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Challenging the Threats of Democracy: Prefigurative Repertoires at the Local Level[1]

Desafiando los peligros de la democracia: repertorios prefigurativos a nivel local

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Abstract

We are facing a time of profound political instability, environmental crisis and a clear distrust of the democratic system. In this situation, authoritarian positions appear to be gaining ground, promising hope and security in response to the uncertainty and precariousness of the present moment. The left's traditional strategies have become obsolete, and the alternatives for new ecological transitions seem unconvincing to those who are largely excluded from the system. In this situation, the following special issue proposes local political prefiguration as a democratic repertoire that allows us to act in the present in order to imagine the societies of tomorrow. Specifically, it presents three contributions from which to reflect on past and present political prefigurations, taking into account historical and contemporary forms of organisation and institutionalisation that envisage a new emancipatory order within and beyond the state.

Key Words: prefiguration, democratic repertoire, local politics, communalism, democracy

Resumen

Nos encontramos ante un momento de profunda inestabilidad política, crisis medioambiental y una clara desconfianza hacia el sistema democrático que se ha forjado en los últimos años. Ante esta situación, las posiciones autoritarias parecen que están ganando cada vez un mayor peso, prometiendo esperanza y seguridad ante la incertidumbre y precariedad del presente. Las recetas tradicionales de la izquierda han caducado y las alternativas hacia las nuevas transiciones ecológicas parecen no convencer a los grandes excluidos del sistema. Ante esta situación, el siguiente *special issue* propone la

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prefiguración política local como un tipo de repertorio democrático que permite actuar en el presente para imaginar sociedades del mañana. En concreto, se presentan tres trabajos que nos permiten reflexionar sobre prefiguraciones políticas pasadas y presentes teniendo en cuenta formas de organización e institucionalización históricas y contemporáneas que piensen un nuevo orden emancipatorio desde y más allá del Estado.

Palabras clave: prefiguración, repertorios democráticos, política local, comunalismo, democracia.

THE CONTEMPORARY THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

The initial idea for a special issue on the topic of "Democratic repertoires of prefigurative politics at a local level" emerged from a panel at the XXI Conference in Ethics and Political Philosophy that took place in February 2023 at Universitat Jaume I (UJI) in Castelló, and the Vive la Commune project.[3] The need for such a panel arose from a shared fear of a number of serious and interconnected threats to democracy. One of the most obvious is the increase in the perceived democratic deficit that has developed in recent years. According to a survey conducted in 2023 in 30 countries around the world, more than a third of 18 to 35 year olds favour a military regime or an authoritarian leader.[4] Some feel that our representative democratic institutions are being hijacked or kidnapped (Feenstra, 2019); others may argue that they have always been exclusive and repressive to particular societal groups. This crisis of legitimacy is related to the growing apathy towards politics in the narrow sense (Lutz & Marsh, 2007; Franklin, 1999). Increasingly, people are fed up with party politics, unresponsive representatives, and the 'political games' that are part of what is usually considered to be 'politics' (Mair, 2013).

Any explanation for this apathy cannot overlook the effects of the neoliberal political and economic regime that has crystallised in recent decades. Research on this novel ideological version of the traditional conceptual confluence of capitalism–liberalism has yet to reach a consensus on exactly what it constitutes: is it a set of economic policies and an ideology (Harvey, 2007), a mentality and a governmentality (Dardot and Laval, 2019), or a combination (of some) of these things? However, most

[3] https://vivelacommune.org/

[4] https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/focus/open-society-barometer

readings on neoliberalism do agree that it has a tendency to depoliticise and de-democratise (Dardot and Laval, 2017: 252-254; Brown, 2015). It hides political-economic choices under a veil of 'nature', 'tradition' or 'common sense', and as such masks the inherent and fundamental political questions behind economic or social policies. As a result, over the past decades, the common understanding of politics has narrowed to the point that only a few representative, executive or legislative institutions in the governmental square miles of capitals or regional centres. In effect, this has severely limited the range of themes and issues that people can influence or determine in their everyday lives. No wonder, then, that apathy is on the rise.

