Beyond Dual Power: Prefiguration and the Appropriation of Space

Más allá del poder dual: prefiguración y la apropiación del espacio

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Abstract

In the wake of 'assembly movements' such as Occupy Wall Street, the concept of 'prefiguration' has received increased attention in radical political theory. What remains undertheorised, however, is the manner and the extent to which prefiguration often implies a territorial claim as a way to secede from existing power relations and institutions. This article seeks to establish this relation between prefiguration and the appropriation of space. It first retraces the idea of prefiguration as a revolutionary strategy to the Paris Commune of 1871 and reconstructs how this experience led to a split within the international workers' movement. It then continues to distinguish between prefiguration and 'dual power', which was introduced by Lenin, and argues that the latter does not bear the same territorial connotation. Finally, the paper turns to a contemporary example of prefigurative politics that is underpinned by a territorial claim – namely, the ZAD or *zone à défendre* in Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

Key Words: prefiguration, appropriation of space, dual power, territory, Paris Commune, ZAD.

Resumen

A raíz de los movimientos *asamblearios* como Occupy Wall Street, el concepto de *prefiguración* ha ganado mayor atención en la teoría política radical. Sin embargo, sigue sin ser suficientemente teorizada la forma y el grado en que la prefiguración implica a menudo una

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reivindicación territorial como una vía para distanciarse de las relaciones de poder e instituciones existentes. Este artículo busca establecer esta relación entre la prefiguración y la apropiación del espacio. En primer lugar, rastrea la idea de prefiguración como estrategia revolucionaria hasta la Comuna de París de 1871 y reconstruye cómo esta experiencia provocó una división dentro del movimiento obrero internacional. A continuación, distingue entre la prefiguración y el *poder dual* introducido por Lenin, argumentando que este último no posee la misma connotación territorial. Finalmente, el artículo examina un ejemplo contemporáneo de política prefigurativa sustentada en una reivindicación territorial: la ZAD o *zone à défendre* en Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

Palabras clave: prefiguración, apropiación del espacio, poder dual, territorio, Comuna de París, ZAD.

INTRODUCTION

The past decade (2010-2020) has seen a global increase in popular uprisings, social mobilisations, and protest movements that had one important feature in common: they all sought to 'prefigure' a radically different social or political order within their own practices and organisational structure (Bevins, 2023). From the iconic tent camp in Cairo's Tahrir Square that became a symbol for the so-called Arab Spring (van de Sande, 2013) and the activist tent camp in Syntagma Square in Athens (Douzinas, 2013) to the Spanish 15-M movement (Flesher-Fominaya, 2020), Occupy Wall Street in 2011 (Bray, 2013; Graeber, 2013), the Gezi Park movement in Istanbul of 2014 (Tufekçi, 2017) and the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle in 2020 (Baker, 2020): many of these movements turned their streets and public squares into laboratories for social and political experimentation. For instance, they adopted horizontalist and non-hierarchical forms of organisation and consensus-oriented decision-making (Lorey, 2020; Sitrin and Azzellini, 2014), set up collectively-run facilities such as public libraries and field kitchens, or provided various forms of mutual aid and social safety, education and medical support (Butler, 2015; Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012).

This is what is often referred to as 'prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics': the attempt of activists or revolutionary movements to already give shape to their ideal of a radically different social and political order within their own organisational structures and activist practices (Monticelli, 2021). In anarchist and syndicalist theory it is traditionally referred to as a process of 'building a new society in the shell of the old' (Graeber, 2013: 232). But in the wake of these various 'Occupy' movements the concept of prefiguration has

received increasing attention among activists as well as scholars, and its origins, meanings, potentials and limitations have become a subject of lively debate (Raekstad and Gradin, 2020; van de Sande, 2023; Yates, 2015). Several scholars have explored the spatial character of prefiguration and its relation to the creation of autonomous spaces (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Halvorsen, 2015; Zibechi, 2012). As Anthony Ince (2012: 1662) argues, "self-managed territorialisations are vehicles for institutionalising modes of organisation and relating that prefigure possible future anarchistic worlds in the present". What remains undertheorised, however, are the forms and measure of *exclusion* implied in such territorial claims. I hypothesise that most examples of prefigurative politics (including attempts to establish durable structures or institutions as well as deliberately temporary, activist interventions) imply an act of spatial *appropriation*. Prefiguration is made possible by an ability to (at least temporarily) secede from an existing social or political order and thus to exclude elements of this order and its representatives from a given territory. What renders spatial appropriation such an important element or precondition of prefigurative politics? And what implications may this have for the concrete relation between social or revolutionary movements on the one hand, and the political order or state institutions that they seek to oppose, on the other?[2]

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[2] In this article I will use 'appropriation of space' rather than the more commonly used term 'occupation.' The emergence of 'Occupy' movements has given rise to a debate about the use of the term 'occupation,' especially in the United States and Canada. Indigenous activists have insisted that these settler states are already based on occupied land. The use of this term by a (predominantly white) anticapitalist protest movement evinces a lack of awareness about the fact that "the reality of capitalist oppression is inseparable from the history of colonization" (Baker, 2012: 329). Others have defended the use of this term, stating that occupation can serve colonialist as well as liberatory purposes. As AK Thompson (2017: 186) argues, movements such as Occupy Wall Street "help to reveal occupation's centrality in *all* forms of political action". One act of occupation could serve to negate the others. Much like Marx's description of the Paris Commune as an "expropriation of the expropriators" (Marx, 2010b: 213), which he compared with the Hegelian idea of a "negation of the negation" (Blumenfeld, 2023), these recent assembly movements should be interpreted as an attempt to "occupy the occupiers" (Thompson, 2017: 185). Although there is a lot to be said for this dialectical use of the term 'occupation,' I nevertheless assert that it is important to recognise the sensitivities around this particular concept and the fact that indigenous movements insist on decolonising the discourse of/around social movements. Staying closer to Marx's dialectical use of 'appropriation,' I therefore chose to employ this concept here – even though I am aware that this, in its own right, may give rise to similar objections (after all, is colonisation not precisely a practice of appropriation?). The question of whether (white) activists are entitled to make territorial claims on colonised land remains a valid one. This should give pause and lead to careful reflection on the question of in whose name such claims are being articulated. Yet, at the same time, and in line with Thompson's position, I also think that using this frame of "territorial claim" or "the appropriation of space" serves to lay bare how exclusive claims on territory play a role in *any* kind of politics. What matters, at the end of the day, is where (and in what terms) one seeks to redraw the boundaries between those who are legitimately inside a specif-

