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# ‘Goldman-Sachs doesn’t care if you raise chicken’: The challenges of resistant prefiguration

Laura Naegler

## **Abstract:**

This article addresses debates in the ‘post-Occupy movement’ over the resistant potential of prefigurative politics, and asks how prefiguration can be conceptualized as resistance in relation to activists’ understanding of politics, power and social change. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with activists in New York City, it looks at anarchist politics after Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Here, the absence of spectacular moments of confrontation and the removal of OWS’s space of mobilization and organizing challenged activists to adjust their prefigurative politics to the shifting spaces post-Occupy. This paper advances our understanding of prefigurative politics by conceptualizing prefiguration as resistance in consideration of the elements of ‘intent’, ‘recognition’, ‘opposition/confrontation’ and ‘creation’. Following this, it introduces the ‘logic of subtraction’ as a concept to understand the resistant potential of prefiguration. Here, I argue that rather than being in an antagonistic relationship with dominant power, resistant prefiguration aims for the creation of alternatives while subtracting power from the state, capital or any other external authority in order to render it obsolete. This understanding allows for a nuanced consideration of the proactive and creative potential of prefiguration, as well as of the difficulties of prefigurative practices in shifting movement spaces.

**Keywords:** prefigurative politics, post-Occupy movement, Occupy Wall Street, resistance, anarchism

## **Introduction**

The post-crisis movements of the early 2010s have been widely perceived as a revival of anarchist politics – one that had not happened in a comparable way since the 1990s’ alter-globalization movement. In the USA, Occupy Wall Street (OWS), expressed people’s frustration and growing disillusionment with the existing political system and their desire for alternatives (Harvey, 2012; Winlow et al., 2015), and re-introduced a wide range of political practices with a long tradition in autonomous and anarchist(-inspired) movements. This included non-hierarchical and direct democratic organizing and the establishment of alternative social networks based on

mutual aid (Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012). Activists in the movement widely engaged in these (and other) kinds of prefigurative politics: political practices that consciously attempt to create a desired future world in the present – the ‘new society in the shell of the old’ (Breines, 1989, p. 52) – instead of postponing revolutionary transformation to a diffuse moment in the future.

In November 2012, the encampments in Zuccotti Park were evicted and OWS was forcibly broken up by a massive police operation. Nonetheless, post-OWS, activists in New York City continued to engage in anarchist(-inspired) politics, direct action, and everyday prefigurative experiments. However, the time after the occupation constituted a specific moment of reflection, reconsideration of political tactics and principles, and reconfiguration of movement structures. The movement’s loss of Zuccotti Park as the physical space of mobilization and organizing meant that activists were obliged to create new organizing structures in NYC, and had to adopt to ‘shifting spaces’ post-Occupy. In the absence of spectacular moments of confrontation, many activists engaged in the politics of everyday life: ‘classical’ prefigurative experiments such as activist centers, urban farms, or alternative modes of living and organizing everyday life based on ostensibly similar forms of mutual aid to those practiced by OWS. Other activists emphasized the risks of prefigurative endeavors, such as an orientation towards ‘exclusive’ and narrow micro- and lifestyle politics (Portland-Stacer, 2013). At best, these activists saw this type of micro-politics as ineffective in achieving long-term strategies of social change and abolishing capitalist relations; as one activist, told me, ‘Goldman Sachs doesn’t care if you raise chicken’ (interview, March 2015).<sup>1</sup> At worst, they saw such endeavors as opening the way for co-optation and incorporation into the very consumer paradigms they mean to oppose. In between these positions, many activists acknowledged both the risks and the necessity of ‘everyday’ prefiguration for

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<sup>1</sup> The slogan originally stems from political scientist Jodi Dean.

transformative political change. In these debates, activists did not only engage with the opportunities and limitations of prefigurative politics, but with questions of its resistant potentials and effectiveness in achieving social change.

Here, I engage with the challenges and opportunities of prefigurative politics within the shifting spaces after OWS. My argument is based on ethnographic research with New York City's 'post-Occupy' movement; activists who had been particularly engaged in implementing anarchist politics during the occupation, and who continued this political organizing after the physical space of mobilization in Zuccotti Park was removed. Using empirical data from participant observations and interviews with activists, I assess the role of prefigurative politics in achieving social change and reflect on how the political and theoretical contradictions play out in the movement's 'on-the-ground' politics. Specifically, I ask whether prefigurative politics can constitute a politics of 'resistance' and, if so, how this resistant potential can be conceptualized in relation to activists' understanding of politics, power, and social change.

In order to make my argument, I begin by placing prefigurative politics within theories of resistance. Drawing on the theoretical framework elaborated in this section, I will analyse prefiguration under the themes of 'recognition', 'opposition/confrontation', and 'creation'. In the following section, I present data from my fieldwork with the post-Occupy movement, showing how activists address prefigurative politics as resistance through their own practice and ideas. I will then discuss how my research shows that the notion of prefiguration as resistance calls into question the idea that resistance always constitutes an act of opposition (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). Yet, rather than understanding resistance in an antagonistic relationship with dominant power, prefiguration follows a 'logic of subtraction', in which the resistant potential is found in the creation of alternatives outside of dominant power that eventually render it obsolete.

