Recent political campaigns within the mainstream and social democratic left have been billed (both by themselves and others) as ’revolutionary’. From Podemos to Bernie Sanders’ so-called ’political revolution,’ grassroots movements have mobilised the imagery and rhetoric of collective liberation, bottom-up decision-making, and opposition to the status quo. This political development, which evokes a certain reform-versus-revolution synthesis, stands in stark contrast to the operational logics – namely those of refusal, flight, and experimentation with new forms of social organisation – of autonomous and prefigurative anti-capitalist (or at least counter-neoliberal) social movements of the last two decades, from Quebec’s Maple Spring to Occupy Wall Street and beyond. In this essay, I will attempt to tease out some of the tensions as well as commonalities between these prefigurative projects, and the coordinated policy and cultural programs proposed by proponents of less horizontal forms of political organising. The first stage of this inquiry will probe the anti-power, anti-hegemonic principles that guide much of the discourse that characterises these modes of political intervention and social production. This is followed by a discussion of the limits, especially in terms of reach and mass, that are thought to undermine these prefigurative strategies. Finally, these limits will be weighed against recent calls for organised programs of political plurality based on coordinated efforts at both the cultural and policy level.

Before starting down this line of inquiry, however, I would like to introduce two terms that I will utilise throughout this paper to designate each of these political streams: project and program. The term project, in this instance, is intended to encapsulate the experimental, self-generated character of many movements of autonomy. It is intended to emphasise their common underlying goal of the active creation of alternatives. By contrast, the term program is used throughout in relation to coordinated efforts to bring these political projects into closer connection with pre-existing policy and cultural goals. The political program, in this sense, is a compound movement of social production and political organisation that reaches beyond strategies of refusal and attempts to intervene at many points throughout the socio-political landscape, whereas the project stands out as the generation and rearticulation of alternatives in practice. It will be my goal in the pages that follow to clarify this contrast while simultaneously finding points of agreement and harmony that assist in promoting negotiation and coordination between these two strategic positions.

To begin, let’s consider some of the underlying principles and characteristics of the prefigurative project. First, the prefigurative experiments of the past two decades – the global justice mobilisations of the late 1990s, the 2010 UK tuition protests, Occupy Wall Street, Hong Kong’s Umbrella Revolution, or more recently, the 2017 campus occupations and student strikes in Puerto Rico – were highly participatory mobilisations from below, often coordinated outside of bureaucratic structures, and generally including some alternative or open form of outreach and narrative framing. Additionally, in most cases these projects are spatially and/or temporally rooted, taking cues from Bey’s notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone or occupation. Generally speaking, with these movements we observe the intentional creation of alternative modes of social life outside of market relations. In the words of Holloway, these projects liberate the human ‘power to’ create from the systems that exercise ‘power over’ human creativity and freedom. The goal in this context is not to create an alternative system of power relations but rather to free human socialisation from systems of power writ large.

Moreover, in Holloway’s view, these mobilisations can – and often do – challenge capitalist hegemony by exposing and exploiting the cracks in its legitimacy. The Zapatistas, for instance, continue to operate as a social formation outside and beyond the Mexican state and the conventions of global market relations. At the same time, the Zapatistas organise oppositional actions outside of their zone of autonomy in order to strengthen the communicative dimension to their struggle. These

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1 McNally, 2006
3 Holloway, 2002.
4 The term Zapatista refers to the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), a horizontally organised peasant collective behind the Chiapas rebellion in Mexico in 1994. Beyond the original rebellion and the ongoing collective efforts within Mexico, the Zapatistas are commonly credited as a primary influence and inspiration for the Global Justice movements of the late-1990s (see, e.g. Holloway and Pelaez [Eds.], 1998).
efforts, ranging from the organisation of strike actions to the now-iconic electronic communiques of Subcomandante Marcos, expand their reach and simultaneously inspire the imaginations of activists in disparate regions and cultural contexts.

We should note as well that the proliferation of prefigurative movements has coincided, in large part, with that of social media, which stands out in its own right as a powerful tool in the evolution of public discourse. It is easy, of course, to overstate the causal relationship between social media and social movements, to stray close to a kind of blanketed technological determinism. However, as Cammaerts argues, such media present new discursive spaces for network building, platform dissemination, and performative outreach, and have become commonplace features in the repertoires of contentious action of a wide berth of prefigurative movements.

