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UTOPIAN IMAGINATION

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Immanent Utopias and Permanent Revolution

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ABSTRACT: With the breathtaking proliferation of polycrises unfolding around us, the central problem this article takes as its starting point is the nature of our current political utopias—that they are transcendent rather than grounded. Or, to put it another way, rather than being here-and-now, they are nowhere, situated in an ever-receding future or past, or otherwise in an alternate reality altogether. They are impossible. This article's argument is that, if we are to move beyond our current states of bewilderment, disorientation, and denial, we must set new political trajectories which aim not at our current utopias (which are not-now and nowhere) but toward those that are both now and here, and therefore possible. Drawing on classical and contemporary anarchist theory, and from participants of the ongoing Deep Commons collective visioning project, the perceived antinomy of revolutionary and evolutionary theories of political and social change will be questioned, and the anarchist concept of permanent revolution—an ongoing process without end—will be explored as an alternative model for radical social transformation. The temporal gap between current struggles and imagined futures will be problematized, prefigurative praxes critiqued, and a politics of immanence explored as a remedy. Finally, this article considers reframing the sequencing of means and ends from a linear to a non-linear temporal form. Thus, rather than prefiguring a path which leads to a particular goal, we reframe *the path* as the goal.

KEYWORDS: Utopia, immanence, (deep) commons, prefiguration, freedom.

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> It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that revolution is in vain unless inspired by its ultimate ideal. Revolutionary methods must be in tune with revolutionary aims. The means used to further the revolution must harmonize with its purposes… Revolution is the mirror of the coming day; it is the child that is to be the man of tomorrow.
>
> – Emma Goldman (1925, 433)

We are living in perilous times. The dizzying scale and pace at which human beings are consuming and fighting over resources is literally destroying our web of life, constructed over billions of years, upon which all of us, human and non-human, depend for survival. Despite our best (and worst) efforts, the consequent proliferation of polycrises we can observe unfolding around us has now brought humanity to an existential cliff edge. The central problem this article takes as its starting point is the nature of our current political utopias—that they are transcendent rather than grounded. Or, to put it another way, rather than being here-and-now, they are nowhere, situated in an ever-receding future or past, or otherwise in an alternate reality altogether. They are impossible. This article's argument is that, if we are to move beyond our current states of bewilderment, disorientation, and denial, we must set new political trajectories which aim not at our current utopias (which are *not-now* and *nowhere*) but toward those that are both *now* and *here,* and therefore possible. I will draw on classical and contemporary anarchist theory, and from participants of the ongoing Deep Commons collective visioning project[1] that brings together activists and scholars from across the world to co-imagine and cultivate ecologies of solidarity and care beyond capitalism, anthroparchy, patriarchy, racism, and the State. These voices will be used to bring the theory to life. The perceived antinomy of revolutionary and evolutionary theories of political and social change will be questioned, and the anarchist concept of permanent revolution—an ongoing process without end—will be explored as an alternative model for radical social transformation. The temporal gap between current struggles and imagined futures will be problematized, prefigurative praxes critiqued, and a politics of immanence explored as a potential remedy.

In 1898, twenty years before the October Revolution, Élisée Reclus prophetically warned his "revolutionary friends" in Russia of the dangers of conquering state power

and in turn adopting the very tools of domination that their revolution was seeking to displace:

> If the socialists become our masters, they will certainly proceed in the same manner as their predecessors, the republicans. The laws of history will not bend in their favor. Once they have power, they will not fail to use it, if only under the illusion or pretense that this force will be rendered useless as all obstacles are swept away and all hostile elements destroyed. The world is full of such ambitious and naïve persons who live with the illusory hope of transforming society through their exceptional capacity to command. (Reclus 2013, 145)

These words of Reclus are as pertinent now as they were then, perhaps even more so. For as Murray Bookchin similarly reminded us: "political parties are *products* of the nation-state itself, whether they profess to be revolutionary, liberal, or reactionary" (1996, 7). Thus, the fundamental difference that distinguishes one party from another is merely the kind of nation-state it wishes to establish. Yet in spite of this, conventional political histories examining revolutions have focused exclusively on the rivalries between liberal, radical, and revolutionary parties for control of the state, ignoring this far more important political battle which takes place between the state-centric revolutionary party and the new, usually directly democratic institutions co-created by the people on the ground.