By bringing these two understandings together, I advance our conceptualization of prefiguration as resistance to allow for a nuanced consideration of its proactive and creative potential (Sørensen, 2016; Vinthagen, 2007). However, at the same time, the notion of prefigurative resistance challenges activists to negotiate the extent to which they seek recognition from dominant power and engage in resistance both as transgression and confrontation.

### **Conceptualizing resistant prefiguration**

When the activists of OWS created the encampments in New York's Financial District in 2011, they occupied public space without permission from the authorities and created structures of everyday and political organizing. Rejecting the legitimacy of existing political institutions – expressed also in OWS's (much criticized) refusal to 'issue demands' to the state – activists created alternatives such as direct democratic and consensus-based organization models (Graeber, 2011, 2013). The kitchen, tents, clinics, media center, and library that activists built in Zuccotti Park served a purpose beyond the provision of food, shelter, health care, or education. They were expressions of the movement's desire to create alternatives to the status quo; by offering egalitarian social relationships based on mutual aid. Echoing the strong impact of anarchist politics on OWS, the movement's politics were those of direct action: autonomous action that does not appeal or take recourse to any external authority (Franks, 2003); 'acting as if one is already free' and proceeding, as far as possible, 'as if the state does not exist' (Graeber, 2009, p. 2013). These conscious attempts to create an autonomous, anti-authoritarian, non-hierarchical society in the middle of the Financial District, entailing the hope that it would eventually exceed the confines of Zuccotti Park, were distinctly prefigurative (Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012).

The term prefiguration, or prefigurative politics,<sup>2</sup> first emerged in the context of the New Left in the United States, and played, in various embodiments, a significant role in New(est) Social Movements (e.g. Day, 2005; Breines, 1989; Epstein, 1991). The term describes the endeavor to build, if only temporarily and on a limited scale, ‘utopic’ alternative social relationships in the present. To engage in prefiguration means ‘to anticipate or enact some feature of an ‘alternative world’ in the present, as though it has already been achieved’, or to engage in modes of organization that prefigure how they ‘might normally be performed in the future’ (Yates, 2014, p. 3-4). This can happen through building ‘movement alternatives’, ‘institutions’, or ‘community’, or by the creation of egalitarian, non-hierarchical ‘counter-institutions’, as in the notion of ‘dual power’ central to many New Social Movements (Schantz and Williams, 2014). Here, the creation of counter-institutions is understood as a necessary and complementary political practice to mobilization and confrontational protest (Breines, 1989; Epstein, 1991; Yates, 2014). Counter-institutions’, if viable, would gain influence and eventually lead to the ‘withering away’ and replacement of dominant institutions and power structures (Schantz and Williams, 2014, p. 128). Furthermore, prefiguration can be understood as a dynamic underlying protest and political mobilization (Yates, 2014) based on the equivalence of means and ends. The means-ends-equivalence, a further key element in prefigurative politics, describes the belief that any political tool has to be in accordance with the aims and goals of those enacting it; in rejection of political consequentialism or revolutionary vanguardism (Springer, 2014). This translates a politics of New(est) Social Movements less concerned with a ‘grand’ moment of revolution, or ‘affecting the current forms of domination and exploitation’ but rather ‘with creating alternatives

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<sup>2</sup> In the following, both terms are used interchangeably.

to the forms themselves' (Day, 2005, p. 19). This is also expressed in an orientation towards the 'politics of everyday life and individual transformation' (Melucci, 1989, p. 5).

Prefigurative politics constituted a main tendency within OWS, even seen as defining the movement (Graeber, 2011; Smucker, 2017). Similar to previous anarchist-inspired movements (Graeber, 2002), the prefigurative logic underlying political mobilization, direct action and decentralized organization turned these into expressions of the movement's ideology. OWS's engagement in prefigurative politics enacted the position that desired future structures and social relationships have to be created in the present (Franks, 2003; Springer, 2014) and have to be lived on the micro-level prior to any macro-level transformation. The aim is to eventually overcome the totality of current conditions and dominant power: those engaging in prefigurative politics 'actively seek alternatives that provide a point of alterity or exteriority that calls the limits of the existing order into question' (Springer, 2014, p. 3) through which alternatives can emerge that otherwise could not be imagined. Creating these alternatives also aims to demonstrate that this point of exteriority to dominant power already exists in the present, making overcoming its totality possible (Ferrell, 2001). Here, following the notion that the ideology of anarchist movements is expressed in prefigurative modes of organization and political mobilization (Graeber, 2002), prefigurative politics entail what can be understood as an 'ideological separation' from dominant power. This is achieved by creating situations and spaces based on egalitarian relationships; in which the validation of dominant power is not meant to be given. Without this ideological separation, the means-ends-equivalence cannot be achieved without significantly compromising its underlying principles. An equivalence of means and ends can only be achieved when the structures of inequality permeating the dominant order are – even if only temporarily -- displaced (Ince, 2012).