In order to address these questions, I must first return to a historical debate that has been formative to this contemporary concept of prefiguration: the historical split that occurred in the 1870s between Marxist and anarchist tendencies in the international workers' movement. The dispute between these two factions largely revolved around the question of revolutionary strategy and the role of state power as a political instrument. In Section One I briefly discuss how this debate took shape in the wake of the Paris Commune of 1871. In Section Two I then reconstruct how the contemporary notion of prefiguration emerged out of this historical debate. Prefiguration is often associated with the creation of a 'dual power' alongside the capitalist or liberal-democratic state (Price, 2023). Lenin, who first introduced this concept in 1917, referred to the Paris Commune as a primeval example of dual power (Lenin, 1964a: 39). However, I hypothesise that a prefigurative politics instead requires the (temporary or permanent) liberation of *physical* spaces or the establishment of so-called 'autonomous zones', from which the state and its institutions are banned. Rather than a dual power, prefigurative politics is thus underpinned by a certain territorial claim or an act of *spatial appropriation*. In Section Three I therefore turn to a contemporary case study of prefigurative politics in which such a territorial claim is explicitly made: the *zone à defendre* (ZAD) at Notre-Dames-des-Landes in France. This 'autonomous zone' was established in 2009 to stop the development of an airport close to Nantes. In Section Four, I flesh out the element of appropriation and its role in prefigurative politics, based on the historical case of the Paris Commune and this more contemporary example of the ZAD. This finally leads me to conclude why prefiguration requires an appropriation of space – and why the idea of dual power is not sufficient to understand the kind of territorial claim that is implied in a prefigurative politics.

1. THE ORIGINS OF PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS: FROM THE PARIS COMMUNE TO THE EMBRYO THESIS

The term 'prefiguration' stems from a tradition of biblical exegesis (Smit, 2024). It was originally used to analyse how events or persons from the Old Testament announced or anticipated similar events or persons in the

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ic space or territory and those who are not. (A previous version of this article did centre on the concept of 'occupation' - I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this point to my attention.)

New Testament. (For instance, the sacrifice of Isaac was considered a prefiguration of the sacrifice of Christ; see Gordon, 2018.) In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, prefiguration was first introduced in radical theory as a strategic concept (Yates, 2021: 1035-1037). An important contribution to its articulation was made by Carl Boggs, who used it to describe how social and revolutionary moments – from anarchism and syndicalism in the nineteenth century to council communism and so-called 'New Left' tendencies in the twentieth century – sought to be "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs, 1977: 100). Boggs's concept of prefiguration thus referred to a revolutionary practice or strategy that has existed at least since the nineteenth century, and that arguably has characterised anarchism as a distinctive revolutionary tendency since its very inception in the 1870s.

In order to reconstruct this history, we first need to return to one of the founding moments of the international workers' movement: the Paris Commune of 1871. In the wake of the Franco-Prussian War and the siege of Paris in 1870-1871, Parisians rose up against the newly established Third Republic and declared their city an independent Commune. Many circumstances contributed to this uprising. The Parisians, who had suffered tremendously during the siege, were embittered by the conditions of surrender to which their new government had agreed (Lissagaray, 2012: 55). They also felt alienated by recent election results for the National Assembly, which evinced a significant political gap between the more progressive and republican urban population of Paris and some other major cities on the one hand, and the reactionary and royalist majority of voters from the countryside on the other (Tombs, 2013: 61-63; Castells, 1983: 23). Unlike its more rural areas, Paris was a hotbed of socialist organisation and agitation. Moreover, and in part for this very reason, the Second Empire had denied Paris most rights to democratic self-determination: the mayors of its twenty *arrondissements* and all members of the municipal council were directly appointed by the central government (Greenberg, 1971: 14-15; Shafer, 2005: 36-37). Another important development that fuelled the political tension in Paris was baron Haussmann's remodelling of the inner city, which had pushed many working class families to its peripheries (Gould, 1995; Lefebvre, 2018: 168). The spark that ignited this powder keg, however, was the government's attempt to disarm the National Guard – a citizens' militia that had played a major role in the city's defence during the siege. Especially in popular neighbourhoods this Guard had a predominantly

socialist membership, which explains the Republic's eagerness to confiscate their cannon (Eichner, 2022: 26-27). On 18 March 1871, the state army's attempt to do so provoked an uprising in Montmartre, which quickly spread to other popular quarters. Most members of the state administration and the bourgeois class fled to Versailles, leaving the French capital under the control of the Central Committee of the National Guard. This committee called for elections to be held on 26 March: a new governing council was established, which two days later formally proclaimed Paris an independent 'Commune' (Merriman, 2014: 55).

