
Política prefigurativa y espacios comunitarios emergentes: El caso de Portugal

Prefigurative politics and emergent communitarian spaces: The case of Portugal

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Resumen

La prefiguración se ha convertido en los últimos años en una conceptualización importante y poderosa para entender las construcciones localizadas que son desarrolladas por diferentes actores mientras intentan crear en sus propias interacciones y en la forma en que organizan sus vidas otros tipos de sociedad más respetuosas de la inclusión, la diversidad y la no opresión. Concretamente, este trabajo se centra en el establecimiento de relaciones comunitarias y su importancia para la política prefigurativa. Con este fin, el caso concreto de Portugal será explorado pues aquí se han desarrollado, en los últimos años, un número cada vez mayor de proyectos comunitarios (es decir, centros sociales, eco-aldeas y redes solidarias económicas) tanto en las zonas urbanas como rurales del país. Las implicaciones para las ideas contemporáneas sobre la lucha cotidiana se discuten al final.

Palabras clave: resistencia, prefiguración, monedas alternativas, eco-aldeas.

Abstract

Prefiguration has become in the last years an important and powerful conceptualisation to understand the place-based constructions developed by different actors while attempting to create in their own interactions and in the way they organise their lives the kind of society they envision more respectful of inclusion, diversity and non-oppression. Concretely, this paper is focused on how the establishment of communitarian relations is of paramount importance to prefigurative politics. To this end, we will explore the concrete case of Portugal wherein an ever-growing number of communitarian projects (namely social centres, ecovillages and economic solidary networks) have been developed both in urban and country sides of the country in the last years. Implications for contemporary ideas on everyday struggle are discussed in the end.

Keywords: resistance, prefiguration, alternative currencies, eco-villages.

Introduction

This paper aims to draft some important ideas on how prefigurative initiatives can represent contemporary expressions of everyday struggle against dominant regimes of

power. Ecovillages, self-managed centres, alternative food initiatives (e.g., communitarian gardening) or ethical economics associations (e.g., parallel currencies and markets) are examples of voluntary participated places which are fostering innovative social imaginaries and which have escalated in several European countries and worldwide, during the last years. As I shall discuss, these practices aim to create a diverse and creative array of possibilities (i.e., temporary and in ongoing construction). Also, they are oriented to promote communitarian emancipation based on direct/autonomist ethos - ‘Do it Yourself Politics’ (DYP Politics) (Halversen, 2012; Maeckelbergh, 2012).

As a second goal I will bring to this discussion the specific initiatives which have increased in Portugal. Ecovillages and informal networks of solidary economy will be taken into account for a more in-deep analysis. While both of them have common features like the kind of responses and imaginaries advantaged, these initiatives also have distinctive aims, repertories and contexts of emergence. For instance, both ecovillages and networks of solidary economy were deeply influenced by the transition towns’ movement (Hardt, 2013; Hopkins, 2011) oriented to the creation of local money (e.g., parallel currencies) and local food (e.g., communitarian gardening, permaculture). However, for instance, while ecovillages are growing in Portugal since the beginning of the last decade, the intensification of networks of solidary economy has occurred more recently in the last years. Also networks of solidary economy are more disperse than ecovillages typically concentrated in the country side of Portugal. Clearly, economic austerity is a central factor to understand the more recently emergence and development of more economic-oriented alternatives. In this sense, I will shed light in the common and distinctive features of these two kinds of initiatives, namely ecovillages and networks of solidary economy.

Development

One of the most well-known conceptualizations on prefiguration has been recently developed by the sociologist Luke Yates (2015a) based on his work within the social centres of Catalonia. The author defines thus prefiguration as “the attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present, either in parallel with, or in the course of, adversarial social movement protest” (p. 1). Prefiguration does not aim to

explore ‘new ways’ of doing protest or of resist to dominant regimes of power but rather it aims to bring an inclusive conceptualization for radical, non-directive and grassroots’ politics of acting (Cornish, Haaken, Moskovitz, & Jackson, 2016). In line, prefiguration as a concrete political voice for resistance and/or social transformation must not be understood as an innovative idea on disruptive ways to bring about social transformation. As the political theorist van de Sande (2015) exposes, prefiguration is an abstract and inclusive conceptualization which also aims to contest the hegemony of adversarial social movements. But, in practice, prefiguration is as old as more institutionalized and visible movements such as socialism, the occupations of factories and other places in Italy in 1970s, or even as the Paris Commune of 1871 (ibdem).