Prefigurative politics, however, are hardly ever fully autonomous as there is currently no ‘outside’ of dominant power and capitalist relations (Duncombe, 2007, p. 172). Acting ‘as if the state does not exist’ has its limits, as the state does still exist. In OWS, activists attempted to create an alternative utopian world in the middle of Manhattan’s Financial District, but were threatened by authorities from the first day of the occupation, under constant surveillance, and eventually forcefully evicted. Here, prefigurative politics still resulted in confrontation with the ‘structures of power’ (Graeber, 2013, 2009). As Graeber argues, these structures of power and the threat of force which is the underlying ‘reality’ in hierarchically organized societies are mostly concealed by cultural mediations that make the social world appear free from state violence (e.g. that authorities prevent rather than are constituted by violence). In moments of confrontation, if the legitimacy of these structures of power is threatened and/or refused, the threat of violence materializes -- as was the case in OWS, resulting in the eviction of the encampments.

The period immediately after OWS saw a continuation of the prefigurative politics developed during the occupation and a restructuring of movement structures. OWS had changed pre-existing, and created new, networks in the city’s activist community; but some of these new groups and collectives, affected by burn-out and frustration, soon broke up or dissolved. For activists, the uprisings were a source of inspiration and hope, but also of collective trauma resulting from police brutality and feelings of disappointment and powerlessness. With the eviction, the movement lost a central, symbolic as well as physical (Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012), space of mobilization and organizing. The removal of this prefigurative space resulted in the necessity to create new prefigurative spaces if the movement wanted to persist. Within these shifting movement structures, activists’ orientation towards prefigurative politics found expression in practices of mutual aid, self-organization, and alternative modes of living through



which activists aimed to continue the direct democratic and prefigurative principles enacted in Zuccotti Park. In addition, these prefigurative endeavors were framed and intended as ‘resistance’ by activists themselves: targeted, like OWS, at fighting economic and social inequality in its many and everyday manifestations.

While the prefigurative space of OWS existed in open confrontation with the structures of power, prefigurative politics post-Occupy were not, or at least not to the same extent, confrontational. After the eviction, OWS soon disappeared from international headlines and attention ceased to focus on the movement. Post-Occupy, prefigurative experiments were overwhelmingly formally legal and widely unrecognized by or at least under the radar of the authorities. Here, the question emerges if prefigurative politics can be defined as resistance, outside of spectacular and confrontational ‘movement moments’ (Smucker, 2017) such as OWS. This question is a site of a fundamental tension in our understanding of oppositional action and its potential to achieve the aims of social change.

This is because resistance is commonly defined as an action or practice enacted in opposition to a certain order, situation, condition or behavior (Hollander and Einwohner, 2014; Johansson and Vinthagen, 2014). ‘Opposition’ is seen as a core element: the notion of resistance as ‘acting against’ is inherent in the term’s etymological roots (Hayward and Schuilenburg, 2014) and results in the concept being framed as mostly reactive (Vinthagen and Lilja, 2007). However, as Hayward and Schuilenburg (2014) rightly point out, there are limitations to conceptualizing resistance in purely negative terms: ‘to resist’ also means ‘to create’ (p. 27). Resistance holds positive imaginative capacities that turn it into a future-oriented and transformative force. Concepts of creative or ‘constructive resistance’ (Sørensen, 2016; Vinthagen, 2007) thus emphasize the proactive element that comes with the creation of alternatives. These, built or

carried out independently of structures of dominant power (Sørensen, 2016, p. 57), either ‘facilitate resistance’ or create new, resistant subjectivities (Vinthagen, 2007, p. 13). In this understanding, resistance is not limited to practices of contentiousness and confrontation but can ‘transcend the whole phenomenon of being-against-something’ (p. 12).

The concept of constructive resistance allows for an understanding of prefiguration as a means to facilitate more conventional forms of opposition. Prefigurative spatial and organizational practices can create the physical and/or conceptual safe spaces in which organizing and processes of imagining alternatives take place and which allow for the creation of networks of affinity and solidarity (Clough, 2012; Yates, 2014). However, the question remains whether or not prefiguration is resistant in itself and how, as in the concept of constructive resistance, its resistant potential can be located in the creation of alternatives outside of the reach of dominant power.

Similarly to the concept of constructive resistance, the aim of prefigurative politics is to replace the ‘undesired’ with an alternative, turning this alternative into ‘the norm, thus resulting in a complete collapse of the previous dominant structure’ (Sørensen, 2016, p. 58-59). Here, resistance moves from being purely reactive to being creative. Through prefigurative politics, activists create spaces in and through which collective egalitarian power relationships are built, realized and lived. This process is framed in terms of creating a certain form of power that is ‘power-to’ rather than ‘power-over’: it is not ‘a form of power held by a subject and institution, over another subject or institution’ (Sitrin, 2012, p. 103), such as the state (Holdren and Touza, 2005). Rather, it is ‘power as potential and capacity’ (Sitrin, 2012, p. 102). In this understanding, power is inherently social, ‘something that one creates, uses, and shares’ (Holloway 2002, p.

102). It is rooted in ‘mutual action’: collective action that does not only enable people but binds them together in a common purpose (Arendt, 1970, cited in Allen, 2003, p. 53).