The Paris Commune lasted only for 72 days. But during these few weeks, the Parisians initiated a number of radical political reforms. Inspired by the federalist ideas of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, they sought to establish a decentralised political structure. The idea was that most decision-making power would be relegated to neighbourhood councils in each of the city's *arrondissements* (Lefrançais, 2018: 188). A central communal council, consisting of recallable delegates from these local bodies, would mostly fulfil a coordinating role (Zaidman, 2008: 73-79). This council established different public committees to oversee its various administrative responsibilities: a Military committee, committees of Labour and Exchange, Education, Foreign Affairs, etc. (Lissagaray, 2012: 129). Another key function of this communal council would be to represent the city in a larger, nationwide federation of free communes that may eventually replace the administrative body of the French Republic (Greenberg, 1971). Although the short-lived Commune could only partially implement these institutional reforms in practice, it did establish a number of significant social policies. All rent debts built up during the siege of Paris were remitted and pawned goods were returned to their owners (Lefrançais, 2018: 151). Workshops that had been abandoned by their bourgeois owners were collectivised and turned into self-organised cooperatives (Schulkind, 1972: 162-163). As most primary education in Paris was under the control of the Catholic Church, the communards replaced it with a secular school system (Dupeyron, 2020; Ross, 2015: 39-43). Perhaps the most famous example of the Commune's social policies is its ban on nightshift for bakers (Chuzeville, 2021, 58-59).

Next to these formal institutions and policies, moreover, the Paris Commune also spawned a lively political culture. Since the Prussian siege, Parisians had already established a network of political clubs, which often met in occupied churches (Johnson, 1996). In these club meetings, citizens engaged in critical debate on all kinds of topics, including the Commune's poli-

cies. Since women were excluded from participation in the Commune's formal institutions, they chose to organise themselves in these revolutionary clubs (Eichner, 2004: 26). This group of female *clubistes* included prominent feminists such as Louise Michel and André Leo. Alongside these groups, militant women also self-organised in the Union des femmes, whose aim was to improve the living and working conditions of women in Paris (Muldoon, Müller, and Leipold, 2023). And finally, during the days of the Commune, Paris experienced a vibrant cultural and street life. Countless new newspapers, brochures and pamphlets were published and circulated (Merriman, 2014: 67), and the Parisians organised regular fundraisers to support the families of communards who gave their lives in an ongoing effort to defend the city against attacks of the state army (Eichner, 2022: 72-73; Lissagaray, 2012: 244). For these reasons, members of the Situationist International referred to the Paris Commune as "the biggest festival of the 19th century" without a trace of irony (Debord, Kotányi, and Vaneigem, 2006: 398).

After 72 days of social and political experimentation, the Paris Commune was drowned in blood. On 21 May, the French state army finally succeeded in invading the city. Until today, the exact number of casualties has been the subject of heated academic debate. It is safe to assume, however, that at least 15,000 men, women and children were killed during street battles or summarily executed in the so-called *semaine sanglante* and the weeks that followed (Audin, 2021: 221). Many more were exiled, imprisoned or deported to overseas penal colonies. But the Paris Commune would live on – in art, literature and political theory. In the course of the 1870s a lively commemorative culture appeared in different corners of the world (Deluermoz, 2021; Nicholls, 2019). In consequence, the exact meaning and political relevance of the Commune was a subject of debate from its very start. Many different tendencies within the international workers' movement sought to claim it as its own. They also tried to draw practical lessons from the Commune and its experiences. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for instance, significantly revised their understanding of revolution and the role of the state. In their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 they had argued that the bourgeois state should be appropriated and used as a revolutionary tool by the proletarian class (Marx, 2010a: 86-87). But in his report on the Paris Commune, which he followed closely, Marx (2010b: 206) concludes that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the readymade state machinery, and wield it for its own purpose". Instead, a proletarian revolution ought to give rise to a workers' state, which would both take a different form from the liberal state and serve a specific purpose: the

expropriation of the expropriators, the abolition of class property, and the political suppression of the bourgeoisie (Marx, 2010b: 213). This is what Marx, in his later *Critique of the Gotha Programme* would famously describe as the "dictatorship of the proletariat" (Marx, 2010c: 355). According to Marx and his followers, the Paris Commune could be regarded as a first attempt of the proletariat to establish such a revolutionary state – albeit, ultimately, a failed one.

However, Marx's anti-authoritarian counterpart, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, drew very different conclusions from this experience. Bakunin had taken part in an attempted uprising in Lyon earlier that year (Greenberg, 1971: 235-237). In his reflections on the Paris Commune, which he wrote in the summer of 1871, Bakunin celebrated it as a spontaneous and popular uprising. Most Parisians had not been ideologically informed socialists from the outset. But when the revolution broke out, they nevertheless intuitively knew what to do (Bakunin, 1974: 201). Short-lived and imperfect as it may have been, Bakunin (1974: 199) asserted, the Commune was "a bold and outspoken negation of the State". Unlike Marx, Bakunin thus refused to interpret the Commune as a failure. Even "between the most precise theories and putting them into practice," he argued, "there is an immense distance which cannot be covered in a few days" (Bakunin, 1974: 203). If anything, this experience evinced that the people do not need any state, party or revolutionary leaders to show them the way (Kinna, 2019: 32-33). Bakunin thus also drew very different strategic conclusions from these events: as far as he was concerned, the Commune had proven that "the abolition of the Church and of the State must be the first and indispensable condition of the real emancipation of society; after which (and only after which) it can, and must, organize itself in a different fashion" (Bakunin, 1974: 205).