To take but one of the more salient examples, writer and activist Micah White describes the success of Occupy Wall Street at pushing its discursive platform into the mainstream conscience as owing to a form of ‘meme warfare’. According to White, the lasting influence of the movement was contingent upon a decentralised means of message generation, wherein the editors of Adbusters generated the initial idea, which was then circulated and co-opted by a multitude of activists and organisers. This more organic circulation, in White’s view, led to a greater degree of interaction from actors who built the movement to suit their particular needs, rather than requiring them to fall in line behind designated spokespeople and organisers. As White readily acknowledges, for all its affordances, such horizontalism also came with constraints, and revealed the limits of decentralised decision-making for diverse intended outcomes, such that the movement’s ability to articulate any kind of program for change was seriously hampered.

First, however, let us consider how the messaging of these examples interacts with the project of autonomous production of alternatives. Many thinkers cite the ideological and pedagogical influence that decentralised, viral communicative strategies has on other activists, ultimately conceiving their impact as one of exemplar rather than of narrative. Day, for instance, posits that the various physical actions of organising – setting up the autonomous zone, creating the counter-public, and generally prefiguring an alternative – serve an ideological function in their own right, by demonstrating an alternative to the conditions of neoliberal global capitalism. In this way, the physical and communicative activities of such projects inspires what Haiven calls the ‘radical imagination’ - that is, a collective imaginary that develops through the actions and interactions between and within movements. In the case of Occupy, the development of the radical imagination came about through the movement’s ability to self-organise, sustain a multitude of autonomous activities, and ultimately help generate a diaspora of related movements (among them Strike Debt and Occupy Sandy).

In all such cases, prefigurative projects have a markedly communicative dimension. Prefigurative actions - including the occupation of public spaces, the autonomous take-overs of productive facilities, and instances of refusal - simultaneously exist as sites of mass theatre and creation in and of commonality. These are experiments which both create real instances of new social organisation and engage the imagination in the abstract work of envisioning egalitarian futures. They are, in other words, simultaneously resistant and generative. Take, for instance, the striking visual spectacle of the so-called Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong or the telegenic occupations of foreclosed homes throughout the United States in the wake of the housing crisis. The performative force of these actions stems not just from their political motivations, but also from their literal demonstration of alternative ways of being and of organising social life.

But to what degree does this process of refusal and generation actually challenge entrenched systems of power? In contrast to the anti-power and anti-hegemony views of commentators like Holloway and Day, Srnicek and Williams question the efficacy of political projects that do not directly

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5 Cottle, 2006.
6 Cammaerts, 2015.
7 Tilly, 2008.
8 See: White, 2016.
9 See, e.g. McNally, 2006.
12 Haiven, 2014, p. 75.
intervene in the exercise of political power beyond refusal or protest\textsuperscript{13}. In their \textit{Inventing the Future}, Srnicek and Williams charge that contemporary movements have stooped to an unexacting manner of thinking and have mobilised what they deem 'folk politics.’ These folk politics according to Srnicek and Williams, are characterised by individualism, an obsession with the strategies of the past, overdetermined localist ethics, and ultimately an unwillingness to do the hard, long-term work of actively challenging structures of power. This mind-set, the argument goes, instils in the Left an expectation of immediate results and forecloses the struggle for a post-capitalist mode of social organisation. In short, so long as it remains tethered to the anvil of folk politics, the prefigurative project remains backward-facing, and succumbs to a simplistic politics of refusal rather than engaging in a proactive program of social and political change.

So, where does this leave us in terms of the potential of creating radical, egalitarian alternatives to the global capitalist order? For Wright, the solution is to be found in the unification of the radical imagination with direct opposition to dominant institutions\textsuperscript{14}. The interstitial project, for Wright, is one which simultaneously generates new potentialities at the margins while stopping short of deconstructing the structures of power which separate those temporally-limited alternatives from true egalitarian social change. The distinction here is between the world we want and the means by which we can create it, recognising the entrenched power of regressive systems that would oppose such a movement. A key first step in such a ruptural program is intervention at those sites of social reproduction that instil both a foreclosed view of alternatives and homogenise political discourse. The corporate media, mainstream educational institutions, physical and virtual workplaces, the home, and the formal halls of government are all such sites of reproduction of regressive power, sites that continually stand out as targets for democratisation, reform, and radical revision.