Recognition is seen as a further important yet controversial element in conceptualizing resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Johansson and Vinthagen, 2014; Hayward and Schuilenburg, 2014). Disagreement exists about whether oppositional activity can only be defined as resistance if it is recognized as such externally. This includes not only the targets it is directed at but also the more loosely defined group of ‘observers’; the wider public, mediated discourses, uninvolved bystanders, or academics (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004, p. 541). This recognition is most likely to occur in intentionally visible forms of resistance such as organized protest and contentious politics (McAdam et al., 2001). However, there are acts of resistance that lack recognition and visibility: for example, subtle forms of individual subversion and everyday acts of resistance (Scott, 1987), often concealed to prevent repression and retaliation for the structurally powerless. The existence of such acts of resistance that, although likely unnoticed by targets, constitute subaltern practices that might undermine power and domination (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2014, p. 2), challenge the assumption that recognition is decisive in defining resistance. This understanding emphasizes the role of *intent* in resistance, of the conscious decision to resist the exercise of power which would turn an act of opposition into resistance independent of its success or outcome (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). Consciousness and intent alone, however, do not seem sufficient to define an act as resistant, whilst considering ‘intent’ to be a defining element of resistance is itself controversial, as this would only make acts of opposition motivated by a concrete political consciousness ‘count’ as such (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2014).

The element of recognition is complex in the prefigurative politics of anarchist movements, where activists use strategies of ‘renouncing the desire for representation, recognition and integration within the currently hegemonic order’ (Day, 2005, p. 84); challenging theories of radical democracy (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe (1985)) that consider (mass) representation and engagement with dominant power both necessary and ‘desirable’ for social transformations (Day, 2005, p. 75). However, while prefigurative politics aim to prevent integration into the dominant social order by being recognized by those in power, the question is if activists can engage in resistance while dismissing the recognition resulting in and from confrontation. As argued by Hollander and Einwohner (2004), the very notion of resistance itself seems to require the existence of an opposite force toward which it is targeted, that recognizes the oppositional act as such; thus having both forces entering into a moment of confrontation. In this understanding, resistance has to be transgressive – crossing the threshold between what is legal and illegal, or (culturally/socially) accepted and unaccepted within the current dominant order and at least holding the possibility for confrontation – to count as such (Hayward and Schuilenburg, 2014). As Sørensen (2016) points, out, the moment of confrontation, and the response by those who are resisted, can be understood as an indicator of effectiveness (Sørensen, 2016); as in OWS, the aggressive reaction of authorities in itself indicated that there was something about the movement that mattered (Harvey, 2012).

Understanding the potential of prefiguration as resistance thus has to consider the importance of ‘intent’, ‘recognition’, ‘opposition/confrontation’, and ‘creation’. This raises several questions. First, can prefiguration be defined as resistance if it seeks to exist outside of dominant structures and when opposition – confronting the status quo and/or transgressing a certain set of rules or order – is not a given? Does the resistant potential emerge through the

creation of viable alternatives outside of dominant power in the ‘here and now’ (Springer, 2012), and if so, how can this resistance be conceptualized? Second, if this is the aim of resistant prefiguration, how do activists react to the challenge that the physical and conceptual spaces that have been created post-Occupy, and which are necessarily unstable and dependent, are not entirely free from state control, capitalist relations, structural inequalities, or internalized hierarchical behaviors? Third, can activists engage in resistant prefiguration without seeking or achieving recognition from dominant power? Or rather, if resistance is relational and entangled with power (Vinthagen and Lilja, 2007), do they have to enter into confrontation with ‘structures of power’ (Graeber, 2013)? In the following, I discuss how activists address these questions through their own practice and ideas, drawing on my ethnographic research with activists in the ‘post-Occupy movement’ in NYC.

## **Method**

The ethnographic research upon which this article is based was conducted in two fieldwork phases in NYC: a first period between May 2013 and October 2014, and a second period from February to March 2015. In the context of this research, I use the term ‘post-Occupy movement’ to refer to a certain set of decentralized multi-layered networks and non-formal organizing structures. My study focused on the political activity of anarchist activists, many of whom (self-identified and/or externally defined) were part of an anarchist ‘core group’ of organizers in OWS, numbering around 500 people (as estimated by activists). These anarchist politics are not representative of all current activism in NYC (neither pre-, during, nor post-Occupy); neither can their networks and structures be understood fully as a social movement, despite sharing the non-contentious character (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; Sitrin, 2012) and orientation towards the ‘leaderless’ structures (Jasper, 2014) of autonomous movements. Rather, these activists had been

particularly engaged in implementing anarchist(-inspired) politics during the occupation, and influential in shaping the movement's organizing structures and its internal and external (media) representation; and continued political organizing and implementation of anarchist(-inspired) politics after OWS.

During fieldwork, I worked with a variety of groups and collectives, including local community organizing, anti-gentrification collectives, radical pedagogy projects, and 'creative activism'. I engaged in discussions, meetings, events, and workshops on an almost daily basis, and participated in protests, marches, and actions. Alongside engagement in informal conversations, debates, and exchange, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 28 activists that extended from discussions among activists. In addition, I collected material such as zines, mission statements, pamphlets, and articles in movement-specific outlets.