Nonetheless, prefiguration has allowed researchers and activists to upheave and to redirect their attention to everyday practices rather than to be focused on institutionalized forms of actions when it comes to foster social transformation and radical politics. The inadequacy of portraying prefiguration as a new form of social transformation and of constructing alternatives to *status quo* shall be further discussed. Firstly, the idea of prefiguration has been pervasive in leading branches of academia yet metamorphosed in other concepts as for example:

- Autonomist Marxism with the recent ideas of crack and multitude (Hardt & Negri, 2004; 2001; Holloway, 2005; 2010)
- Anarchic political thought with the ideas of direct action or autonomous geographies (Chatterton, 2010; Gordon, 2007; Graeber, 2002; 2009; Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006)
- Utopian political thought with concepts of eutopia or intentional communities (Sargent, 2005; 2006; Wright, 2010; 2011)
- Non-violent approaches with notions of passive revolution (Epstein, 1991)
- New social and decentralized social movements such as the *Occupy!*, the alter-globalization movement or the transition towns movement (Biddau, Armentia, & Cottone, 2016; Disalvo, 2015; Hopkins, 2011; Juris, 2012; Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012)

- Resistance studies with the idea of everyday resistance (Ince, 2011; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014)

More and more works rely heavily on interdisciplinary and integrative readings of the multiple insights that these perspectives share in order to discuss practical projects of social and everyday struggle. They found echo in prefiguration as it expresses a complex movement of ‘against-through-in-beyond’ dominant regimes of power. Put simply, prefiguration brings together the idea of refusing power (in opposition to destruction) and the creation of possibilities (in opposition to the idea of power’s reconfiguration) at the same time it acknowledges that these initiatives are always co-existing with (and subjected to) dominant systems of power (Holloway, 2005; 2010)

Secondly, prefiguration is linked to a highly developed ground of analysis on practices of communitarian and cooperative relations. For instance, refusing capitalism has always been associated with an urge to reinforce communitarian bonds (Alonso, 2009; Alonso, Pino, & Vázquez, 2013). Capital depends on a social synthesis of fragmentation and isolation (Holloway, 2005). In other hand, patriarchy as a dominant system of power also relies on fragmentation and dualism too. On the contrary, the idea of community as a symmetric social bond is able to refuse the logic of domination through fragmentation (Alonso, 2009; Alonso, Pino, & Vázquez, 2013). Taking the case of Europe, some initiatives developed in these countries have been intensively recovering the ideas of communitarian life that goes beyond a mere conception of ‘community’ as a place or as a fragmented union. Rather, several projects are showing a deep intent of developing communitarian social relations for the sake of creating a “better world”. Initiatives such as self-managed social centres (Chatterton, 2010; Graeber, 2002), worked-owned cooperatives (Sitrin, 2012), co-housing groups (Ruiu, 2016), ecovillages (Mauch, Ritso, & Trischler, 2012), solidary networks of informal economy (Gibson-Graham, 2008; North, 2005) or, even more broadly, several kinds of intentional communities (Sargisson, 2007) are some examples of these initiatives. The most common initiatives developed in Portugal, in the last years, are social centres (at urban settings), ecovillages (at rural settings) and parallel currencies (at both urban and rural contexts). These initiatives tend to be enmeshed in pluralistic repertoires of action such as ethical economics, direct

democracy, peace, spirituality, permaculture or transition (Cornish *et al.*, 2016). As a common feature, all of these initiatives communities became a “counter-space” for building alternatives and for experimenting ‘not-yet’ worlds. Even if not new, these initiatives are emergent: they represent innovations in regard to the pre-determinant and dominant realities of today contemporary societies.

Noteworthy, communitarian social relations within prefigurative projects are not panaceas. Some of the current vulgar features of communitarian prefigurative projects such as decision-making by consensus, decentralization and horizontality hold a lot of challenges ahead (Polletta, 2005; Trott, 2016). It goes beyond the scope of this work to expose the limits, problems and solutions associated with these ideas. However, before presenting the concrete initiatives developed in Portugal it should be emphasized that research on how prefigurative actors are constructing the potentialities and limitations of their own projects is still missing. Despite that, our goal will be hereinafter to describe the context of emergence and the main features of the most typical prefigurative initiatives at Portugal with a particular emphasis on ecovillages and informal networks of solidary economy.

Since 2000s onwards, both Portugal and Spain have witnessed the rise of several social centres, ecovillages and parallel currencies. These different initiatives can, in different extents, contribute to the understanding of prefigurative politics and emergent communitarian relations. For example, several self-managed educational centers have been developed in Portugal in the two first decades of this century. One of the most well-known examples was the Escola da Fontinha. An old and abandoned building in the center of Porto has been occupied by a group of youngsters and adults and has become a place for extra-curricular activities. Police forces have totally dismantled this self-managed center by 2014. Other initiatives, however, have not suffered such a process of dismantlement. Ecovillages and parallel currencies are the most representative examples.

