Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Prefigurative Politics"

Why Consensus?

Prefiguration in Three Activist Eras

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Abstract

Activists have long justified their egalitarian organizational forms in prefigurative terms. Making decisions by consensus, decentralizing organization, and rotating leadership serves to model the radically democratic society that activists hope to bring into being. Our comparison of consensus-based decision-making in three historical periods, however, shows that activists have understood the purposes of prefiguration in very different ways. Whereas radical pacifists in the 1940s saw their cooperative organizations as sustaining movement stalwarts in a period of political repression, new left activists in the 1960s imagined that their radically democratic practices would be adopted by ever-widening circles. Along with the political conditions in which they have operated, activists' distinctive understandings of equality have also shaped the way they have made decisions. Our interviews with 30 leftist activists today reveal a view of decision-making as a place to work through inequalities that are informal, unacknowledged, and pervasive.

Keywords: prefiguration, consensus decision-making, participatory decision-making, social movements, horizontalism, activism

Activists in the global justice and anti-austerity protests that have swept the globe proudly explain their horizontalist decision-making processes—the General Assemblies, the progressive stacks and vibes watchers, the rules of consensus, the affinity groups and spokescouncils—in prefigurative terms (Juris, 2012; Leach, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2011). They are aiming to show that "another world is possible," as the slogan of the World Social Forum puts it (Juris, 2008).

There have been critiques of this prefigurative ethos. Activists have been accused of fetishizing process, of insisting on radical democracy at the expense of getting anything done (Cornell, 2011; Smucker, 2013). The insistence on radical democracy, critics say, runs the risk of alienating newcomers, people of lower socio-economic means, and those unaccustomed to activist subcultures (Leondar-Wright, 2014; Polletta, 2005). Even sympathetic critics point out that prefigurative goals are often in tension with strategic ones (Breines, 1989; Epstein, 1991, 2001;

Hammond, 2013; Leach, 2013). Defenders counter that prefiguration bridges instrumental and expressive goals (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Juris, 2008, 2012). Demonstrating the viability of an alternative *is* strategic. In this paper, we probe activists' understandings of prefiguration, both now and in earlier eras of progressive activism in the United States. How have activists imagined that modeling an alternative would affect people exposed to that alternative? What have they seen as the point of prefiguration? How have they imagined it working? Where have activists' understandings of prefiguration come from and how have they shaped movement practices—as well as problems that have come along with those practices?

Activists in each of the three periods we examine described their purposes as prefigurative, but they understood those purposes in very different ways. Whereas radical pacifists in the 1940s and '50s saw themselves as sustaining a flame of radical democracy in a world deeply hostile to it, 1960s new left activists believed that their radically democratic practices would influence people outside the movement. Prefiguration was about modeling a real alternative rather than preserving what pacifist A. J. Muste earlier called a "church in the catacombs" (Peacemakers, 1952). There was another important difference. Whereas 1940s pacifists saw themselves as an elite vanguard uniquely equipped to lead a mass movement, 1960s activists' belief in radical equality was at the very center of their deliberative practices.

Our third prefigurative moment is the contemporary one. Our interviews with activists in several progressive movements reveal that consensus-based decision-making continues to be animated by prefigurative purposes—but ones that depart both from 1940s and 1960s understandings. Unlike 1960s activists, progressive activists are frankly dismissive of the idea that mainstream organizations will take their decision-making as exemplary. Yet they do see themselves as developing modes of decision-making that will become more broadly utilizable. More than activists in earlier movements, they are sensitive to the demands of making radical democracy appealing to those without a prior ideological commitment to it.

In the following, we trace continuities and departures in activists' practice of prefigurative politics. What accounts for the changes we describe? In part, the political context in which activists have operated. In addition, we highlight changes in activists' understandings of what equality has meant and required. The continuities we identify are not only in activists' prefigurative goals but also in the problems they have faced in realizing those goals. Alongside the tension between prefiguration and political strategy, we identify another tension. This one has to do with the audiences to whom activists have sought to model a political alternative. Certainly, when activists have been politically marginalized, it has made sense to concentrate on sustaining an activist core rather than trying to convince people outside the movement of the virtues of radical democracy. Focusing their prefigurative efforts within their own circles, however, has also led activists to miss possibilities for communicating alternatives to a larger audience. We explore this tension.

