Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today by Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020. 158.pp, £15.99 (paperback), £50 (hardback). ISBN 9781509535910

*What is prefigurative politics? How can we understand it as part of a strategy for achieving social change? Is prefigurative politics political?* These questions, among others, are commonly raised when discussing prefigurative ideas and practices, questions which Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin, in their latest book, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today,* unpack and explore. They are mindful to stress that this book does not intend to offer definitive answers; rather, it opens up a conversation which sits prefigurative politics at the fore of discussion on social transformation. They offer an exploration and defence of prefigurative politics as a strategy for social change and as a radical act of not only resistance, but societal reconstruction. In focusing on the strategic use of prefigurative politics, they offer clarity to an often-confused perception of the nature and role of prefigurative politics.

The early chapters are devoted to exploring the evolution of prefiguration as a concept and practice, summarising the historical lineage of prefigurative politics from anarchist movements in the 1800s to the influence of anti-racist, feminist and anti-colonial movements past and present. This makes for a brief though fascinating introduction to prefigurative practice, whilst also taking a conceptual position on prefigurative politics. Building on Carl Boggs’ (1977) definition the authors describe it as ‘the *deliberate experimental* implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now’ (p.10). Raekstad and Gradin argue that a broad approach overcomes the limitations of confining prefigurative politics to organisational decision-making structures: it is a strategic endeavour that challenges both formal and informal hierarchies. This points to the basic premise of prefigurative politics as connecting the means and ends of concerted action. They go further in Chapter 4 to explain that prefiguration is not just about ‘enacting a new imaginary by sheer force of will’ (p.62); it is instead a relational process that seeks to sustain those social connections and institutions that can bring the new world that activists desire into being. The ease with which Raekstad and Gradin articulate and illustrate this principle through engaging examples, such as the Common House social centre in East London, the Zapatistas, and the Kurds of Rojava, is a great strength of this book. It makes this an accessible read for a lay audience.

In giving an overview of prefigurative politics and practice, Raekstad and Gradin stress the influence of feminist and anti-colonial movements in shaping the foundations of prefigurative politics. Drawing on seminal literature such as Kimberly Crenshaw’s *[Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex]* and Paulo Freire’s *[Pedagogy of the Oppressed]*, they point to how feminist and decolonial theory have challenged our conceptions of knowledge and how it is produced and intertwined with personal experience. Through examples such as the Combahee River Collective, they demonstrate that a prefigurative lens views dismantling informal and embodied politics in our lived experience as integral to challenging formal structures of power. In this way, Raekstad and Gradin follow a poststructuralist tradition, arguing that power is diffuse and reproduced by social structures and evidenced in our attitudes, behaviours, expectations and language (p.138). Consequently, we are encouraged as activists and readers to unpack our own understanding of power and learn from intersectional approaches that understand social structures and hierarchies as not just existing in ‘high places’ but in everyday social relations. Though the authors are not exceptional in highlighting the need for intersectional perspectives in theorising social change, it is the extent to which they reflect on this that is refreshing. Their commitment to the representation of feminist and anti-colonial theory and practice is evident not only in references and case studies, but also in the book’s conceptual approach and its discussions of power, revolution and the origins of pre-figuration. One could argue that the authors actively practice prefiguration through their writing, demonstrating a critical awareness of their own positionality and highlighting the contribution of less recognised literature to this debate.

Perhaps the most interesting sections of the book are its engagement with critiques of prefigurative politics (Chapters 6 & 7). The authors refute the necessity of hierarchy and engagement with the state apparatus to achieve social change as well as claims that prefiguration is isolationist and confined to the informal sphere. Their arguments are brief but well made, using examples to demonstrate counter-narratives for social change, such as the lessons from Rojava and grassroot organisation of the Spanish and Ukrainian Revolutions. Similarly, in discussing the role of the state in systemic change, they touch on models of Democratic Confederalism and 21st Century Socialism to suggest that a commitment to prefigurative politics does not necessarily contradict approaches which include the state. However, as this section of the book attempts to cover a lot of ground, it leaves its counterarguments and case studies lacking in depth. Though striking a balance between sufficient critical analysis and making this book accessible to a wide audience is difficult, Raekstad and Gradin often compromise on explanation which leaves their conclusions feeling thin. This is particularly apparent in the theoretical chapters (3 & 4) that explore power, drives and consciousness as integral to understanding the social-praxis of prefigurative politics. The explanations of these elements are brief and quite fractured, with each element discussed individually without much attention to how they relate to each other and inform a theory of social change. The discussions of power, in particular, are rather rudimentary and reductionist; there is little discussion of the complexity of power as a concept nor of the variance between power of the individual and the collective.

Overall, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* offers a comprehensive overview of key ideas, influences and practices of prefigurative politics. The debates that Raekstad and Gradin raise on the nature of the political are more important than ever in an era of increasing civil disobedience and climate emergency. They ask us to critically reflect on what it means to embody prefigurative politics to achieve social transformation; reflections that students and activists alike need to consider in order to imagine a society in which ecological and social justice is possible.

Bibliography

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