It's not just apathy that is on the rise. The depoliticised, de-democratised and exclusive governance of neoliberalism has simultaneously proven to be a fertile breeding ground for the semi-dormant seeds of fascism and the far right.[5] Not only have we seen these parties and movements well on the road to power in many countries all over the world, but we are also witnessing their frightening success in producing a dominant discourse that transgresses democracy at all levels. Part of this success is due to the fact that rebelliousness (the sense of being outsider of the system) has been co-opted by the extreme right (Stefanoni, 2021): the discourse of the new far-right forces presents them as transgressors of the current elitist liberal democratic system. They build on the promise to bring back a glorified past that was destroyed by the onslaughts of neoliberal globalisation. As a result, many ideas that we thought would 'never again' be expounded are now commonplace in successful election campaigns.[6] All of this presents us with the following paradox: the current democratic system produces inequalities, promotes exclusion and at the same time generates the context for the proliferation of far-right movements that further accelerate these processes.

And this is without even touching upon two other major current crises: the climate crisis and the inequality crisis. The two are interlinked. According to the United Nations Development Programme's annual report

[5] Following the work of Cas Mudde (2019), we use the term 'far-right' to encompass both the extreme right (violent and anti-democratic) and the radical right (reformist but anti-liberal). Fascism is one of the most well-known examples of extreme right ideologies.

[6] See for instance the campaigns of Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, FPÖ in Austria, Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the US and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands.

2023,[7] it is the poor who are most affected by climate change, even though they have the least responsibility for it. The relationship between inequality and climate change can be seen at different scales, both on the peripheries of large cities and in the countries of the global South that are most affected by extreme weather. Here we can articulate a relationship between inequality, the climate crisis and the rise of the far right. Inequality, exacerbated by the climate crisis, has encouraged migration to countries in the global North, where social inequalities are also increasing. This situation has been exploited by the extreme right, which blames migration for the existing crises.

Moreover, we must not forget the responsibility of the left in these multi-crises (democratic, climate, inequality). All three models of transformation put forward by Erik Olin Wright in his famous text *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010) – ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic – seem to have failed or been defeated in the last thirty years. The transformation of rupture, associated with party-led revolutions in general, has remained in the memory of the twentieth century. The interstitial transformations linked to more autonomous processes at the margins associated with social movements such as the anti- or alterglobalisation movements of the 1990s or the outbreak of protests from Latin American indigenous movements, the Arab revolutions or the *Indignados* in Spain, did not have the capacity to lead to major structural changes. And finally, the symbiotic transformations associated with the democratisation of the state, such as the Bolivarian governments at the beginning of the 21st century in Latin America or the institutional projects at both the state and local level in southern Europe, have been unable to hold on to power as a result of both internal and external circumstances.

Nevertheless, there is always hope, even in dark times (Solnit, 2016). As the Marxist perspective has historically pointed out, crisis is the norm of the capitalist system, and it always generates processes of interruption and transition of the system. On the one hand, this generally increases inequalities and the tendency to authoritarianism, but it also can create an opportunity to deepen the forms of equality and democratic control (Gramsci, 2009; Harvey, 2014). In this regard, we are indeed facing a complex of crises that the left is currently unable to resolve. However, the contradictions within the system will persist, and it is clear that neoliberal

[7] https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-annual-report-2023

proposals, now cloaked in new fascist populisms, will not provide a solution. There is, therefore, potential for change. Such a transformation appears to be linked above all to a broadening of the political repertoires adopted by grassroots and radical politics.

This special issue aims to bring together three dimensions of these past and present possible responses to the threats diagnosed above. These three dimensions are: first, the idea of democratic repertoires; second, the notion of prefigurative politics and political change; and third, the local as a scale of prefigurative democracy.