The different lessons that Marx and Bakunin drew from the Paris Commune fuelled an ongoing political conflict between them. This would eventually culminate in the latter's expulsion from the International Workingmen's Association (often simply referred to as the First International) in 1872, eighteen months after the Paris Commune. With respect to their ultimate goals, arguably there were no significant differences between Marx and Bakunin (Musto, 2018: 233). As the latter admitted, "both the one and the other faction equally desire the creation of a new social order based solely on the organization of collective work" (Bakunin, 1974: 197). The main issue, however, was how to get there. For Marx and his followers the appropriation and use of state power was a necessary step towards the establishment of a stateless and classless society, in which politics would eventually be replaced by "the man-

agement of things" (Engels, 1987: 268). According to Bakunin, on the other hand, the state in its every form was to be abolished in the revolutionary act itself. The use of state power as a tool would only lead to new political class distinctions. Liberty, Bakunin argued, "can be created only by liberty, by an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organization of the workers from below upward" (Bakunin, 1990: 179). This also meant that the International, as a revolutionary workers organisation, should aspire to live up to its own communist ideal of a future society. Arguably the clearest articulation of this view was the so-called 'embryo thesis' by the Jura Federation – a section within the International that was spearheaded by Bakunin (Eckhardt, 2016: 101-109). In its *Sonvillier Circular* of 1871, the federation formulates it as follows:

> The society of the future should be nothing other than the universalization of the organization with which the International will have endowed itself. We must, therefore, have a care to ensure that that organization comes as close as we may to our ideal. How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? Impossible. The International, as the embryo of the human society of the future, is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship (Jura Federation, 2005: 97-98).

This idea, that the means and ends of revolutionary action must mirror each other, is what many anarchist activists and scholars today refer to as prefiguration or prefigurative politics (Baker, 2023: 122-130; Franks, 2003: 22; Milstein, 2010: 111). In the next section I briefly reconstruct how it was further developed in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how it came to be associated with the concept of dual power.

2. PREFIGURATION AND DUAL POWER

The embryo thesis and Bakunin's insistence on consistency between means and ends significantly influenced the emergence of another radical tendency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: syndicalism (Damier, 2009: 5-6). This tradition has various sub-currents, but what they all share is their investment in the labour union and workplace democracy as the locus and vector of revolutionary change. The syndicalist union fulfilled a number of different, but complementary functions. First, its purpose was to organise workers and to engage them in direct action (Baker, 2023: 131; Pouget,

2010). At the same time, syndicalist unions sought to establish a durable organisational structure that could serve as a model for a post-revolutionary, post-capitalist society (Baker, 2023: 354; Schmidt and van der Walt, 2009: 21). Finally, and in consequence, unions should fulfil a didactic role by preparing workers to take over the technical management of production processes (Rocker, 2004: 57). A number of major syndicalist organisations were based on a combination of these three principles: the Confédération Generale du Travail (CGT), which is still one of the largest unions in France (Damier, 2009: 29-30); the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), which played a major role in collectivising industries and infrastructures during the Spanish Civil War (Mintz, 2013); and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an international workers' union that had 150,000 members at its peak in 1917, especially in North America (Cole, Struthers, and Zimmer, 2017). These syndicalist unions often had very detailed constitutions, in which their internal structure and revolutionary role was formally laid out (Kinna et al, 2023). In its constitution, the IWW for instance described its own revolutionary function as follows:

> It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old (IWW, 2022 [1905]).

This last phrase, forming or building "a new society in the shell of the old", continued to be used by anarchist movements throughout the past century – often as an equivalent for the more contemporary concept of prefiguration (Cornell, 2016; Graeber, 2013: 232; Raekstad and Gradin, 2020: 24). There is both a strategic and a more immediately emancipatory element to this principle. Creating the organisational structures and social relations that reflect one's ideal of a future society in the 'here and now' can be an empowering and liberating experience (Baker, 2023: 235-236; Crass, 2013: 28; Gordon, 2008: 39). At the same time, this is also perceived as a long-term revolutionary strategy. The idea is that, alongside or from within the existing society, an alternative social and political order takes shape that (once it has mustered enough power and mobilising potential) will break through the existing structure and establish itself in its stead. Such a prefigurative form of revolutionary change has not only been pursued or promoted by anarchists and syndicalists. The radical

Quaker organiser George Lakey (1987: 48), for instance, has sought to develop a more elaborate, institutional strategy based on this insight. And the autonomist Marxists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have used the famous IWW-slogan to describe how a post-capitalist mode of production is gradually taking shape within and against the capitalist order. "[T]here is no telling when it will cross the crucial threshold," they claim, "but we can already recognize [...] the makings of a new society in the shell of the old" (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 301).

Another term that is used to pinpoint this more strategic aspect of prefigurative politics is that of dual power. This is defined as either a transitory or a stable situation "in which revolutionary social relations and political structures exist in parallel to and in competition with the ruling power" (Hardt, 2023: 212). The term 'dual power' was initially introduced by Lenin in the spring of 1917. After the February Revolution and Tsar Nicholas II's abdication, a Provisional Government was established under the leadership of Georgy Lvov. This body, which mainly consisted of former Duma representatives from liberal and conservative parties, enjoyed very little popular support from the Russian working classes. They were represented by an informal, yet increasingly powerful, council of workers' and soldiers' delegates that is commonly referred to as the *Petrograd Soviet* (Lenin, 1964b: 60; Trotsky, 2017: 149-155). Both representative bodies acknowledged each other to some degree, and a precarious balance between them was maintained until the October Revolution. It was Lenin who, in April 1917, first described this situation as dual power (Lenin, 1964a). Lenin stressed that his dual power hence was an "uncertain, unstable, and obviously transitory stage" (Lenin, 1964c: 445) since, in principle, "two powers cannot exist in a state" (Lenin, 1964b: 61). The eventual aim of the Petrograd Soviet should thus be to topple and replace the bourgeois Provisional Government. But in order to do so, it first needed to muster sufficient popular support among the majority of the working classes (Lenin, 1964a: 40). Lenin drew an explicit parallel between Russian dual power and the Paris Commune of 1871. Both found their origin in a popular power from below, both sought to undermine state forces by arming the people themselves, and both replaced electoral-representative structures with forms of delegation based on an imperative mandate (Lenin, 1964a: 39). As Lenin perceived it, the Parisian communards had thus set the example for how to establish a revolutionary government alongside and in opposition to the existing one (Lenin, 1987: 300-301) – and, inasmuch as the Soviets were in power, he

argued, "we have in Russia a state of the *type* of the Paris Commune" (Lenin, 1964a: 39).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the term 'dual power' (or its equivalent 'counterpower') was also increasingly adopted by anarchist and anti-authoritarian communists (Dixon, 2014: 138). Wayne Price (2023) distinguishes two anarchist conceptions of dual power. The first, which he describes as the "alternate-institution approach" promotes the establishment of new structures and relations that "grow peacefully and gradually, overtaking and crowding out the state and capitalist businesses". Initiatives such as food co-ops, community gardens, social and cultural centres or alternative schools may come to mind. The other approach, which may be referred to as "revolutionary dualism", focuses on the organisation of a mass movement with the ultimate aim of directly *confronting* the capitalist state. Price stresses that these two strategies can be complementary, and both may be regarded as examples of dual power in that they take shape alongside the state and the capitalist relations of production, which they eventually seek to replace.