It was witnessing at first hand the French revolution of 1848 being subverted in this way by the provisional government that confirmed for Pierre-Joseph Proudhon that "all parties, without exception, as they affect power, are varieties of absolutism", leading him to conclude: "the political revolution, the abolition of authority among men is the goal; the social revolution is the means" (1849, 3). Proudhoun thus called for a "permanent revolution". Unlike the Marxist-Trotskyist use of this term, which maintained the need for a vanguard party seizing state control (Marx and Engels 1850; Trotsky 1931, Chapter 4), Proudhoun's permanent revolution involved "the people alone, acting upon themselves without intermediary" in order to break this cycle of partial revolution (1848, 9). For contemporary activists and scholars, our revolution must become similarly permanent if it is truly to be resolved to imagine, co-constitute, and then sustain free society. It must become (r)evolution, an ongoing process without end.

If, however, a free society is to be founded without "assistance" from a vanguard revolutionary party, then what of a manifesto? What of strategy and planning? In a

famous attack on the revolutionary ideas of Marx, Mikhail Bakunin addressed this question by setting himself in opposition to what he saw as the foolishness of rigidly aligning to a preconceived idea of how revolutionary change should occur:

> We do not, therefore, intend to draw up a blueprint for the future revolutionary campaign; we leave this childish task to those who believe in the possibility of the efficacy of achieving the emancipation of humanity through personal dictatorship. (Bakunin 1973: 357)

From this perspective then, and without a clear map to guide us, the question of how to get from the *here* of struggle to the *there* of free society continues to present us with a perplexing dilemma. It is not a question of whether political means and ends *should* be linked, because "they *already are*" (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 36). Ugandan activist Namazzi, a participant in the Deep Commons collective visioning process, argues that the reason why so many revolutionary movements have failed is because "the people were clear about what they wanted to move from, but they were not clear on where they were heading", and, therefore, those in power have been able to "take advantage of this gap in strategy". But this very sense of trajectory—from here to there or somewhere, as expressed by Namazzi—perhaps illuminates a more central problem. As long as freedom is deferred while in transit between a past we aim to escape and an imagined utopian future, there indeed remains such a gap to be enclosed and colonized by oppressive forces. But it is this very sense of trajectory from here to there, and the resultant gap between the two temporalities which obscures what might be the ground upon which free society can at long last be constituted in the immanence and accessibility of the now.

In his work on "grounded utopias", Laurence Davis builds on Friedrich Kümmel's idea of time as a temporal coexistence between past, present, and future, with the relation of these temporal components not merely conceived as one of succession but also as one of conjoint existence—with both past and future intertwined with the present (2012, 130–32). From a movement perspective, this state of profound contingency calls on us to open many more spaces for radical imaginaries focused on building political projects in the here-and-now, grounded in historical praxis and extending toward an ever-changing yet hopeful future. This relocation to the present is by no means a rejection of utopian thinking, for visions of future worlds animate struggle

in the present. The real danger lies in clinging to and concretizing any one fixed vision of the future (or of the past) as it will implicitly trap us within what David Abram calls "the oblivion of linear time" (2017, 272). It will trap us, that is, within the same illusory dimension that has already enabled us to lose connection with, and fragment apart from, the natural world. Temporally speaking, then, the most strategic and efficacious location for constructing a free society is in this moment, and then the next, and the next, in perpetuity. And so, as Anna, an eco-activist from Mexico participating in the collective visioning, explains:

> Acting from the here and now is revolutionary. Rather than having a fixed vision that the future will look like XYZ, it is left open, really trusting in where we are coming from and what our intentions and motivations are. More humane, more relational, more caring.

From this perspective, any truly inhabitable utopia can only be arrived at, or lived, as a dynamic process in the here-and-now. Kurdish (r)evolutionary Bager Nûjiyan describes his own struggle in Rojava as such a grounded utopia, firmly rooted in the present. For him and his comrades, free society is not just an abstract idea, but their "concrete way of living", and their "way of connecting with struggle and utopia on a daily basis" (Nûjiyan, 2018). From Nûjiyan's perspective, the temporal gap between that which we struggle to escape and our imagined destination has been closed, and the free society relocated to the immanence of the here-and-now, where it can finally be reclaimed and occupied.

There are, of course, a number of well-argued critiques of such a politics of immanence which deserve further engagement. Uri Gordon has argued that a politics of the here-and-now leads our struggles to become trapped in a "recursive prefiguration" (2017, 521). He explains elsewhere that, similar to that which can be found in Christianity, a future "radiates backwards on its past", as an "absorption of the revolutionary/utopian horizon into the present tense" (Gordon 2009, 261). Such a temporal framing, he argues, works to "undermine a generative disposition towards the future", allowing a collective denial of both the "absent promise" of revolutionary transformation in the near future and the very real prospect of imminent ecological and societal collapse (Gordon 2017, 522). Prefiguration from this perspective is little more than a way of modelling an imagined future in the present moment, as a way of dissociating from the very real and immediate ecological and social crises that cascade

around us; it is "fiddling while Rome burns". Gordon argues that adherents to such "presentism" sidestep these crises by "avoiding any disposition towards the future altogether" (2017, 532).