1. DEMOCRATIC REPERTOIRES

The idea of 'democratic repertoires' has been developed over the past decade by a range of interdisciplinary scholars from the fields of political science, sociology, philosophy and history (Gijsenbergh, 2016; Hollander, 2016; Houwen, 2013; Van der Zweerde, 2015; Van Zon, 2020; De Jong, 2014). The notion of repertoire is borrowed from a rather loose interpretation of the influential work of Charles Tilly on social movements. Tilly takes the metaphor from music and theatre to construct the idea of a 'repertoire of contention' that includes an array of experiences with forms, methods and tactics of collective action that social movements have at their disposal: "a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice" (Tilly, 2005: 41-42). Contemporary contributions have built on this idea of a repertoire to show how the analytical tool of a democratic repertoire is useful to understand how stocks of democratic actions, institutions and ideas can be transferred (much like theatrical or musical repertoires) between different temporal and spatial contexts. According to Evert van der Zweerde, democratic repertoires "can be (re-)invented at any time and in any place," and "transferred to other contexts, where they can be imposed [...], imported [...], adapted to local conditions or grafted onto local political traditions" (van der Zweerde, 2015: 41). The consequence of these transfers, and the act of reinterpretation or re-articulation of these repertoires, is their continuous development.

In addition to this element of transferability, the concept of 'democratic repertoire' emphasises the intersection of theories, practices and institutions. Moreover, these democratic repertoires are neither merely formal, nor purely substantive: "they provide means for actors to pursue

their interests, but at the same time, they constrain what these means and preferences can be" (van Zon, 2020: 24). The concept of 'democratic repertoire' helps us to understand how democratic institutions and practices are not only informed by particular procedural or substantive views of justice, legitimacy, the good and beautiful, etc., but also the other way around. Finally, Tilly's definition of repertoires suggests that (collective and individual) political agency and choice play an important role, alongside more contingent factors and contextual circumstances. The qualifier 'democratic' repertoires is crucial: in contrast to technocratic, authoritarian or governmental repertoires of action, the papers in this issue will discuss movements, ideas and actors that consider themselves and their discourses as part of a participatory, popular and inclusive repertoire. Based on all the elements discussed above, a working definition of a democratic repertoire has recently been worded as follows.

> A democratic repertoire is a more or less fixed and more or less explicit set of ideas and theorems [theoria], practices and routines [praxis], institutions and artifacts [poièsis] that is relatively stable over time and that can be transposed from one place or context to another while being grafted onto other circumstances (Van der Zweerde et al., forthcoming).

An example of such a democratic repertoire is parliamentarianism, with actions and collectives organised through political parties, regular elections, issue-based committees, general meetings, amendments, votes, speakers, assistants, backbenchers, campaigns and professional politicians who represent a people or constituency (c.f. Van Zon, 2020).

Another democratic repertoire, and one of particular interest to the themes of this special issue, is that of communalism (cf. Kets, Van de Sande and Roth, forthcoming). This repertoire includes a conception of community that is particularly urban or local, or based on a shared economic interest. It also includes internationalist or transnationalist practices, ideas and institutions, and is generally opposed to what Bookchin called 'statecraft'. The communalist repertoire actively seeks to contrast its politics with the state and bureaucracy. Moreover, it shuns a coherent political programme in favour of including a measure of openness and spontaneity in its composition. The repertoire contains a plurality of democratic forms and logics that is "neither vertical nor horizontal", in the words of Rodrigo Nunes (2021). Finally, the communalist repertoire is

characterised by its multiple emancipatory aims of different classes, genders, cities and communities: it strives for both recognition and redistribution (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Many of the democratic repertoires discussed in this special issue will share practices, institutions or ideas with communalism.

2. PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

The definition of democratic repertoires brings us to the second element in the title of this special issue: the notion of prefigurative politics. The concept of prefiguration has a long and diverse genealogy. Originating in biblical exegesis, and emerging in various anarchist traditions, the idea of prefigurative politics as we understand it today in the context of social movements can be traced back to the work of Carl Boggs (Van de Sande, 2024: 6-7). The term was initially used by Boggs to contrast with centrist or authoritarian vanguardist modes of organisation for social movements. Instead, he argued that social movements ought to embody the democratic, progressive and inclusive forms of organisation that it aims to achieve in society (Boggs, 1977). In other words, prefigurative politics demands that the means of a movement resemble its ends.

Notwithstanding this plurality, it seems possible to distinguish a core conception of what constitutes prefigurative democracy. Mathijs van de Sande (2024: 154-165) identifies five elements of such a theory: first, prefigurative politics is not reformist (it envisions radically different social and political relations) but is also not revolutionary in the sense that it does not necessarily demand a complete overhaul of all aspects of society. Second, prefigurative democracy is not merely about democratic forms or institutions, but also entails a substantive ideal of democracy as open-ended and transformative. Third, prefigurative politics includes both vertical, hierarchical organisation and horizontal forms of self-rule. Following Rodrigo Nunes (2021), it is important to build an organisational ecology in which the best elements of vertical and horizontal logic are retained, taking into account the needs of each moment. In other words, prefiguration cannot be limited to either pure participatory democracy or just representative politics, but combines elements of both logics. Fourth, prefiguration takes place in a complex and layered relationship to the state. On the one hand, it operates within the context of the state, but on the

other hand, it also seeks to go beyond or against that state. Davina Cooper (2017) has similarly argued for the inclusion of the state in our understanding of prefiguration. Fifth, prefiguration is never finished, and can only present the beginning of a continuous transformation: "prefiguration creates order that is constantly shifting and discontinuous, existing between decided and emergent dimensions of order" (Laamanen, 2024: 200).

In addition to these five characteristics, authors have also noted the proximity of prefigurative politics. Not only does it often primarily take place at the local level (as discussed above), but prefiguration also implies a politics that departs from and is situated in people's everyday lives and experiences – be it in their streets, squares, neighbourhoods, villages, workplaces or cities (Cooper, 2024).

3. THE LOCAL AS A SCALE OF PREFIGURATIVE DEMOCRACY

This bottom-up character of prefiguration brings us to the final element of the title of this special issue: the local level. The papers collected here have a strong focus on local, often distinctly urban, repertoires of politics. The sense of community underpinning these movements, and that they prefigure in their transformative politics, is based on neighbourhoods, cities and towns – in contrast to, for example, national, ethnical, neoliberal, global or cosmopolitan communities that are central to other political repertoires. As Murray Bookchin said:

> It is not kinship or ethnic ties that make links with the public sphere possible [...]. Nor is it the common place of work [...]. Rather, it is residential proximity and the problems and interests in a particular community [...] that constitute the central elements of a shared civic life (Biehl & Boockchin, 2015: 61).

The movements studied in this issue have, on the one hand, a communitarian conception of the demos and, on the other, translocal, regional or international aspirations and solidarity.

The academic and political hypothesis of this special issue is framed in the idea that the local is the strategic level for developing democratic repertoires of transformative and prefigurative politics. In this way, it is part of a current of inherited practices and ideas that in recent years has

regained strength in both activist and academic debate (Featherstone et al., 2012; Subirats, 2016; Cooper, 2017; Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2020; Stromquist, 2023; Beveridge and Kosch, 2023; Roth, Russell and Thompson, 2023). From these approaches, the local is considered a strategic point to recover the sovereignties taken away by the state and the market. The local as a place of everyday politics and situated practices is the best space to develop solidarity relations, facilitate the agency and political empowerment of new subjects from a diversity approach, and reimagine the forms of legitimacy built in other arenas. It is proximity.

> A material and imagined place for the demos to come together and govern their immediate sociomaterial environment as a distinct area of political life (Beveridge and Kosch, 2023: 2).