My research followed a critical ethnographic approach (Marcus and Fischer 1999; Thomas, 1998) that emphasizes the researcher's active involvement in processes of meaning-making by engaging with, and sharing at least partially, experiences, actions, emotions and symbolic codes (Young, 2011). This approach acknowledges the political nature of ethnographic research and emphasizes the reflexivity of the researcher-researched relationship (Conquergood 1991; Ferrell 2012). This ethnographic approach allowed an exploration of activists' reflections within changing movement spaces after OWS and an understanding of the dialogical, interactive, and experimental nature of anarchist(-inspired) politics (Fernandez 2009) and activists' theorizing that emerges from, and results in, concrete political practice. The ethnography further drew strongly on an understanding of social movements as 'knowledge producers' (Casas-Cortés et al., 2013, p. 199) who – in their everyday activities as well as in movement moments such as OWS – engage in a large variety of knowledge practices. This includes workshops, meetings,

discussions, reading groups, research activities and the production and distribution of the movements' publications. In addition, engagement in direct action, and direct democratic processes constitute examples of 'political theory production' (Casas-Cortés et al., 2013, p. 201), combining theory and the 'reflexive refinement' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014, p. 15) of political practice in collective processes of knowledge production. In order to negotiate the insider-outsider position in critical ethnographic research with social movement in a way that is not exploitative of knowledge produced by activists (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014) I collaborated with activist collectives and I participated in research activities such as observation and note-taking during events and meetings, using my ethnographic data collection to participate in collective reflection and analysis. I facilitated two group interviews which were simultaneously reflections on collectives' practices. This allowed me to actively contribute to a social movement's collective knowledge production (Juris, 2007; Russell, 2015) while at the same time allowing for collective reflection on research practice and the researcher-researched relationship.

### **Prefigurative politics 'post-Occupy'**

During OWS, a gallery space located in the fourth floor of a plain, unobtrusive building in the Financial District turned into one of the movement's central hubs. A few blocks away from Wall Street, it provided a space for gathering and organizing, and a place of retreat for the activists. Many of the early organizing meetings prior to the occupation took place here. After 2012, the intensity of use decreased but it continued to be an important activist space. However, despite its prominence and status in activist circles, the actual place, with an unmarked buzzer and no sign on the door, remained easy to oversee for those without knowledge of its existence. This somewhat-hidden existence was intentional. Eileen,<sup>3</sup> one of the activists involved in running the

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

space, explained at a meeting in October 2013 that the aim had never been to get ‘as many people as possible’ to visit. Rather, it functions primarily through relationships. She explained, ‘you have to be told by others that this place exists. You have to be forwarded to it, you have to have relationships that connect you to this place. And this means there has to be trust’. This idea of running the space based on trustful relationships was seen as providing a counter-weight to the commodification of every aspect of everyday life. Eileen continued: ‘capitalism tells you to not trust anyone. But we are not all wolves. Not everything is capitalized. There is hope. People have non-capitalized relationships. There are still spaces left which are not capitalized’.

After OWS emphasized the importance of ‘space’ for radical movements (Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012), maintaining the activist spaces that emerged alongside the occupation and creating new spaces, was an important task for activists post-Occupy. These prefigurative spaces were important to the movement as meeting spaces; after the loss of Zuccotti Park as a center, the movement required spaces for everyday and political organization, and the exchange of ideas and knowledge (Poletta, 1999). They were also central to developing and maintaining alternative social relationships (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006): the trustful ‘non-capitalized’ relationships described by Eileen, and the formation of dense social networks based on trust and affinity (Clough, 2006), which often exceeded the mere physical existence of activist or movement spaces such as the encampments in Zuccotti Park.

Prefiguring alternative social relationships and non-hierarchical, direct democratic structures of participation requires activists to engage in a wide array of daily practices that ensured an equivalence of means and ends. Prefigurative spaces have to be inclusive to a broad population of diverse actors (Polletta, 1999), as only this provides the basis for mass social movements. Everyone must have the right to participate in decision making, regardless of status,



gender, sexuality, age, race, class, physical ability, and so on (Springer, 2011) to ensure they are prefigurative of a broader practice of political process and direct democratic decision-making. One practice aimed at achieving both openness and security, and a commitment to reflexivity (Clough, 2012) was the application of ‘safer space policies’: a set of rules of conduct for those participating in activist spaces. This included, for example, the use of preferred gender pronouns, the use of trigger warnings, not assuming ‘anyone’s gender identity, sexual preference, survivor status, economic status, background, health’, and the awareness ‘of your prejudices and privileges and the space you take up’ (field notes, January 2014). While at first sight, rules – the transgression of which leads to exclusion from those spaces – seem contradictory of the notion of anti-authoritarian politics, their aim is to make activist spaces safe for marginalized people suffering from discrimination in their everyday lives.

After OWS, the gallery in the Financial District continued to offer training, legal clinics, and group therapy sessions to help people deal with trauma resulting from police brutality during the occupation and eviction. This maintained an emphasis on prefiguring alternative social relationships, engaging in mutual aid, self-organizing and ‘care’ that was strongly present in NYC’s post-Occupy movement. Within the activist community, it was common for people to grow their own food or keep rabbits or chicken in community gardens or in the backyards of their (communal) homes, sharing oversupply with neighbors. People organized non-commercial childcare, or created collectives that offered alternative ways of conflict management for people dealing with drug issues or domestic violence.