Participatory Democracy, Prefigurative Purposes, and Strategic Tensions

Direct forms of democracy go back to ancient Athens, New England town meetings, the Society of Friends, and European anarcho-syndicalism. In the United States, experiments with consensus decision-making were undertaken in the abolitionist, women's suffrage, and pacifist movements. However, it was not until the 1960s that consensus

decision-making exploded into the public consciousness. In 1962, the new left group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) called for a "participatory democracy" in which decisions were made by the people affected by them. SDS activists intended the term to describe a political system, not a mode of organizational decision-making. However, at the time, decision-making within SDS itself was collectivist and consensus-oriented. For thousands of activists in the new left, antiwar, radical feminist, and cooperative movements, consensus-based decision-making, decentralized administration, and rotating leadership became organizational commitments (Polletta, 2002; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Rothschild & Whitt, 1989).

For scholars writing about the surge of collectivist organizations during this period, the participatory democratic impulse reflected a youthful repudiation of authority that was at odds with the demands of effective political reform (see the discussion in Breines, 1989). However, by the late 1970s, scholars, some of whom had had experience in collectivist organizations, began to draw attention to the virtues of those organizations. Carl Boggs (1977) introduced the term "prefigurative" to contrast new left organizations with old left ones. New leftists sought to enact within the "ongoing political practice of a movement … those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (p. 100). Such efforts were not anti-political, Wini Breines (1989) insisted. In seeking to embody within the movement the values of community, equality, and freedom they sought to bring about more broadly, activists were modeling a political alternative to a conventional politics of parliamentary maneuver and bureaucratic manipulation.

Scholars were not uncritical, however. Breines argued that participatory democrats' prefigurative goals were in constant, and eventually debilitating, tension with the strategic demands of political reform. Political reform demanded an ability to act quickly, manage resources shrewdly, and marshal expertise to realize clear goals. Decentralized and nonhierarchical organization made those things difficult. Other scholars similarly drew attention to participatory democracy's inefficiency. Inefficiency could be tolerated as long as a group was small, poorly-funded, and low in political profile. When opportunities for genuine impact opened up, however, movement groups found themselves torn between participatory democratic purists and those who would give up some democracy in order to get things done (Clecak, 1973; Epstein, 1991; Starr, 1979; Stoper, 1983).

Feminist Jo Freeman (1973) identified a different fault line in participatory democratic organizations. Eliminating formal structures of authority made it easy for informal cliques to rule freely, she argued. The problem was not participatory democracy's inefficiency, but its inequality (see also Sirianni, 1995; Phillips, 1991). Breines, Freeman, and authors since then have been sympathetic to activists' efforts to create organizations that are radically egalitarian, but they have emphasized the fragility of the form. They have treated participatory democracy as a worthy ideal but one that inevitably generates inefficiencies, inequities, and debilitating stalemates.

Importantly, however, scholars have tended to treat such weaknesses as intrinsic to the form. Participatory democracy is always at odds with political effectiveness, in this view, or it is always at odds with equality. A closer look at experiments in radical democracy in other historical periods, however, reveals that neither is the case. In the 1940s and 1950s, as we show in the next section, participatory democracy's inefficiency simply was not a problem given the context of political repression in which activists operated. Its potential to reproduce inequalities was not a problem given activists' conception of their role vis-à-vis the masses.

Prefiguration in the Radical Pacifist Movement

In the 1940s and 1950s, groups like the Peacemakers and the Committee for Non-Violent Revolution combined daring acts of direct action against the war machine with collectivist organizations in which all decisions were made by consensus. As radical pacifists saw it, challenging militarism meant challenging the bureaucratic ethos and narrow instrumentalism that accompanied it (Katz, 1974; Tracy, 1996). "The movement must live its principles," as one pacifist put it. "It must live cooperation" (Kamiat, 1956, p. 11).

However, the goal was survival. Radical pacifists operated in a period of state repression and public opprobrium. After World War II, the Cold War hardened public opinion against pacifism and ramped up the government harassment of dissenters. Earlier allies on the left shifted their allegiances to a militaristic nationalism (Tracy, 1996). In that climate, the point of prefiguration was to preserve the values of individual conscience and nonviolence among pacifists' small network. Peacemakers member A. J. Muste wrote in 1952, "It seems altogether likely that building a radical pacifist movement of any size will be a tougher and slower job in the U.S. than anywhere else … [W]ill reaction prove so strong in the U.S. that we have to keep a small remnant alive … a church in the catacombs pattern?" (Peacemakers, 1952). Developing cooperative and egalitarian relationships among a small group of stalwarts might enable them to survive until pacifists could have any hope of mobilizing a wider constituency.