Darren Webb similarly critiques what he describes as attempts to "reconfigure utopia" and to "rid it of its totalistic and prescriptive dimensions" in order to avoid the risk of "closure and control". He claims that such an approach merely succeeds in nullifying its utopian potential. He believes that much of the "vitality, power and direction" that a utopian approach might offer is lost when attempting to circumvent its perceived "bad" connotations (Webb 2009, 757). He repeatedly rejects what he refers to as "the standard liberal critique" of blueprint utopianism, a tactic often utilised in order to ridicule similar arguments made by those on the left, without acknowledging that such a critique has a long and established history in anarchist thought (*idem*). Moreover, the many anarchist revolutionaries and theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who were clear in their opposition to such vanguardist, concretized visions of a future society, were making their observations within living memory (and often through direct experience) of the devastating consequences of such an approach. He is right, however, in his assertion that, without visions of the future, utopian praxis risks becoming "an empty and endless project that romanticizes the process while losing sight of the goal" (*idem*, 287). In his critical case study of Occupy Wall Street, he makes a similar argument:

> Movements heralding themselves as cracks in capitalist space-time through which transformed social relations are emerging here-and-now might just end up becoming dead spaces in which the inchoate utopian desires that originally gave them life wither away through neglect. (*idem*, 358)

He is correct to observe that they *might*. But *must* they? Are a politics of immanence and a generative praxis, as these scholars claim, so mutually exclusive? The dangers are certainly real and must be taken seriously. A politics of immanence could well be (and at times is) subverted to provide reassurance and denial in the face of ecological and social systemic collapse. However, such an impatience with our collective lack of revolutionary progress in the present, while entirely understandable, might just as easily lead us yet again into a blinkered march towards a frozen future image conceived of in the past, the

abandonment of the now, and the repetition of previous mistakes. Any future utopia we might imagine through the limitations of our current conceptual frameworks will inevitably at some point be found lacking, as our capacity to imagine better worlds evolves beyond our original starting point, condemning us to a future "caught within the paradigms of the present" (Newman 2009, 211). As Rosi Braidotti points out, "[w]e cannot even begin to guess what post-anthropocentric embodied brains will actually be able to think up" (2013, 104). So, although it might be possible to identify the impacts and successes of previous struggles with the benefit of hindsight, it is never possible to envisage the whole process in advance (Swain 2019, 59).

It is therefore through the co-creation of living, vibrant, material alternatives in the here-and-now that we can tangibly express the utopian potentiality always within grasp, as an immanent feature of the present moment. Such approaches are of central importance, Simon Springer asserts, because they remind us of the latent agency present in the here and now: "all we have is immanence, this precise moment of space-time in which we live and breathe, and because we are *it*, we can change, reshape, and ultimately transform *it*" (2014, 161). As another collective visioning participant, UK activist Jack explains, "what we are bringing into perception in this moment, that is the world we are living in. That is the relationship". For Jack, the idea of an abstracted yet concrete utopia is "a bit silly". Our struggles must remain dynamic or else they end up being "in opposition to life and the dynamism of who we are".

But many—as we have just discovered—will still be asking how realistic such a profound reconfiguration of our social ecologies can actually be? And the answer, somewhat unsurprisingly given the sheer scale of struggle visible today, is that it is entirely possible to find living, vibrant examples of such societal formations across the world right now that might inspire us. Perhaps, as Ariel Salleh suggests, political theorists have simply been "too culturally blinkered to see it" (2017, 269). For instance, the indigenous cosmovision that so radically transformed the original Marxist insurgency, and, consequently, the entire trajectory to date of the Zapatista revolution in Chiapas, Mexico has been the Tsotsil concept of *O'on* or "collective heart" (Fitzwater 2019). In the Tsotsil language, thoughts and feelings are considered to be one and the same, thus better framed as *thought-feeling*, and are understood to manifest in this collective heart as the realization of its "inherent potentialities". This underlying potentiality is called

ch'ulel; that is, a means of describing the "inherent or immanent potentialities" that are always present and ready to shape and form the "dynamic relationships that compose reality" (Fitzwater 2019, 32–33). Xuno López Intzin, a contemporary Tsotsil scholar and activist, explains how *ch'ulel* thus potentiates the kind of profound interrelationality that resonates with the politics of immanence this article explores:

> From this understanding of the ch'ulel in everything, the human being establishes relations with all that exists, in other words the human being interacts with their environment and the environment with the human being on a material and immaterial plane. From this plane or universe of ch'ulel existence is ordered, and social relations are ordered with all that exists. (qtd by Fitzwater 2019, 33)

The creation of a free ecological society from a Tsotsil perspective can therefore be seen as an ongoing reciprocal process of nurturing and developing both this underlying potentiality and our collective heart. And this process of "bringing one another to greatness" (*ichbail ta muk*) in turn creates "the life that is good for everyone" (*lekil kuxlejal*), as Dylan Eldredge Fitzwater explains: "For the Zapatistas, dignity, autonomy, and democracy for each people, as well as the creation of this people as a collectivity, arises through the growth of the heart, through bringing one another into one collective heart, through *ichbail ta muk*" (2019, 36). And so more than mere abstract theory, these deep commons can be seen as animate in the actually-existing anarchistic practices of the ongoing Zapatista revolution, a political project that has been described by John P. Clark as "one of the most radical and far-reaching conceptions of democracy yet to appear" (2019, 103).

The centre of Zapatista autonomous governance is in "every Zapatista community", existing as multiple dialogical processes that work openly on the tensions between different actors while simultaneously constructing a framework of "shared aspirations born from a collective heart" (Fitzwater 2019, 49). Moreover, this process includes at its centre an ongoing radical reconfiguration of gender relations within these communities. Taking seriously the shared commitment to engage in struggle *juntos y a la par* ("together and side by side"), there is a shared recognition that any struggle against colonialism and capitalism is also "necessarily a struggle against patriarchy" (Gahman 2020, 518). Material results of this can be seen in the increased engagement by Zapatista men in reproductive work and emotional labour, and the increased involvement

of women in positions of responsibility and decision making in community life, political organising, and autonomous governance (Gahman 2020, 519). While (as in all contemporary societies) there remains a long way to go in terms of fully overcoming masculine domination and *machismo* forms of masculinity, the strides they are making in these communities towards women's collective empowerment, claims Levi Gahman, are "nothing short of miraculous": "Rebel women, and the socially reproductive labour they do each day, are at the heart of both the movement and lifegiving world they are creating" (Gahman 2020, 521).

The Zapatista governance structures have no central constitution, only principles arrived at through collective agreement. Community representatives who serve in the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipalities (MAREZ), for instance, follow the seven principles of autonomous government or "Command by Obeying", which are: (1) serve and not be served; (2) represent and not supersede; (3) build and not destroy; (4) obey and not command; (5) propose and not impose; (6) convince and not defeat; and (7) come down and not go up (Moisés 2018, 169-70). Thus, the system of assembly (*Ichbail ta muk)* maintains a "constant process of creation and re-creation" in order to remain free and open, with each community free to imagine for themselves what unique form their democracy might take. When the smaller collectives that constitute the collective heart find themselves in disagreement or imbalance, an assembly is convened in order for all constituents to participate in the formulation of a new agreement, resulting in the co-creation of a new collective heart. It is this process of direct community approval of all decisions that ensures the flow of communication (and power) between the various levels of autonomous government remains in perpetual movement, thus continuously weaving the multiple collective hearts of the communities into the one collective heart of the Zapatista organization (Fitzwater 2019, 69-71). Moreover, as a further tactic for combatting the ever-present danger of the accumulation of power in any one community or by a new governing elite, a complex rotation system for assembly representatives has been established that ensures no one person has the opportunity to develop disproportionate power or influence. The governance structures and communities thus remain part of "the same social body" (Fitzwater 2019, 136). Fitzwater's conclusion that autonomous structures of government such as this cannot/must not have an end point supports the argument of this article for utopia as process. Such structures, he argues,

must be created by the "constant creation and re-creation" of governing systems that respond to the "desires and problems experienced by the communities themselves" (Fitzwater 2019, 160).