Another conception of dual power that focuses more on the establishment of formal public institutions can be found in the political thought of Murray Bookchin. In part inspired by the experiences of the Paris Commune, Bookchin has developed a 'communalist' programme that seeks to replace the centralised nation-state with a confederal network of popular assemblies and administrative councils. Most legislative power will then be concentrated in local face-to-face assemblies that are organised in villages, towns or urban neighbourhoods. These assemblies send recallable delegates to regional council meetings that have a more coordinative and administrative function, and which in turn delegate their members to national or even supranational level meetings (Bookchin, 2015: 75). A key axiom of this proposal is that the local community or municipality is "the most authentic arena of public life" (Bookchin, 2015: 79), and that this should be the central locus of democratic participation and decision-making. Bookchin also proposes a bottom-up strategy to put this into practice: rather than first taking control of the nation-state in order to implement this communalist programme from above, radical municipalist movements could start by creating a "confederation of municipalities [that] may eventually gain enough power to constitute a *dual power*, one that could ultimately reclaim complete power for the people" (Biehl and Bookchin, 1998: 124; see also Bookchin, 1995: 10). A similar approach is advocated by Lorenzo Kom'Boa Ervin, a key theorist of Black anarchism:

> We can build inner city communes, which will be centers of Black dual power and social revolutionary culture against the white political power structures in the principal cities of the United States. Once they assume control from the local city governments, such communes could ultimately be an actual alternative to the government and serve as a force to revolutionize African people and, by extension, large segments of American society (Ervin, 2021: 126).

Bookchin presents two complementary arguments in defence of dual power as a revolutionary strategy. First, the experience that is gained by setting up and running these alternative institutions can be a source of confidence and moral authority that will eventually undermine the state's perceived legitimacy (Bookchin, 2005: 57-58). Second, the experiences of many reformist movements that have tried to establish radical change through the state and its institutions teach that state power tends to be corruptive. To accept state office, Bookchin claims, merely serves to perpetuate statecraft (Biehl and Bookchin, 1998: 128). Only at the local level may it be worthwhile participating in municipal elections so as to use public office to relegate as much power to local communities and communalist counter-institutions. Much like Lenin, Bookchin refers to the Paris Commune as an initial example of this dual power strategy. As we have seen, the communards of 1871 also sought to establish a federated network between local communes – or a 'commune of communes' (Bookchin, 2015: 63) – that could give rise to a direct democratic dual power alongside the state (Bookchin, 2015: 117; Biehl and Bookchin, 1998: 124; Rougerie, 2004: 41).

The idea of dual power thus continues to be invoked in various radical practices and discourses – often as part of, or in combination with a prefigurative approach in which one tries to create non-capitalist social relations and non-statist institutions alongside, and independently of, the existing order. Compared to Lenin's original concept, however, its meaning appears to have shifted in the meantime. As Michael Hardt (2023: 302n4) argues, today "it is more appropriate to think of dual power not as an immediate prelude to revolution but rather an accumulation of counterpowers and democratic social relations within the shell of the dominant order". It is nevertheless striking that both Lenin and contemporary anarchists as well as radical municipalists refer to the Paris Commune as a primeval example of dual power. However, there is one important element that this historical comparison tends to overlook. Bookchin rightly stresses that the communards sought to establish a 'commune of communes' throughout France that could serve as a counterpower to the French state. And it could indeed be argued that, within Paris,

the Commune established a system of dual power as the central committee of the National Guard, a myriad of neighbourhood committees and labour unions, and a network of revolutionary clubs all existed alongside the formal communal council in the *Hôtel de Ville* (Merriman, 2014: 55). These various institutions often did not perfectly align – let alone formally report to each other. As Massimiliano Tomba (2019: 98) suggests, rather than a duality of powers the Commune in fact established a "plurality of powers". In its relation to the French state, however, it is questionable how far, if at all, the concept of dual power can be applied in either of its formulations. For if there is one important difference between the Paris Commune on the one hand and the Petrograd Soviet in 1917, or Bookchin's communalist agenda on the other, it is that in the spring of 1871, the state was effectively banished from its own capital. Although the French Republic claimed to have jurisdiction over Paris, within the city borders it had no control over its territory or population. The communards had effectively liberated their own city – or occupied it, depending on one's political perspective.