These acts of mutual aid were seen as situated within a long tradition in anarchist politics, for example found in early formulations by Kropotkin (1892/2006). Jessica, an anarchist heavily involved in OWS, made a strict distinction between ‘charity’ and mutual aid. Charity, which she

strongly objected to, was based on the capitalist state holding the monopoly over care activities (interview, March 2013). Mutual aid rejects this monopoly, but is an act of solidarity among people striving for a self-organized, egalitarian society – and who were prefiguring a society without the state and private property by taking matters of self-sustenance into their own hands, and by ‘stepping out’ of the commodification of every aspect of living.

These aspects – prefigurative spaces based on trustful, non-commodified relationships and the engagement in mutual aid as a principle organizing everyday life – were echoed in activists’ understandings of resistance. Celine, who was involved in organizing against gentrification and student debt, argued that resistance is ‘not the grand moment’, but ‘the question of how do you live your life’, (interview, March 2015). Mike, an artist-activist explicitly agreed with Celine that resistance is found in everyday choices but at the same time emphasized the risk of co-optation and voiced a skepticism about the resistant potential of lifestyle politics:

There are hipster-ish ways of doing politics of life, too. Cooperatives, chickens, whatever, that whole shit can sort of be resistance in a certain frame, but also is totally complicit with the lifestyle idea of gentrifying white people, or not even white, whoever, it’s also about class privilege. So the resistance depends on the context, and also how the people doing it frame it and how the people seeing it and engaging with it define it. (Interview, March 2015)

The ‘hipster-ish ways’ refer to young middle and upper-class people drawn to gentrifying neighborhoods in cities like NYC in search of an alternative bohemian lifestyle. These ‘hipsters’ are characterized by a widely a-political fascination for the ‘authentic’ and ‘local’. This can result in an engagement, for example, in ‘organic’ food production as described by Mike that, driven by a certain ecological consciousness, ‘imitates’ (Hayward and Schuilenburg, 2014, p. 32) prefigurative politics. However, the glorification of the ‘authentic’ and ‘local’ in absence of an

awareness of class dimensions and potentially harmful consequences makes hipsters complicit in their role as pioneers of gentrification (Zukin, 2011).

But these politics of life did not only become commodified. Squatter activists pointed out the forceful eviction of self-organized community gardens in the Lower East Side up to the 1990s. Here, small livestock held by local residents in the gardens, formerly under the radar, was declared a health risk by authorities when gentrification proved profitable. Eventually, this provided justification for eviction; rendering acts previously non-confrontational and unrecognized as transgressions of regulations (field notes, August 2013).

Talking about activists' spaces and their safer space policies, Celine emphasized the importance of acknowledging 'everyday' resistant acts that happen on the micro-scale, irrespective of outside recognition. She refused the assumption that an act is only resistance when recognized as such, highlighting the problem of who is visible and whose assessment 'counts' in the first place:

I don't think it's anyone's position to label or judge what another person's resistance is. You never know where a person is resisting, what resistance is to them. [...] Something that you might not even recognize is a huge act of resistance for somebody else. (Interview, March 2015)

Celine illustrated her point using the example of a woman who experienced abuse and assault, and who speaks in an activist meeting full of men. This act of speaking can be both a tremendous challenge and resistance to patriarchal structures but is likely to go unnoticed by people unaware of the women's history and not be recognized as resistance. In cases like this, prefigurative practices that allow for a commitment to reflexivity and providing security, such as the safe space

policies, can create awareness and external recognition of her act of resistance. This, in turn, can lead to an open challenge of structures of domination that are taken for granted.

In discussions (group interview, March 2014), Jessica illustrated the productive element that derives from creating autonomous practice through mutual aid and direct action:

I would define resistance as the building of alternative power relationships, egalitarian power relationships, that are not in opposition to, but separate from the state.

Any act carried out in opposition to state power is ‘protest’, she continued, not resistance. ‘Real’ resistance is ‘maybe formed in opposition to [dominant power]. But then it seeks to overcome it, or becomes something else.’ This resistance does not only delegitimize existing power relationships by acting ‘as if’ (Graeber, 2009) the political, social and/or economic structures perceived as unjust and harmful have already been invalidated; it creates new power – ‘just a different kind of power’.

Simon, in response to Jessica, argued that this notion of finding resistance in the enactment of alternative social relations in the ‘here and now’ (Springer, 2012) means moving from ‘a logic of antagonism to a logic of subtraction’. Simon saw this ‘logic of antagonism’ as evident in conventional protest: by ‘making demands’, seeking recognition and engaging with structures of representative politics, these legitimize existing power relations rather than meaningfully transforming them. Effective resistance, as both he and Jessica agreed, has to ‘take away’ power from authority by rejecting its legitimacy and at the same time enacting alternatives, thus making authority obsolete.

In achieving these aims, prefigurative politics post-Occupy faced several challenges. In late 2013, activists held a range of meetings aimed at starting autonomous anti-gentrification

work and eviction defenses in NYC. In one of these meetings, participants raised the idea of organizing workshops on gentrification to inform and mobilize larger numbers of people. Deciding *where* these workshops should take place soon became a concern. While the ‘usual’ activist spaces, such as the gallery in the Financial District, could easily be engaged, the problem was, as Jessica put it, ‘that these are the kind of places only radical people go’ – which were not necessarily the same as those most affected by displacement and eviction. Others pointed out that the experiences of organizing during and after OWS had shown that by exclusively using activist spaces, activists don’t ‘open up’ to community organizing and allow for the diversity necessary for a broad movement. ‘Going to these places,’ Richard, a homeless rights activist, put it, ‘means preaching to the believers.’ Involving ‘the same people’ over and over again risks insular discussions among like-minded people, without engaging people outside of radical circles.