However, this approach is not naïve: we know that the local has also been and continues to be the preferred space for extraction, speculation and exclusion. It is also where the logics of clientelism and paternalism are reproduced. Therefore, the local is a space in dispute. The local scale, like any other scale, is a relationship that is built on relationships established with the region, the nation or the global world. Thus, in order not to fall into the local trap (Purcell, 2006), it is necessary to study the local from a multi and interscalar perspective.

4. OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

The three papers published in this special issue address the problems arising from the system in crisis and propose solutions to overcome them from the perspective of developing local democratic and prefigurative repertoires.

Mathijs van de Sande points out that prefigurative politics always entails a territorial claim. Drawing extensively on experiences of radical politics from the Paris Commune of 1871 to contemporary movements such as the French Zones à Defendre (ZAD) today, van de Sande focuses on the spatial character of these claims to power. However, the current association of prefigurative politics with the concept of dual power – for example in the work of prominent communalist scholar Murray Bookchin and the radical municipalist literature – is problematic. Instead of just building a

counterpower alongside existing institutions, van de Sande argues, the Communards of 1871 in fact appropriated (or liberated) political space from those contested powers. By extension, local prefigurative movements today, like the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, aim to appropriate territory as an essential part of their prefigurative politics.

This ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes was established by activists who took over abandoned houses in the small village in the west of France, which was the planned site for a contested new airport. The location grew into a permanent encampment of climate (and other) activists, who barricaded the site and permanently blocked all entrances. In doing so, the 'autonomous zone' refused entrance to any state officials or liaisons and turned into a social and political experiment, not unlike the Paris Commune of 1871. The space within the ZAD was organised as a non-capitalist society that included theatres, libraries and other meeting places and the zone effectively seceded from the rest of the French society and state. Hence, van de Sande argues, the prefigurative potential of this experiment was twofold: first it appropriated space and seceded from the capitalist state, and second, as a result the activists were able to create the communal institutions to prefigure their fundamentally different societal visions. Like the Commune of 1871, the example of the ZAD helps us to understand how spatial appropriation and a territorial claim (much more than mere dual power) are quintessential parts of the prefigurative repertoire of local politics.

Sixtine Van Outryve's paper analyses the case of the Assembly Movement of Commercy, a rural working-class town of around 4,500 inhabitants, which decided to stand in the local elections in March 2020. As a product of the prefigurative forms of organisation promoted by the yellow vests, this assembly movement stood in the elections with the aim of introducing a new form of representation that would incorporate novel forms of direct municipal democracy. According to the author, this model of communal democracy was based on three central elements: the imperative mandate, recall and rotation. It aimed to break with classical vertical and professionalising dynamics, in which organisational power tends to be concentrated in the hands of the leader. However, only the first of these mechanisms came to fruition. The lack of legal mechanisms prevented the recall mechanism from being put into practice and the rotation system, although initially crucial, eventually remained with the same people, especially men with a high level of training in the matter.

Although Van Outryve highlights how the local scale served as a way to build social control and put pressure on political representatives, confirming how the local as a human scale is key to the implementation of democratic processes, she also points out that the lack of binding legal force prevented more effective control over elected people.

Sanchez-Santiago's article introduces us to the field of the gig economy and digital sharing platforms, analysing both the new forms of exploitation and resistance to them. The gig economy is associated with the new forms of accumulation and financialisation of late capitalism. In this new economic model, the gig economy worker is disconnected from the physical workspace of the factory, but subject to new forms of precarious work characterised by uncertainty, lack of legal protection, physical and moral harm, as well as fierce competition between workers. In this type of work, AI and algorithms generate new sophisticated forms of control and discipline. Moreover, it represents a further advance in the outsourcing model promoted by neoliberalism. It is not only training, means of production or maintenance costs that are outsourced, but the workers themselves. Most of them migrants and in an unstable legal situation, they are the ones Mbembe refers to as the surplus population, situated on the margins of social protection.