In that vein, members of the Committee for Non-Violent Revolution decided in 1946 that it was "far too early to be primarily concerned with the masses." The group should concentrate on "sowing the seeds" of a future order through experimental organizational forms and intellectual discussion—rather than "this grim and ludicrous, though ever so dedicated, procession of picket signs, this trembling of the fist on the street-corner." To be sure, pacifists were not of one mind on the issue. Some argued that pacifists' own political marginality made it difficult for them to gauge just what the "masses" were open to. They argued that striving to build a perfect microcosm of democracy might detract from efforts to build a broader constituency (Committee for Non-Violent Revolution, 1946).

Either way, few pacifists saw their organizations as the basis for a mass movement. Even those committed to direct action more than community-building saw themselves as a tiny band of committed radicals and their organizations as cadres. Again, their distance from the public as well as their view of the "masses" as blinded by patriotic fervor may have made them comfortable with conventional notions of leadership in spite of their radical egalitarianism. Such views had firm support in the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence they adopted. Gandhi himself envisioned an India governed by autonomous local units. However, he believed that the organizational vehicle for bringing about such a society had to be centralized and hierarchical (Sharp, 1973). For those interpreting Gandhi in the 1930s and 40s, leaders' role was clear, conventional, and indispensable (Polletta, 2002).

Without a counterpart to Gandhi's elite corps of experts in nonviolence, a movement of the masses was "inconceivable," Peacemakers declared in their founding statement (Peacemakers, 1948). When pacifists talked about democracy within their organizations, they meant among people who were similar in ideological commitments, formal education, and political skills.

Prefiguration in the 1960s New Left

Participatory democrats in the 1960s differed both in their relationship to publics outside the movement and in their views of leadership. Activists in the civil rights, new left, anti-Vietnam war, and women's liberation movements sought to prefigure an alternative to a political system they perceived as democratic in name only. For most of the decade, however, they did not see themselves as threatened with extinction. To the contrary, they imagined their radically democratic practices spreading among people like themselves. Given the number of mobilizable young people, this was not unrealistic. Indeed, swathes of 1960s movements as well as whole urban neighborhoods were populated by groups that operated as collectives (Rothschild & Whitt, 1989).

The challenge for 1960s activists was not to survive but rather to square their prefigurative commitment with a commitment to political reform. They wanted to change laws at the same time as they changed the whole system. As people within the movement often argued, the two demanded different kinds of organizational practices (Breines, 1989). For example, the new leftist group, Students for a Democratic Society, rode the wave of growing anti-Vietnam War sentiment to expand dramatically in size. It then found itself wracked by a battle between radical democrats who were intent on eliminating all formal offices, and those who feared losing organizational capacity at just the point when the organization was poised for political influence (Gitlin, 1993).

The political context thus helps to explain differences in how radical democrats in the 1940s and the 1960s understood their prefigurative purposes. New understandings of equality also shaped the practice of radical democracy. As we noted, few radical pacifists saw participatory democracy as the basis for overcoming differences of status between the leaders of a movement and its members. By contrast, equality was central to 1960s understandings of prefiguration. The founders of SDS in 1960 were inspired by the example of the southern civil rights movement. In that movement, people lacking standard political credentials were at the frontlines of the struggle. Northern white students joined their heady experience of a community that was forged in direct action with a vision of a polity in which ordinary people made the decisions that mattered. This mix became participatory democracy. As Miller (1987) points out, it was an uneasy mix: it celebrated both an existentialist refusal of the rules and the kind of civic republicanism that would surely require rules. The tension was carried into activists' efforts to enact a participatory democracy in the here and now. Activists strove to create egalitarian organizations, but they were reluctant to put into place the formal structures that might have combatted the operation of informal inequalities. Hence, Freeman's critique of the "tyranny of structurelessness."

In short, critiques of consensus-based decision-making as inherently at odds with commitments to strategy or equality miss the very different ways in which activists have understood what it was they were doing. Radical pacifists and new leftists both described their purposes in prefigurative terms. However, the fact that pacifists operated in a context of severe political repression meant that the notion of prefiguring a radical democracy to anyone but a small core of activists was utterly unrealistic. For that reason too, the question of whether to devote their energy to building a politically effective organization rather than a radically democratic one was never an especially salient one. Likewise, radical pacifists' understanding of movements as properly divided between masses and leaders made it easier for them to practice radical equality within a small circle of the like-minded.