In addition, it showed that the risk of the – unwilling and/or unwitting – reproduction of structures of domination in daily practices of organizing is not erased by the mere commitment to prefigurative principles. In the case of the gallery and its objective to work via pre-existing networks of affinity and non-capitalized relationships of trust, Eileen’s statement was, in part, a response to a tense discussion around the question of the exclusivity and inclusivity of the space. In the meeting, some people voiced their critique of the internal hierarchy they felt was strongly operative in the room: those who had been involved for longer than others talking over other people, interrupting them, or dominating the discussions. Eileen continued by stating that it was necessary to acknowledge that even collective spaces have a history that cannot be ignored: ‘You don’t just walk in there, and immediately have a clue of how everything is working. You cannot ignore history and existing relationships just to keep the process going.’

The objective of creating an atmosphere of mutual trust has to be situated in the context of a radical movement that is under constant surveillance by the police, and had been subject to police infiltration in the past and most likely is in the present. Still, the over-emphasis on exclusivity – only gaining access when already involved to a certain degree in an activist community and having proved oneself trustworthy – can result in the creation of internal hierarchies based on knowledge, competence, or status in activist circles. This highlights the difficulty of constantly negotiating the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity in prefigurative spaces. Safe space policies, for example, show that, by necessity, environments dedicated to inclusivity and diversity have to be exclusive to the extent they require participants to abide by a code of conduct. There is a risk that codes of conduct are extended towards, for example, activists' code, patterns of speech, dress codes and so on, thus appearing 'closed' and alienating people outside of activist circles (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). This, as Celine put it, easily results in 'ecosystems of resistance' (interview, March 2015): closed, self-sustaining systems carefully preventing any outside influences in order to retain their internal stability.

## **Discussion**

Many elements of the prefigurative politics of OWS, such as the refusal to issue demands (Graeber, 2011), direct democratic principles in organization and the aim to create an alternative to the current political and economic system, were carried into the shifting spaces of the post-Occupy movement. Activists created and maintained prefigurative spaces that allowed for alternative modes of living and organizing everyday life, such as activist spaces or networks of self-organization and mutual aid. These prefigurative practices are aimed not only at helping each other to meet material needs, but at creating social bonds that are not 'capitalized' and subsumed by the logic of economic efficiency. By giving activists physical and/or conceptual safe spaces,

these prefigurative endeavors enabled direct democratic organizing outside of representative politics (e.g. autonomous anti-eviction work). Additionally, prefigurative practices post-Occupy were framed and intended as ‘resistance’ by activists.

The actors’ intent to consciously oppose the exercise of dominant power, and with this the social and economic inequality that derives from it, was seen by activists as important in defining an act of prefiguration as resistance. Intent, when bound to a political consciousness, is seen as distinguishing resistant prefigurative practices from the commodified lifestyle decisions of ‘hipsters’ and ‘gentrifying people’. Precisely this juxtaposition by activists, however, shows the limitations of the element of ‘intent’ in defining resistant prefiguration. If it is assumed that prefiguration is resistance simply when the actors intends it as such – while, as argued by Celine in my fieldwork, external judgments of what ‘counts’ as resistance are refused -- this would apply to those engaged in the highly commodified lifestyle practices strongly opposed by activists. Eventually, defining prefigurative practices as resistance based on ‘intent’ does not allow for a distinction (as, for example, also the ‘hipsters’ could insist their search for the ‘authentic’ resists mainstream culture).

For activists in the post-Occupy movement, the resistant potential of prefigurative politics was further seen as located in the creation of alternatives outside of dominant power. This is in contrast to the common understanding of resistance as caught in a cyclical relationship with power (Hollander and Einwohner, 2014), which, in the perspective of anarchist politics, eventually reproduces power instead of dissolving it. Activists make a clear distinction between resistance and ‘protest’ that relies on the ‘logic of antagonism’ and, consequently, recognition. In this anarchist reading of radical politics characteristic to the post-Occupy movement, ‘real’ resistance refuses to recognize, and to be recognized by, authority, as this is seen as a

legitimization of the dominant power's grasp on actors' endeavors (Day, 2005). Rather, resistant prefiguration relies on a 'logic of subtraction': it is seen as resistance by activists precisely *because* it is not antagonistic, but as creative resistance that transcends the 'phenomenon of being-against-something' (Vinthagen, 2007, p. 12). In the process of subtracting power from the state, capital or any other external authority, the aim is to render the dominant power obsolete and replace it with 'a different kind of power', or 'power-to'. This power-to manifests in people's growing ability to self-organize everyday and political life without having to resort to the capitalist market or representational politics, the state and its institutions.

However, as the fieldwork showed, the element of recognition in resistance cannot be seen as restricted to recognition by its targets. For example, activists pointed out that the prefigurative spaces provided the preconditions under which resistance can be recognized. Prefigurative practices that allow for a commitment to reflexivity and provide safety, such as the safer space policies in activist centers, can create awareness and external recognition of acts of resistance that would otherwise go unnoticed. This includes 'making visible' asymmetrical power relationships that obscure acts of resistance, as in the example of the woman speaking up in a male-dominated space.