This finally brings me back to my central hypothesis, namely, that a prefigurative social movement strategy implies a territorial claim. Both the establishment of structural, long-term change and its prefiguration within a movement's organisational form and practices require a certain measure of space that is liberated from the contested powers and their agents. Prefiguration thus pertains to more than the establishment of a dual power alongside the existing institutions and power relations: it needs to be able to effectively *replace* the latter – or, at least within a confined space and timeframe. This is not implied in most conceptions of dual power, and only a few theorists seem to acknowledge its potential territorial character (Ervin, 2021: 182; Trotsky, 2017: 150). In order to establish that prefiguration thus requires more than the creation of a dual power, I turn to another, more recent case of prefigurative politics in which such a territorial claim is explicitly articulated: the *zone à defendre* (ZAD) of Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

3. THE ZAD OF NOTRE-DAME-DES-LANDES

The backstory to the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes can be traced to the 1960s. As capital and production were increasingly concentrated in the Paris region, the French government sought to promote economic activity in various remote parts of the country – including the Grand-Ouest region

in which the cities of Nantes and Rennes are located. In an attempt to improve the local infrastructure of this region, a new airport was to be established between these cities, and in 1968 a region south of the municipality Notre-Dame-des-Landes was selected for this purpose. This project would require the deforestation of 1,225 hectares of *bocage* (a combination of woodlands and cultivated pasture) and the forced relocation of local farmers and other inhabitants (Collectif Comm'un, 2019). In 1974, the government officially declared this designated area a *Zone d'aménagement differé* (ZAD) or 'deferred development zone'. This status allowed local authorities to pre-emptively purchase this land and evict its occupants (Pailloux, 2015).

These plans were immediately met with great resistance from the local population. Nantes was in fact the only region in France where the May '68 uprising had led to a fruitful political coalition between farmers, students and radical workers (Guin, 1969). Many of them rose up in protest against the projected airport, and in the early 1970s a number of large mobilisations took place within this designated area. Due to the oil crises and economic recession, these plans for a new airport were eventually shelved – until the government under Prime Minister Jospin relaunched the project in the early 2000s. The original *zone d'aménagement differé* was expanded to cover an area of 1,650 hectares in 2006. It was in this period that the first squatters appeared in the region and took possession of a number of houses and farms that had already been abandoned. In 2008 they called for climate activists to set up camp in the region, which in 2009 led to the organisation of an international climate camp. The activist rebaptised the *zone d'aménagement differé*, maintaining the original acronym, to a *zone à défendre* (or 'zone to defend'). In the following ten years, the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes would be permanently inhabited by hundreds of activists – some of whom stayed for months or years or even decided to put down permanent roots. It was also the backdrop for a number of mass mobilisations, where thousands of protesters from across the continent would join forces to protest against the destruction of the natural environment in general, and the planned deforestation of the ZAD in particular.

In order to protect their autonomous zone, the *Zadists* established barricades to control all entrances to the area. Most roads traversing the ZAD were permanently blocked by barricades, constructed with debris, felled trees or entire vehicles. Some access roads were partially demolished so as to make them inaccessible to motorised traffic. Other entrances to the area were permanently controlled by activists who even built cabins and watch towers on the road to protect it from unwanted guests (Collectif Comm'un, 2019: 106).

Law enforcement was categorically barred from entering the ZAD, and so were the public officials, city planners, and ecologists sent there to prepare to build the contested airport. Only the farmers who continued to cultivate the land within the *bocage* were allowed in. Many of them took an active part in resisting the airport and protecting the ZAD, although the coalition with some climate activists, who were critical of modern agriculture and the use of pesticides, would at times be a precarious one. For good reason, therefore, these activists and inhabitants considered their ZAD as an 'autonomous zone' that had effectively seceded from the capitalist state and its control (Fremeaux and Jordan, 2021).

In the meantime, laying claim to this region did not merely serve a strategic purpose: the ZAD also quickly developed to become an extensive and durable social experiment. Organised in various collectives, living groups, communities and cooperatives, the Zadists created their own non-capitalist miniature society – or, perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as an 'anarchic order' that consisted of various miniature societies and forms of cohabitation (Verdier, 2021: 10). Zadists lived together in squatted farms, caravans, tents and self-built wooden cabins – often grouped together in small communities, but sometimes dispersed over more isolated locations. Whereas some of these living groups were durable and exclusive, others changed continuously and were open to anyone wanting to spend some time in the autonomous zone (Pruvost, 2017). Many of the squatted barns and newly erected structures also fulfilled a collective function as meeting spaces, bars, theatres or concert halls, a library, radio station, and even an 'anarchist university'. Zadists used the available farmland and orchards and constructed greenhouses and permaculture gardens to grow vegetables and grains for the zone's inhabitants. Some collectives kept sheep or cows for milk and wool, but also to maintain the unique cultivated landscape in the *bicolage*. Other collectives established a bakery, a cheese dairy, a foundry, a printing shop and a brewery. Foodstuffs and other products would be exchanged without charge on the zone's 'non-market' and a complex economy based on mutual aid and barter took shape within the ZAD (Collectif Comm'un, 2019). As a number of architects, urbanists and academics who came to the support of the ZAD stated in 2018, it has "shown that another way of living was possible, well beyond the state-form and standardized scenarios of industrial agriculture" (Bouchain et al, 2018).

It is precisely for this reason that the authorities sought to bring this prefigurative experiment to an end. Between 2009 and 2018, several attempts

were made to take back control over (parts of) the ZAD and forcefully evict its inhabitants. The most aggressive and large-scale campaign against the ZAD started in October 2012 and was called, without irony, *opération César*; 1200 police officers were mobilised for this eviction, which was supposed to last only a few days. Some of the squatted farm houses and settlements in the ZAD were demolished, but the authorities were met with unexpected resistance, which not only slowed down the evictions but also allowed the Zadists to grow in numbers over time. Confrontations with the police continued for several weeks and with the help of thousands of climate activists and local farmers the Zadists used the opportunity to establish new settlements within the ZAD (Mauvaise Troupe Collective, 2018: 29-33). The code name for the police operation, an obvious reference to the *Asterix* comics, was met with scorn from the Zadists and their supporters. "Go and tell Rome that its empire stops here", they wrote in a press release (Anonymous, 2012). Eventually, the authorities had to admit defeat. Their evacuation attempt was ended in November, and while the police would initially maintain a number of check points on the outskirts of the ZAD, ultimately it was left entirely to itself (Fremeaux and Jordan, 2021: 60). In 2018 the government finally announced that the plans for a new airport would be withdrawn. But the Zadists would also be punished for their victory: in a last attempt to clear out the ZAD, which again met with fierce resistance, much of it was destroyed. Some collectives were able to apply for legal status, which allowed them to remain on the ZAD's grounds. But this also gave rise to deep-seated divisions and tensions within the movement, as some Zadist collectives fiercely opposed any form of collaboration with the authorities (Crimethinc, 2018).