Prefiguration From the 1960s to the 2010s

If radical pacifists' understandings of prefiguration departed from the understandings current among 1960s activists, we see another set of changes today. Between the 1960s and now, of course, there has been a great deal of democratic experimentation, inside and outside movements. In the 1970s, feminist groups struggled to maintain their collectivist practices when federal funders pressed them to adopt more conventional practices (Ferree & Martin, 1995). They responded by combining collectivist practices with bureaucratic ones: installing a hierarchy of offices but joining it with informal consultation across levels, dividing decisions into those requiring consensus and those not requiring it, and so on. Indeed, by the 1990s, Bordt's (1997) study of feminist organizations in New York City found that few of them resembled either an archetypal collectivist organization or an archetypal bureaucratic one. This was typical of movement organizations more generally (Chen, 2009).

During the same period, however, portions of the antinuclear movement retained a commitment to radically democratic decision-making and developed a model of affinity groups and spokescouncils as a way to make decisions in large groups (Epstein, 1991). The antinuclear Clamshell Alliance famously reached consensus with more than a thousand people participating (Downey, 1986). In 1999, massive street protests against the World Trade Organization brought international visibility to a movement that was challenging corporate globalization. The Seattle protests also launched a cadre of activists who were committed to developing radically democratic decision-making that could be used in the context of high-profile civil disobedience (Juris, 2008; Polletta, 2002). In 2001, the first World Social Forum brought together activists opposed to neoliberalism from around the world to share strategies and visions. In subsequent World Social Forums as well as regional spinoffs and global summits, activists shared an increasingly sophisticated repertoire of tools for egalitarian decision-making (Juris, 2008; Maeckelbergh, 2009). Activists in earlier eras had connections with movements outside the country, but they had nothing like the activist networks and communicative capacities that have made it possible to share methods of consensus-based decision-making across diverse movements and regions.

A newly resurgent anarchism that drew from punk subcultures and Murray Bookchin's social ecology (see Bookchin, 1971) was influential in shaping activists' deliberative practices. Activists also drew upon radical feminist ideas about process and the example of the Mexican Zapatistas. New versions of consensus were suspicious of agreement too easily arrived at and sensitive to the dangers of structurelessness. There was now an array of techniques and people skilled in their use (Maeckelbergh, 2009; Polletta, 2014).

Global justice activists played key roles in launching the Occupy and Indignados movements, although participation reached far beyond their networks (Graeber, 2011; Polletta 2014; Maeckelbergh, 2012). Global justice activists trained neophyte activists in their styles of decision-making, but there was also a great deal of experimentation. Underpinning the experimentation, nonetheless, was the continuing belief that radically democratic decision-making within the movement was a way to prefigure a radically democratic society.

In her compelling account of global justice activists' prefigurative politics, Marianne Maeckelbergh (2011) rejected the opposition between prefiguration and strategy that scholars like Breines (1989) and Epstein (1991) had taken as unavoidable. Activists in the global justice movement were not seeking to advance a single set of goals, Maeckelbergh argued. They refused current forms of governance, but they recognized that there was not one obvious alternative. Instead, they sought to create multiple and diverse designs for living in their actual practices. They sought to build alternatives in the here and now rather than deferring democracy to some post-revolutionary

period. Accordingly, Maeckelbergh argued, their success should not be measured by standard indices of organizational success.

What measure, then, should one use to decide if prefiguration is working? Is success constituted by ever-increasing horizontalism? Is that true even if radical democracy comes at the expense of alienating people who do not have the time or taste for endless meetings? More generally, to whom do global justice activists see themselves as modeling alternatives? If prefiguration has the goal, as Maeckelbergh (2011) put it, of "transforming governing structures on a global scale, and showing people through *doing* that this is possible" (p. 14), then how are people being shown that and *which* people are being shown that? If prefiguration aspires, as Maeckelbergh quoted Graeber, "to reinvent life as a whole" (p. 9), then whose lives are to be reinvented? How do new designs for living crafted by activists spread? Maeckelbergh did not answer these questions. She argued that alterglobalization activists rejected a distinction between activists and the public because they said it made them sound too much like a vanguard which would lead the masses to freedom. Yet one should be able to acknowledge that there are people outside the movement whom one would like to influence without adopting the notion of a vanguard. To deny that risks making the movement even more insular.