However, these new forms of exploitation foster responses with new forms of organisation. This is what the author calls the 'politics of the precariat'. These forms of organisation are detached from the political parties and trade unions that have historically channelled class conflicts. Instead, these new democratic repertoires are based on spontaneous initiatives of solidarity and considerably heterogeneous horizontality. Meetings in restaurant waiting rooms or WhatsApp groups are spaces of solidarity in the face of intentional fragmentation. However, Sanchez-Santiago problematises the lack of continuity and solidarity of these forms. As a solution to this, he identifies the platform cooperatives that have emerged in recent years, such as CoopCycle (an international federation of cooperatives), which promotes a platform design that allows workers to control the algorithm, have more transparent access to information and participate in the cooperative's decision-making process, even if they are not physically linked to it. However, these alternative gig economy organisations have to contend with the large market monopolies which, due to the forms of exploitation mentioned above, have much lower prices. In the author's opinion, the only solution to this is a regulatory framework

promoted by the state that defends cooperatives and workers from these new forms of exploitation he identifies.

What connects these three texts is, first of all, the concept of appropriation. In the case of the ZAD, activists appropriate spaces for developing their prefigurative politics. The Commercy Citizens' Assembly aimed to appropriate elements of the existing institutional order, reconfiguring the sense of representation and including new repertoires of direct democracy. In the third text, the gig economy workers appropriate the platform technology in order to self-organise prefiguratively. It seems, then, that laying claim to fundamental elements of the existing order (space, institutions, technology), should be considered a central element of the democratic repertoire of prefigurative politics.

Second, in terms of what is being prefigured, all three examples prioritise a radically political and egalitarian society. Both in the Paris Commune and in the ZAD described in Van de Sande's paper, the people inside the barricaded communities decided to organise on the basis of direct and equal participation of all through various formal and informal institutional designs. The idea of citizens' lists and direct democracy in Commercy is obviously grounded in very similar principles. The gig workers analysed in the work of Sanchez-Santiago also explicitly organise in an egalitarian way, in stark contrast to the exploitative and hierarchically authoritarian organisations of their capitalist counterparts.

Finally, regarding the role of the local, all three build on local networks and identities in direct contestation (and confrontation) with either the nation state (as in Commercy) or transnational capitalism (as in the gig workers), or both (as in the ZAD).

The experiences presented in this issue offer us some lessons for the current crisis of democracy. The first has to do with the relationship between the *what* and the *how*; we cannot separate the means from the ends. That is to say, in order to achieve greater democracy, the means of achieving it must be democratic. This implies that we have to rethink organisational structures beyond those of the old parties and trade unions, which are increasingly removed from citizens. To do this, we need to think about forms of direct democracy that allow for inclusive and binding participation of people in day-to-day political decisions, but also forms of representation based on trust, control and power of recall that allow people to delegate their voice when time constraints prevent them from being full-time activists.

The second has to do with the *who*. The depoliticisation and apathy towards democracy has brought the losers of globalisation closer to populist far-right positions that promise a future based on an idealised past. Transformative discourses and practices must appeal to these large segments of the population. It is important to leave the comfort of the politicised niches of the middle class and reach out to groups that are increasingly excluded from the system, those who a priori do not share common values with progressive forces, but who are essential for the transformation of tomorrow. An example is the migrant drivers that Sanchez-Santiago mentions in his article, but also rural workers, the working-class populations that have lost their life prospects as a result of deindustrialisation and the policies of the new Green Deal, and other groups that are increasingly excluded from the system. They need to see an alternative, a hope in a transformative and prefigurative project. To do this, as we have stressed, it is necessary to build prefigurative processes from the territory, characterised by self-management, but also by virtuous forms of creation with the state, if we want to avoid reducing these transformations to mere elitist redoubts of progressivism.

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