We might note that the flat and inclusionary ethos of the prefigurative project is, for Dean\textsuperscript{15}, one its major failings. When mobilised in social movements like Occupy, this has the effect of neutralising struggles integral to negotiating and directing social change in favour of a paradigm of inclusion. In an illustrative passage, Dean\textsuperscript{16} recounts how the crowd of Occupy were at one point faced with the option of securing a new public place en masse or of dispersing; the crowd chose the latter, electing for the pursuit of individual interests and wellbeing above that of the crowd. The voicelessness of the many-voiced thus carries the potential to hamper prefigurative projects’ abilities to intervene in the arenas of social reproduction.

In his acclaimed study of zine culture, Duncombe\textsuperscript{17} identifies and unpacks a further tendency of note – that of alterity as an end in itself. Many counter-cultural movements, according to Duncombe, self-ghettoize by willingly and enthusiastically assuming a defeatist stance even before they take action. For the zinester, the expression of alterity is the political action itself. This action, however, is nothing beyond an act of refusal, which may succeed at creating an emancipated space for a few (the zinester community, participants in Occupy), but does little to challenge power or the systems of social reproduction that reinforce it.

How then might prefigurative projects and their corresponding alternative media ‘scale up’ to such a degree that they might actually affect largescale social change? One answer is provided by Atkinson, who notes that interactivity between social media and social movements can catalyse support for political struggles (at least at the local level)\textsuperscript{18}. As such, political projects which contain a deliberate aim of building solidarity beyond their initial networks are more likely to mobilise support and to disseminate their message on a wider scale. While this is still a far cry from a coordinated program intended to challenge power directly, it does signal a method by which the projects of today constitute and maintain their own collective power.

No matter the struggle, the desperation of the instant is an enemy to the program of egalitarian social transition. As Wright puts it, ‘any plausible strategy for the fundamental emancipatory transformation of existing institutions of power […] has to have a fairly long time-horizon. There is

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\textsuperscript{13} Srnicek and Williams, 2015.
\textsuperscript{14} Wright, 2010.
\textsuperscript{15} Dean, 2012.
\textsuperscript{16} Dean, 2016.
\textsuperscript{17} Duncombe, 2008.
\textsuperscript{18} Atkinson, 2008.
simply no short-term strategy that could possibly work. Waiting for the moment of rupture rather than working to bring it about is the ultimate example of inaction. As the case of Occupy demonstrates, every moment carries with it a potential for preparation, pedagogy, and the development of collectivity, even when it lacks the salacious moment of revolutionary rupture. It is in such moments of mundanity, of calm, of defeat, or of gathering momentum that the business of program building should be done. This means building political efficacy around demands intended to liberate human life and consciousness. Such demands serve two functions. First, they give activists something around which to mobilise. After all, the political demand for something like a universal basic income is neither new nor particularly radical. It is a practical and potentially achievable cause that would have the transcendent effect of freeing time for the pursuit of creative endeavours outside of labour. Moreover, it is a cause that carries the potential to intersect alliances and bisect old grievances, without falling into the many-voiced voicelessness of movements such as Occupy Wall Street.

Ultimately, what this exploration of prefigurative projects reveals is not necessarily their inadequacy but their incompleteness. While they do much to take on one side of the revolutionary equation – that is, the creation of alternatives by way of experimenting with new social formations – they leave the other side – that is, the direct contestation of entrenched systems of consolidated power – largely untouched. This impulse toward experimentation at the expense of contestation may be variously ascribed to localism, individualism, immediacy, or more simply, dropping out.

This should not, however, serve as grounds for the automatic dismissal of such projects. To ask whether they are effective in challenging and overturning systems of power is to ask the wrong question. Instead, we should ask how their successes in creating and maintaining alternative social formations can assist in informing political programs against dominant institutions. As Haiven explains, such instances of organisation and creation serve as incubators and have developed ‘alternative modes of reproducing ourselves as social beings…’ They have, in various ways, expanded our horizons of the possible and have helped us build networks of solidarity across the globe. And, in their failures, they provide opportunity for learning, reflection, and regrouping.

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19 Wright, 2010, p.300-301.
20 White, 2016.
21 Šmicer and Williams, 2015.