After this political victory and subsequent eviction, the ZAD has continued to speak to the imagination of many anti-capitalist movements in recent years. The acronym has been used in reference to many similar appropriated spaces and regions in both rural and urban areas across France and further afield, including the hamlet Lützerath in Germany, which was demolished to make way for an open brown coal mine in 2023, and the NoTAV movement in the Susa Valley that has sought to resist the construction of a high-speed train line between Lyon and Turin for more than 30 years (Mauvaise Troupe Collective, 2018). What explains the significance of the ZAD as an example for anti-capitalist activists today, and what lessons can we draw from it with respect to prefigurative politics in general? In the next section, I argue that two closely related features of the ZAD together determined its significance and its prefigurative potential. First, the act of spatial appropriation and the terri-

torial claim that this implied allowed the movement to effectively secede from capitalism and the state. Second, this helped the Zadists to establish new communal structures and ways of life and to envision what a radically different society might look like. I then return to the Paris Commune of 1871 to argue that, in a very similar vein, its radical potential was not based on a dual power that exists alongside the capitalist state, but rather on an ability to actively secede from it and establish its own territory.

4. THE TERRITORIAL CLAIM IMPLIED IN PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

In order to appreciate the significance of spatial appropriation for the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, one needs to take into account what exactly it sought to confront. The ZAD originally emerged as a response to what activists call "useless imposed mega projects": expensive and expansive projects whose public utility or economic feasibility is often questionable (Pailloux, 2015: 2; Verdier, 2021: 42). Such projects serve to connect or facilitate traffic between different economic 'hubs', which are often imposed at the expense of the natural landscape and local populations that inhabit the space between them. The purpose of such large-scale infrastructure projects thus is to smoothen out or "abolish space" so as to increase the flow of goods, services and capital (Mauvaise Troupe Collective, 2018: 9). One of the most prominent slogans used by the Zadists was "against the airport and its world" (Collectif Comm'un, 2019: 108). This should be taken literally: what they sought to resist was the expansion of a homogeneous, globalised, metropolitan and capitalist 'world'. According to Kristin Ross, the appropriation of space is an effective form of resistance because it gives rise to "a situation that calls for an existential and political choice - one is either for the airport or against it. [...] An airport will either be built on farmland or it will not" (Ross, 2018: xiii-xiv, see also Mauvaise Troupe Collective, 2018: 96; Ross, 2024: 35). The ZAD manifested a fundamental incompatibility between these two worlds: they cannot co-exist and one necessarily excludes the other.

As an appropriation of space, moreover, the ZAD did not merely challenge capitalism, climate change or deforestation. Although its inhabitants came from various political backgrounds, they often shared a strong aversion to the nation-state and its institutions. The sociologist Margot Verdier describes how they established a durable "anarchic association meant to protect

the radical autonomy of individuals and groups" (Verdier, 2021: 10), rather than a unified democratic structure. This is underpinned by the idea, which is more widespread in anti-authoritarian circles, that territory can be used, inhabited and recomposed without possessing it (The Invisible Committee, 2009: 108). The ZAD's mere existence thus posed a challenge to the state's power and legitimacy. According to its modern conception, territory is "the extension of the state's power" (Elden, 2013: 322). The sovereignty of the state is thus inextricably linked with an exclusive claim to a defined territory (Gottmann, 1973: 3; Ince, 2012: 1661). By contesting the latter, the *Zadists* therefore also implicitly undermined the former. "If the state can't take back the zone", a local prefect was quoted as saying at the launch of *opération César* in 2012, "then we should be worried for the state" (Zadist, 2014; see also The Invisible Committee, 2017: 43).

However, this does not mean that the appropriation of space is merely an offensive strategy. The ZAD was also, in more positive terms, a territory that its inhabitants deemed worth *defending*. The desire to defend something suggests that "there is already something on our side that we possess, that we value, that we cherish, and that is thereby worth fighting for" (Ross, 2023: 277; 2024: 63). This may be any natural or cultural landscape, or someone's habitat or livelihood threatened with destruction or enclosure. Yet, to defend a territory does not mean that it must be treated as the passive backdrop against which this struggle takes place. Nor is it supposed to remain untouched by its defenders. Territory, Stuart Elden (2013: 17) stresses, "is itself a process, made and remade, shaped and shaping, active and reactive". This is why the Zadists insisted on living in as well as living off their territory. "Only an inhabited zone can be defended", residents of the ZAD argued in 2009 (Zadforever, 2018: 120; see also Collectif Comm'un, 2019: 78). Many Zadists went as far as to claim that spatial appropriation is a process of mutual integration: one has to "become the territory" (Fremeaux and Jordan, 2021: 24; see also The Invisible Committee, 2009: 108; 2015: 202). This also means that the zone had to be represented differently. Cartography plays an important part in the organisation and control of space. Until the establishment of the ZAD, all existing maps of the area had been drawn up by state-sanctioned institutions, serving their specific political functions and interests. The Zadists made a significant effort to literally re-map their territory, creating an alternative cartography of the zone that represented the space from the perspective of its new inhabitants (Collectif Comm'un, 2019: 174-175).

This close relation between territory and those who dwell in it also explains how the ZAD could give rise to new forms of life (Ross, 2024: 92). As we have seen above, laying claim to the ZAD opened up the space for social experiments and the prefigurative realisation of new economic and political relations that explicitly defy capitalism and the nation-state (Verdier, 2021: 61). Some Zadists saw the autonomous zone as a first stepping stone towards the creation of a durable commune. One influential Zadist communiqué describes the zone as a communal area in a triple sense: as a "shared territory, communal land, and the autonomous infrastructures that are built on it, the commons" (Anonymous, 2015). The ZAD thus is placed in a broader tradition that goes back to the Paris Commune of 1871 (Collectif Comm'un, 2019: 248).

