The soil for our struggles will yield so much more when we cross-fertilize our movements against empire, corporate power and injustice with the universal visions and homegrown supplies produced by the commune next door.

“Cultural revolutions typically precede political revolutions, as the former creates the social conditions for a critical mass of the people to embrace new social values that orient them toward the possibility of another world.” — Kali Akuno & Ajamu Nangwaya

John Adams saw the original American Revolution the same way.

“The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people.... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution.”

Prefigurative projects give us one way to practice cultural revolution. There are many roads to revolution. Head down the one that starts at your door. What are we waiting for?

Notes.

[1] While communal practices have a very long history, the term “prefigurative” first entered radical vocabulary in an essay by Carl Boggs, [“Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers’ Control.”](#) Boggs thought that “within the ongoing political practice of a movement [...] those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” should be “within the ongoing political practice of a movement. Wini Breines continued to use this idea in, [Community and Organization in the New Left 1962-1968: The Great Refusal.](#) “[T]he term prefigurative politics...maybe recognized in alternative institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics...the crux of prefigurative politics imposes substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement relationships and political forms that “prefigured” and embodied the desired society.”

[2] Quoted from Rukia Lumumba, Forward: All Roads lead to Jackson, in [Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi](#)

[3] Grace Lee Boggs, [The Next American Revolution](#)p. 47-48

[4] See this free copy of Alinsky’s [Reveille for Radicals.](#) It is a far more useful text for organizers than the more famous [Rules for Radicals.](#)