In the attempt to overcome the cyclical relationship between power and resistance through prefiguration, however, a fundamental contradiction arises from the fact that the physical and conceptual spaces created by prefigurative politics are not automatically 'freed' from asymmetrical power relations or state intervention. They still exist in an antagonistic relation to the 'outside world' (Duncombe, 2007). Prefigurative practices meant to prevent the reproduction of structural inequalities in movement spaces often reveal precisely these tensions: for example,



the argument made by an activists that a woman ‘speaking up’ in an activist meeting dominated by men is an act of resistance indicates that structures of domination still operate in these spaces.

If prefigurative politics cannot be enacted in full separation from the structures of dominant power, this opens up a contradiction in seeing it as purely creative and constructive rather than oppositional resistance. Eventually, the prefigurative endeavors of the post-Occupy activists rely on a rejection of dominant power. Thus, the attempt to create ‘the new society’ in the presence of the ‘old’ can lead to confrontation with structures of power. This is not necessarily a question of legality – as Graeber (2013, p. 246) points out, whether an action is unlawful is eventually rendered irrelevant in the reaction of the structures of power. This is mirrored in how common non-violent and (ostensibly) non-confrontational prefigurative acts, for example mutual aid, are (re)defined as violations of rules and regulations. This is in particular when matters of community self-sustenance clash with questions of economic usability; as in the abovementioned case of community gardens in gentrified neighborhoods.

In moments where prefigurative politics enter into confrontation with dominant power, this often (although not exclusively) occurs precisely because the refusal of authority is recognized as such. Goldman-Sachs might, in fact, not care much if one raises chickens. However, thinking of prefiguration as resistance might necessitate assessing when and why acts are acknowledged as oppositional by those whose legitimacy is rejected in the process, as the structures of power are revealed in exactly those moments of recognition.

However, confrontation, and transgression, are less likely to be built on an equivalence of means and ends, as this imposes ethical constraints on resistant practices. Yet, prefigurative politics aim for an ideological separation from dominant power that enables the realization of egalitarian principles in the present without compromising underlying ideals and visions. Here,

the risk is that, without resolving (or accepting) the contradiction inherent in prefiguration, the reflexive practices demanded by prefigurative politics can result in an over-concern with political purity that creates isolated ‘eco-system of resistance’. In the case of the activists place in the Financial District, for example, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ were created through subtle ways of impacting access to space and imposing particular forms of conduct, based on specific forms of representation of ‘insider’ knowledge which can function as a form of domination (Kesby et al., 2007, p. 21). Here, prefigurative politics hold the risk of remaining micro-solutions and mere expressions of alternative lifestyles that lack an orientation towards the future. This, eventually, constitutes not an equivalence of means and ends, but an overemphasis on means at the expense of ends: it can be potentially divisive and exclude those outside of activist circles, which hinders the creation of a positively transformative political program based on broad collective action (Winlow et al., 2015).

## **Conclusion**

In this article, prefiguration is conceptualized as a resistant practice in consideration of the elements of intent, recognition, creation, and opposition/transgression. The analysis of resistant prefiguration is further placed in the context of shifting movement spaces post-Occupy and outside of the spectacular ‘movement moments’ (Smucker, 2017) of OWS, in which prefigurative politics existed in open confrontation with structures of power. Here, the article adds a nuance to the understanding of prefiguration as it is used in practice: as the research shows, activists in the post-Occupy movement locate the resistant potential of prefiguration predominantly in its creative and constructive dimensions. This challenges the assumption that resistance is always an act of opposition, while at the same time emphasizing the positive imaginative capacities that turn resistant prefiguration into a future-oriented and transformative force. The article introduces the

'logic of subtraction' in prefiguration, where the resistant element is found in the process of subtracting power from the state, capital or any other external authority in order to render it obsolete. This happens by creating alternatives to the status quo, as found in prefigurative practices such as alternative modes of living and organizing everyday life based on self-organization and mutual aid. The logic of subtraction in resistant prefiguration allows for clarifying what is resisted in the process of creation as it still implies an entanglement with power; thus advancing concepts of creative and constructive resistance.

This understanding of resistant prefiguration overcomes the limitations of conceptualizing resistance in purely negative terms; at the same time, it is the entanglement with power implied in the logic of subtraction that also reveals difficulties and contradictions in activist practice. Prefiguration in anarchist politics, based on the principle of the equivalence of means and ends and the refusal to recognize and to be recognized by authority, seeks to act outside dominant power. However, it is not only the challenge of negotiating the problems of prefiguration as micro-politics in the physical and conceptual spaces post-Occupy that stems from the awareness that these actions are not entirely free from state control, capitalist relations, structural inequalities, or internalized hierarchical behaviors. The understanding of resistant prefiguration as creative resistance that is still, through its logic of subtraction, entangled with and relational to dominant power, suggests that prefiguration has to, at least, hold the potential for confrontation with the structures of power to count as resistance. In other words, a co-existence of prefigurative politics and the dominant system that happens without any conflict calls into question its effectiveness in achieving transformative social change. This implies that conceptualizations of creative and constructive resistance still have to account for the element of opposition/confrontation.

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