There are inevitably many differences between the ZAD and the Paris Commune, but at a fundamental level they indeed do seem to have something in common. First, appropriating a territory and unilaterally seceding from the state allowed both uprisings to establish new forms of life and social cohabitation. The Paris Commune and the ZAD created their own radical-democratic forms of organisation and decision-making, but they also prefigured new economic structures and social relations as they tried to dismantle the old ones (Ross, 2008: 42; 2023: 255-267). Second, through the appropriation of space the Communards and the Zadists defied the logic of the nation-state: the Paris Commune and the ZAD had a strongly transnational character (in terms of reach as well as composition) and rejected the idea of a 'people' defined by national identity (Mauvaise Troupe Collective, 2018: 70; Ross, 2023: 290-300). It would be a mistake, however, to read them merely as 'localist' uprisings; rather, both movements could be understood to defy the distinction between the 'local' and the 'global' (The Invisible Committee, 2015: 188). Third, both the Commune and the ZAD challenged the idea of private property over space by laying claim to it. As Marx (2010b: 213) argued, the Commune thus "aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators". But Ross (2024: 89) adds to this that "[a]ppropriation implies 'usage,' rather than ownership; [...] a making and a usage that ignores the legal and spatial division of mine and yours". Fourth and finally, much like the Paris Commune sought to establish a federated network of communes that could eventually replace the state, the ZAD sought to expand itself over time and space. Tellingly, "sow your own ZAD" (*Sème ta Zad*), was one of its most prominent slogans. The Zadists increasingly perceived their own autonomous zone, and the prefigurative experiments taking part in it, as being "merely one link in a long chain, a territory connected to others where forms of life are also being developed that aspire to

break away from a statist and hierarchical model of organisation" (Collectif Comm'un, 2019: 249).

Rather than building up towards a *Grand Soir* – a single revolutionary moment after which nothing will ever be the same again – both the Commune and the ZAD could be imagined as part of a more widespread and gradual prefiguration of a radically different society. The social mobilisations that have emerged in recent years in Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti Park, Gezi Park and innumerable other public squares and streets across the world are arguably informed by a similar view of radical change (Bevins, 2023). It is striking that these contemporary prefigurative movements, unlike more traditional revolutionary organisations, seem to have gained a stronger territorial focus (Halvorsen, 2015). As Raul Zibechi (2012: 38) argues in his seminal book on social movements in Latin America, "it is within these territories that the movements are collectively building a whole new organization of society". At the same time, these prefigurative movements seek to do more than establish a temporary intervention in the capitalist order, as is for instance promoted by Hakim Bey's concept of the TAZ or temporary autonomous zone (Bey, 2003). The kind of prefigurative politics that we have encountered in the examples of the Paris Commune, the ZAD, or Occupy Wall Street does not pursue a specific and predefined end point, but must rather be imagined as an open-ended process that continuously seeks to expand and prolong itself (van de Sande, 2023: 47-73). According to the late David Graeber, a prominent radical anthropologist and co-founder of Occupy Wall Street, this movement aspired to "act as a model of genuine direct democracy to counterpoise to the corrupt charade presented to us as 'democracy'". Ultimately, public assembly movements such as the one that emerged in Zuccotti Park could serve as "a stepping-stone toward the creation of a whole network of such assemblies" (Graeber, 2013: 43). Much like the Paris Commune and the ZAD, these recent mobilisations were thus underpinned by a gradualist and expansive understanding of radical change that implies a territorial claim and the establishment of autonomous zones.

5. CONCLUSION: PREFIGURATION BEYOND DUAL POWER

In conclusion, what grounds this comparison between the Paris Commune and the ZAD is the fact that both prefigurative experiments were underpinned by an appropriation of space and an act of secession. They both

implied a territorial claim and a contestation of the state's sovereignty over this given territory. This finally brings me back to the concept of dual power. In Section One I retraced the origin of prefigurative politics to the Paris Commune of 1871 and its impact on debates on revolutionary strategy by the end of the nineteenth century. Section Two described how this eventually led to the idea that the structure and organisational forms of a future society must be built "within the shell of the old". In the twentieth century, this was increasingly conflated with the conception of dual power – a revolutionary strategy that Lenin and others ascribed to the Paris Commune. However, I hypothesised that the idea of dual power overlooks one significant feature of the Commune: it was established in a city that was temporarily seceded from the French state. I then continued to analyse the role of spatial appropriation in the more recent example of the ZAD, and concluded that in this respect the Commune and the ZAD may be understood to stand in the same tradition.

However, if secession and the appropriation of space indeed play such an elementary role in our understanding of prefigurative politics, then this arguably means that dual power is not the most astute metaphor to describe where its radical potential lies. The aim of both the Commune and the ZAD was not so much to (temporarily) compete with the state and its institutions, but to secede from it and confront it from the outside. The Paris Commune, much like the ZAD, sought to refute the state and deny its sovereignty within a given territory. This allows us to imagine what a prefigurative strategy for radical change may pertain to in the long term: like an oil slick that gradually expands across a surface, or a contagious disease that spreads through infection, prefigurative movements and experiments seek to grow over space and time. They exist by virtue of their ability to disrupt capitalist relations and the state – in the 'here and now', not merely in a distant future. At the end of the day, this potential for immediate self-liberation is what still renders the Paris Commune such a significant example today. This also explains why climate activists resisting the development of an airfield in rural France still see themselves as the heirs of Parisian communards of the late nineteenth century. The point is not merely to build a new society in the shell of the old; in order to make place for what cannot yet be born, this old shell must first be broken.

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