The Purposes of Prefiguration Today: Interviews

To what extent, then, do activists today see themselves as modeling alternatives to people outside the movement? Hoban's interviews with thirty organizers in the US who use consensus-based decision-making in their groups were intended to answer that question.[i] Interviewees called themselves variously, "left," "radical," "revolutionary," and "anarchist." As such, they were part of wide and overlapping networks: most interviewees knew at least one other person in the sample. Slightly more than half had been involved in Occupy movements, variously in San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, New York City, Nashville, and Honolulu, and in Occupy the Farm. However, most interviewees' activism preceded their involvement in Occupy and continued after that movement's peak. Interviewees had been or were currently involved in movements for immigrant rights, land rights, food justice, Black Power, and cooperative housing, as well as in community organizing. Several interviewees held staff positions in nonprofit community-organizing groups or in policy organizations; others held non-movement jobs while participating in movement activities in their free time. All interviewees had experience in direct action and some had experience variously in legislative lobbying, policy work, community organizing, and programming music events.

Hoban knew most of the people she interviewed; the others were recommended by people she knew and were recruited via social media, phone calls, and in-person encounters. She sought out people who had considerable experience with consensus-based decision-making, but also sought diversity in terms of gender, age, and racial/ethnic identity. The sample of interviewees was 37 percent female and 63 percent male. Whites made up 50 percent of the sample, Blacks 17 percent, Latino/as 17 percent, and "Other" or Mixed Race 10 percent. Interviewees ranged in age from early 20's to mid-70's, with 67 percent in their 20's and 30's. More than half of the sample had completed a Bachelor's degree or higher. Half the sample had stable full-time employment, mostly in human service or organizing professions. The other half supported themselves through student stipends or sporadic employment combined with low-cost lifestyles.

Interviews took place between November 2014 and February 2015. Eleven interviews were conducted by phone; the others in person. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes, with a median of 60 minutes. Interviews

were semi-structured and followed a similar course. After describing our interest in consensus-based decision-making and in understanding activists' experience of it, Hoban asked participants to share any immediate reactions to her framing of the topic. Her questions then ranged over issues of why interviewees used consensus-based decision-making, how their practice of it had evolved over the course of their activism, the challenges they commonly encountered and how they dealt with those challenges both collectively and individually, what they understood by prefiguration and how they assessed its success. Since many interviewees were not familiar with the term "prefiguration", Hoban described it also as an ethos of "being the change you want to be," an ethos with which interviewees were familiar.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed. We identified emergent themes in the transcripts in a series of memos and then worked through the transcripts again to flesh out those themes as well as to locate observations that were inconsistent with arguments we were developing.

As we noted, Hoban asked interviewees why their groups made decisions by consensus or by some version of consensus. Often the first response she encountered was a kind of fumbling. One uses consensus because it is the right thing to do, said Salone,[ii] an organizer with Occupy Oakland and with an anarchist group in Berkeley: "It's the way to operate. Ideally we would never have to operate in any other way." Lava, an Oakland-based organizer with Food Not Bombs, observed that, "It's the way we've traditionally been doing things in anarchist or radical communities."

Organizers spend a lot of time trying to improve consensus-based decision-making, and a lot of time identifying its flaws, but they do not seem to spend a lot of time discussing its purposes. This may be in part because it has become fairly normative in direct action circles, as Lava noted. It is not that all groups make decisions by strict consensus. Some use informal consensus processes; some combine consensus with voting. "Horizontalism" and "consensus" have become loose terms to refer to decision-making that is nonhierarchical.

Upon reflection, organizers were able to identify rationales for this kind of decision-making. Strikingly, the rationales were often strategic—not in the eschatological sense that Maeckelbergh describes but rather in the sense of useful to the functioning of the group at the moment. Consensus-based decision-making built commitment and solidarity within the group, educated people on options and strategies, and helped to recruit participants. Celia, a community organizer in Orange County, California, explained: "It gives you a better sense of your allies, and your entity as a collective effort … It helps us to work better as a team." Kira who organizes with Occupy the Farm, a food and land sovereignty movement, and has lived in anarchist squat houses, similarly explained, "Everyone agrees, so no one has to enforce that decision, because there's group accountability." Akil said simply, "It keeps the group together." Sherlock, a member of Food Not Bombs (and a veteran of the 1960s civil rights movement) observed, "It keeps people coming."