Another contemporary example of such an approach is offered by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava—an extraordinary experiment in horizontal participatory democracy involving a multicultural population of around three million people. This is a utopia of the here-and-now, a political process firmly grounded in (and generative of) the day-to-day life and struggles of the communes. The Rojava process, much like the Zapatista process just examined, remains deeply rooted in the cultural imaginary of the region. Nazan Üstündağ (2020, 253) argues that Abdullah Öcalan—the Kurdish Workers Party leader imprisoned by the Turkish state since 1999 and a key architect of this social revolution—has been greatly influenced by the indigenous epistemologies transmitted through religious-cultural traditions such as Alevism and Sufism, which can be crystallized in Öcalan's aphorism "Truth is Love; Love is Free Life". Positioning this love as central to the revolution, Üstündağ describes an expansive more-than-human matrix containing an inherent promise of freedom:

> This love is not a form of love that can be sexually consummated, contained by household, property, and nation, or reproduce a lineage. Love and eroticism are lived in relation to nature, the world, and revolution, in people, living matter, and society—in other words, in all kinds of relationships—as a movement and a flow (Üstündağ 2020, 253).

But as inspiring as the examples of the Rojavan and Zapatista revolutions might be for many of us around the world, we must remain vigilant. As specific federalized networks achieve a certain level of success, we must consciously resist the temptation to overly reify and essentialize them, and abstract yet more fixed blueprints for future social formations. As we are now starting to understand, it will remain crucial that the co-constitution of free ecological society remains an ongoing process—pluralized, open, responsive, and grounded in the here-and-now. These deep commons thus offer an alternative frame of reference to that of the state by eradicating arbitrary static borders (in fact making them an absurdity), and by honouring both the local and the global without reifying either. The concept potentiates the formation of multiple coherent local

identities, communities, and regions, developing in unique forms according to localized conditions, yet avoiding isolationism due to the need for mutual aid and cooperation with neighbouring communities in order to survive and flourish. Top-down governance becomes nonsensical in relation to this locally responsive ongoing co-production of the world, as does any form of homogenous culture. Such a community of communities is what Sian Sullivan has referred to as "holonic", in the sense that each community is part of the broader scales of a more global organization while at the same time constituting a localized autonomous whole (2005, 380).

Benjamin Franks asserts that locating our struggles in such prefigurative political praxes will act to "collapse the problematic distinction between means and ends", which we have seen as leading to tragic consequences for multiple failed revolutionary movements (2006, 114). Gustav Landauer went so far as to claim that there is ultimately no separation between cause and effect. He conceived of cause and effect flowing from one to another in an "eternal" process that he termed "reciprocal effect". He even proceeded to suggest getting rid of the word "cause" entirely, exclaiming: "The cause is dead, long live the living effect!" (2010, 100). Inverting Schopenhauer's claim that all reality is effectiveness, Landauer instead asserted that "effectiveness is reality", and therefore all that can be actual and existing is "also present and in the moment" (2010, 103).

However, a politics of immanence need not (indeed must not) displace the future. On the contrary, it should recognize it as an entangled aspect of what we term the present. Thus, what is generative must also be processual, with imagined future(s) and an ever-changing present in a constant dialogical process. Therefore, rather than prefiguration, perhaps a more useful frame might be that of an imagined future being constantly *refigured* in a process of entangled relationality with the continually shifting present, which in turn, refigures itself in relation to this new trajectory, and so on and so forth. Such a reframing might then ensure that the "anxious and catastrophic forms of hope", which Gordon rightly argues will be necessary to create the urgently needed radical alternatives to our current dystopia, remain firmly grounded in the possible while generative of what, for some, might seem the impossible (2018, 14).

Sullivan refers to such an approach as an "enfolding-unfolding, implicate-explicate" model of social organization, which potentiates a "proliferation of democratic

processes" in which distribution and emergence can occur simultaneously (2005, 380). It realizes Élisée Reclus' vision of a "globalisation from below" in which humanity might finally undertake an "open ended and creative project of liberatory self-realisation" (Clark and Martin 2013, 4). Mirroring Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's vision of a free society in which the "centre is everywhere, its circumference nowhere" (1989, 282), it is literally impossible to find a medial point or a periphery as each socio-ecological system flows into the next in a dynamic interconnectedness. There is thus no beginning and no end, no us and no them. It is the ultimate realization of *O'on*—the flourishing of the global collective heart.

From this perspective, we might reframe the sequencing of means and ends from a linear to a non-linear temporal form. Rather than prefiguring a path which leads to a particular goal, we reframe the path *as* the goal. Thus, if our goal is freedom, praxes must be established which realize freedom in the present moment, not as a distant promise, but as the liberation of the now. Consequently, it will be in this space between the *no longer* and the *not yet* that we must locate our shared political project, and the free ecological society it pursues.

END NOTES

[1] See: https://www.deepcommons.net/about

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