What, then, of prefigurative purposes? Organizers occasionally did use the term, and did say that they saw their deliberative style as prefigurative. As Charles put it, "part of our goal is solidifying these values that we think will build a more just world." Wynd, an organizer in alter-globalization, antiwar, and Occupy movements, explained, "Consensus decision-making … is a way that we're prefiguring the world that we want to see and the world that we want to live in." Organizers did understand what they were doing as modeling alternative practices. But they were highly skeptical of the idea that mainstream institutions would adopt those practices. As Kira put it, "The way our country is organized, I don't think we could make a decision using consensus. How are you going to get a whole country to agree?" Celia was similarly clear-eyed: "I don't want to seem jaded, but … I don't think that if all

our [City] Council members … saw how we make decisions, they would say, 'Oh wow, let's change our process of making decisions at every council meeting, now we're going to run on consensus.'" She went on, "I guess I'm sort of skeptical that all of a sudden, all of our decision-making processes in the state of California will be similar to what a little grassroots effort is doing in Santa Ana."

Given that skepticism, our interviewees struggled to describe how their efforts might have influence beyond the group. Amaya, who is active in the Black Lives Matter movement, commented:

> That is a tricky question. But I think it's gonna happen. It's kind of like weight loss: you're not gonna lose it until there's a lot of change, until you notice … You'll know because you'll see the shift in the people, but I guess there's different ways.

Ross, a member of Food Not Bombs and Occupy the Farm, was similarly vague:

> I hope more people will come seek an alternative. … maybe it's hopeful at this point, I don't know … If we have an alternative system maybe we'll do something different, people will see that there's another way of doing things.

Some interviewees emphasized the changes that participants in the group would experience, and expressed the hope that that might lead to larger scale change. As Kira said, "[T]he real social impact it has is on individuals … And who knows, maybe it can eventually accumulate to have an impact as a whole." Salone was firm: "Does consensus decision-making change the world? No. That's magical thinking … It's important internally just for its benefit for the individuals who are practicing it."

A few interviewees described impacts that extended beyond the group. Marie talked about bringing the decision-making style that she used in cooperative houses and the antiwar movement to her policy work outside the movement. Celia described a collaborative she worked in that used consensus-based decision-making. She had been "inspired by it " she said, and had "taken it to my organizing efforts outside of [the group]." She said, "I'm sure it's the same for the other partner organizations—" and then stopped. "I'm not sure actually," she corrected herself, "but it could be, right?"

Most of our interviewees acknowledged that the connection between radical democracy within the movement and outside it was less than obvious. Celia observed: "We can certainly try to become a template to other people, but I think communicating with other efforts is incredibly difficult when you're so caught up in your own." Selina, a former community organizer who now works in a Topeka youth mentoring organization described her uncertainty:

> I honestly don't know. It would've kept me up, maybe ten years ago, worrying about it … Like I said, ripples, you can only change what's around you, and maybe everyone will do that and then it will be better. I don't know. I sound like a downer.

Comments like these might mistakenly suggest that interviewees were striving to create a bubble of radical democracy purely for its own sake. This is the criticism that was leveled at champions of consensus in the Occupy movement. They were faulted for insisting on the democratic rigor of their decision-making processes at the expense of ensuring that decisions were actually made (Gitlin, 2012; Juris, 2012; Smucker, 2013).

Yet our interviewees were deeply concerned with making consensus practical. They were sensitive to concerns that some of the paraphernalia of consensus-based decision-making such as the hand signals and long discussions of process might alienate people unfamiliar with it, and they were willing to adjust accordingly. Marie, for example,

argued that what was important about consensus-based decision-making was "active listening, trying to hear what everybody in the group is saying and coming up with a solution that meets everybody's needs." She went on, "The hand signals are a little bit much for most people." Yessu, who used consensus-based decision-making in Occupy Wall Street, said that his group had since dispensed with hand signals. The point was to communicate that "your voice is valuable. I think anybody not running consensus that way should reanalyze how they're doing their consensus because if it's marginalizing anyone, then it's not effective."

If activists were concerned only with creating a microcosm of radical democracy within their own ranks, then one would expect them to privilege the rigor of their democratic practices over their practicality. However, that was not the case. Salone described how decisions were made in Occupy Oakland:

> We used voting, and made a very specific decision to switch to voting and take as much power away from the GA [General Assembly] and put it into committees. When talking to people from OWS [Occupy Wall Street] or Occupy LA, groups that didn't do that, their GA became useless and dysfunctional. It can become like political theater … With decentralization, some of the committees used consensus and some used voting. It was a very practical shunning of spiritual purity.

Salone, like Marie, insisted that consensus-based decision-making had to be accessible to those with little experience of it. "Like we have to use consensus when the vast majority of people don't even know what it is?" she asked rhetorically.

Several interviewees underscored the importance of experimenting. For example, Sherlock, a long-time member of Food Not Bombs, explained that that group had been committed to consensus as a founding principle. But it had not worked: "We haven't adapted it to different situations and we're stuck with a straight and narrow interpretation … We end up not really using it because it's so cumbersome in so many ways." He praised a new collective that Food Not Bombs had joined for just that willingness to adapt. "What really puts things in perspective for me is how much the Omni [Collective] has creatively altered the standard consensus process." Kira observed similarly: "It's all trial and error." She went on:

> Kira: We're trying to figure out how to make decisions in a functional way that is collective and community based and powerful.
> Hoban: Like a laboratory?
> Kira: Yes, a lab is good way to put it. Every organization can be seen as a social experiment … but it's not scientific … It's messy. The context is always changing, so you try to learn and then adapt that into a new environment. You're almost starting from scratch every time.

Our interviewees' determined pragmatism jibes poorly with a view of champions of consensus as ideological purists. Their preference for adaptable and experimental decision-making structures reflects in part a pragmatic style has come to characterize the practice of horizontalism more broadly (Juris, 2008). Activists today are keenly sensitive to charges of privileging self-transformation over social change, or process over outcomes. We call it a pragmatic *style* because it is a way of enacting a principled commitment, in this case, to consensus-based decision-making, rather than a commitment that competes with an ideological one. Even when interviewees described the frustrations and difficulties of consensus, there was no indication that they were leaning toward abandoning it altogether. However, they did put a premium on a consensus process that was workable, whether that meant requiring modified rather than strict consensus, or even using voting for some decisions.

Interviewees' pragmatism also reflected their desire to make consensus-based decision-making useable by people without experience of politics. Again, interviewees were not very concerned about whether organizations outside the movement would adopt consensus-based decision-making. However, they were concerned about making consensus accessible to people *within their organization* who lacked the skills or status of college-educated and movement-experienced members. As they saw it, the success of consensus should be measured not by how far it departed from the kind of decision-making prevalent in mainstream political institutions, nor by its influence on the operation of mainstream institutions, but rather by its capacity to give real voice within the movement to people usually denied voice. Interviewees' pragmatism, in other words, was an extension of the understanding of equality on which they operated.

Equality, as our interviewees saw it, meant more than simply saying that everyone in the group was equal. It also required actively working to minimize the gaps in skills, status, and familiarity with movement practices that carried inequalities into organizational decision-making. This was a primary motivation for the experimentation that interviewees talked about so often. As interviewees saw it, equality also required questioning the basis for people's claims to authority. Interviewees referred frequently to the importance of "calling out white privilege" or "male privilege" in mixed groups. They described themselves both making such challenges and being the target of them. Akil observed that "consensus building spaces" were not "exempt" from racism or sexism. "We deal with those same type of issues … that I was dealing with in top-down spaces." The difference, he went on, was that when the issues came up, "they're addressed … If somebody has a concern about something like that, it's addressed right then and there, and not swept under the rug. Marie agreed: "The power of consensus decision-making when it's done well is how it makes power explicit, how it makes social dynamics explicit, and therefore able to be dealt with."

Naomi faulted the Alinsky-styled community organizing in which she had been trained for its failure to encourage discussion of inequalities within the group.

> If it got brought up, the traditional Alinsky leaders would say we don't have time for that … No one was to talk about race, no talk about sexuality, no talk really about adult-ism and age issues at all … Those things are dividers. All that matters is getting people together to work on the projects.

By contrast, consensus oriented groups encouraged discussions of privilege as they played out in actual decision-making.

To be sure, interviewees complained about the time and psychic energy required by such discussions. As Lava said ruefully, "Even getting through the process a concise proposal that people will hear without interjecting all their drama can be really hard." Akil recounted, "All the yelling that I've seen in Occupy LA, I was like, whoa! … I had to realize that, okay, this is a new environment for me … I still don't like all the fighting." But interviewees saw the conflict as an unavoidable step along the way to developing working relations of genuine equality.

Interviewees thus thought about equality differently than both post-war radical pacifists and 1960s new leftists. Unlike radical pacifists, these activists believed firmly that equality had to be practiced throughout the movement rather than only in the company of a small group of leaders. Unlike many 1960s activists, they thought about equality less as giving people equal access to formal power and more as a continuous effort to identify in practice the unequal consequences of informal power. In that vein, modifications of the consensus process such as allowing women and people of color to jump the speaking queue, encouraging participants to call out the exercise of privilege by others, and giving more weight to the opinions of those affected by the issue were intended to combat informal

inequalities (Walia, 2012). Activists refused what they perceived the anti-leadership ethos of the 1960s. They insisted, instead, on the importance of building the leadership of the historically disadvantaged (Russell, 2012).

Of course, many 1960s activists held less simplistic understandings of equality than this picture suggests (Leach, 2013; Polletta, 2002). But contemporary activists' understanding of equality does reflect several decades of awareness of the "tyranny of structurelessness," as Freeman called it, as well as familiarity with discourses and tools of "anti-oppression" work (Fithian & Mitchell, 2012). The standard critique of consensus-based decision-making as allowing informal inequalities to operate unchecked thus misses the fact that activists today see decision-making as a setting in which to identify, understand, and combat informal inequalities.

Conclusion

Activists committed to prefigurative politics have been faulted for privileging a future vision over immediate goals (Hammond, 2013; Smucker, 2013). They sacrifice opportunities to get something done in the here and now (which may require quick action, imperfect consensus, and even executive fiat) for the sake of perfecting the kind of decision-making that will become normative in a radically democratic society of the future.

We have argued that that criticism obscures the fact that prefiguration has meant different things to successive generations of activists. The differences reflect in part the distinctive challenges of the political context in which activists have operated. They also reflect the changing understandings of what equality has meant and required. With respect to context, the political marginalization to which radical pacifists were subjected in the 1940s and 1950s explains their focus on sustaining the commitment of a small community of the likeminded. Prefiguring truly alternative forms of social relations helped to do that. Indeed, in that context, maintaining the rigor and purity of participatory democratic practices likely would be more important than ensuring their ease or flexibility. For activists in the 1960s, by contrast, the goal of modeling new relationships coexisted with the goal of changing laws and policies. Hence, the tension between strategic and prefigurative aims.

Today, we have argued, activists are committed to drawing people to their organizations who lack political experience. This, we have argued, explains the experimentalism with which they approach decision-making, and their criticism of those who insist on the "purity" of radically democratic practices. They do not assume that equality exists among members of the group just by saying it does. Rather, they see decision-making as a place to work through inequalities that are informal, unacknowledged, and pervasive.

This is not to say that activists today have prefiguration all worked out. We have emphasized the tension at the heart of prefigurative politics that centers on audience. Do you model an alternative only to those within the movement or also to those outside the movement? Along these lines, Jasper (2004) identifies one of the dilemmas that all movement groups face as the tension between "reaching out and reaching in." To what extent to you put your energies into maintaining the solidarity and commitment of people in the movement and to what extent do you strive to make the movement appealing to people outside it?

Certainly, you try to do both, but in some contexts, the latter may be difficult. Radical pacifists in the 1940s, for example, knew that they had little chance of attracting a mass following. The most they could hope to do was to keep the practice of radical democracy alive within their own small circles. Even so, some pacifists worried that

the focus on the internal life of the organization might blind them to possibilities for connecting with people outside the movement. In other words, they may have given up too quickly on opportunities to speak to a larger audience.

Activists today, as we have noted, put a great deal of energy into making the decision-making practices they use accessible to all members of the group. However, they do not talk much about how the insights they have learned might be translated to people and organizations outside the movement. In some cases, this is because activists' lives are led mainly in activist circles; in others, it reflects skepticism that people outside movement circles would be open to those insights. Still, the popularity of participatory styles of decision-making across diverse institutions suggests that activist models of egalitarian decision-making and the broader political visions they prefigure might gain more of a hearing than activists assume. Longtime pacifist activist Bill Moyer often argued that if you had five people involved in developing an alternative institution, one of those five people should have the job solely of spreading the idea of the alternative institution (Cornell, 2011).

How to spread the idea of radical democracy is undoubtedly a challenge. However, it is a challenge that merits activists' energies.

Notes

i) Hoban's interviewees called themselves 'organizers' rather than 'activists.' They did so to counter the image of activism as protesting. They emphasize instead the work of planning actions and marches, coordinating coalition work, working with participants to build an agenda, and so on.

ii) To protect the identity of study participants, all names used throughout this paper are pseudonyms.

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