Ecovillages

In the last years, ecovillages have not only escalated in Europe but worldwide. In Europe, the intensification of ecovillages and parallel currencies can be associated with the ideas

and repertoires associated with the Transitions Towns Movement (TTM) (Hardt, 2013; Hopkins, 2011). TTM is oriented to the creation of local money (e.g., parallel currencies) and local food (e.g., communitarian gardening, permaculture). With a quickly expansion during the last decade, the TTM is a decentralised grassroots movement developed around the idea of free communitarian spaces to address the challenges of climate change, fossil fuel, depletion, and economic austerity (Biddau, Armentia & Cottone, 2016; Hardt, 2013; Hopkins, 2011). TTM starts from the premise that life with less energy is inevitable and new sustainable options must be urgently developed by recognising at the same time the intense connection between environmental problems and advanced capitalist economies (North & Longhurst, 2013). Labelled as the ‘new environmentalists’ TTM supporters are fostering local solutions through the creation of networked resolutions, consensus and self-governance in regard to environmental problems.

By relying on communities as the scalar response, TTM supporters reject the ability of big governments and corporations in exchanging the environmental problems we are today facing. It is within the communitarian structures that different social relations can be experimented, created and consolidated in informal conversations, horizontal organizational structures and in micro-processes of decision-making (cf. Yates, 2015a). It is not possible to advance a precise number on how many ecovillages are settled in Portugal because the main platform of inclusion – Portuguese Network of Ecovillages (i.e., *Rede Portuguesa de Eco-Aldeias*) - is voluntary participated-in and not all its members are part of public knowledge.

By definition, ecovillages can be defined as spaces and collectivities “that are reinventing sustainability in its ecological, economic, communitarian, and worldview dimensions. These are experiences of life in community and in search of a more respectful relationship with earth” (Burke & Arjona, 2013, p. 235). Ecovillages are thus intentional communities where “environmental sustainability is sought, along with social justice, equality, peace, and so forth” (Metcalf, 2004, pp. 9 - 10). In Portugal, some of the most distinguished ecovillages are Tamera, Terramada or Awakened Life Project (ALP). All of them share the mission of living engaged with communitarian relations in order to disrupt with dominant logics of power.

One of the most prominent features of this project is that it combines repertoires of permaculture, ecology, spirituality and social transformation. Philosophically, the project defends that personal and collective liberation is achieved through conscious evolution – the realization of connectedness (oneness) between all forms of life on earth. There is no division between inner and outer worlds. Practically, conscious evolution is achieved through the regular practice of free meditation and awakening inquiring.

It is not uncommon the use of spiritual repertoires for social transformation within ecovillages as prefigurative initiatives (Burke & Arjona, 2013). In academia, one of the most well-developed conceptualization in this matter has been settled by the work of Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa and Ana Louise Keating, both feminist scholars, gathering different perspectives in their utmost representative book ‘This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation’ (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). For the authors, spirituality exists “for social change, spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses the holistic worldview to transform one’s self and one’s worlds” (Keating, 2008, p. 54). Within ALP, spiritual practices are seen as liberators and as personal fractals of social transformation. Meditation is practiced in a daily basis.

In addition, as most of the prefigurative projects of our area, ALP relies on decentralization; voluntarism and practices of decision-making by consensus (cf. Graeber, 2002; Polletta & Hoban, 2016). Awakening inquiries (i.e., collective moments for taking important processes of decision and to pose questions about the daily activities of the Quinta), groups of discussion and everyday interactions facilitate a sense of support and of horizontal participation. Ecovillages, as this case illustrate, can be then used as spaces for the experimentation of new forms of social relations mainly those which question authoritarian rules and the reproduction of oppression.

Parallel Currencies

In other hand, several researchers in the last years have putted forward the emergence of different economies in the shaping of ‘worlds beyond capitalism’. Thus, parallel currencies have been escalated as projects in themselves or as part of broader prefigurative initiatives. Parallel currencies have also founded an intense body of research

using the notion of ‘diverse economies’ which are analyzing them as alternatives or even as non-market practices (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2008). For instance, EcoSol is a well-known and virtual parallel currency developed as an informal network of solidary economy in Portugal. In other words, it works as a communitarian space for parallel social relations of economic exchange.

But how parallel currencies have come to be usual in countries such as Portugal? Anti-austerity measures and anti-austerity waves of protest must be acknowledged to this end (cf. Duarte & Baumgarten, 2015). The rise of decentralized and non-partisan social movements (Accornero & Pinto, 2015) (e.g., F*** the Troika! We want our lives back, *‘Que se lixe a Troika! Queremos as nossas vidas de volta’*) have helped to establish a critical and mass public engagement oriented to the support of initiatives that sprouted and gained visibility to mass public demonstrations. But the effects and the implications of anti-austerity movements have gone beyond the usual public protest. In fact, it has fostered the creation and reinforcement of informal networks. These movements are not directly responsible for the creation of these parallel currencies. Nonetheless, the anti-austerity wave of protest have, in large extent, promoted a social climate more oriented to non-institutional forms of doing protest and of searching for social transformation.

Another important question on prefigurative initiatives is on the creation of networks of struggle and solidarity between these different micro-maps of experimentation, exemplified in this paper in ecovillages and parallel currencies. In fact, one could argue that these links among communities are already being developed. The everyday life of these communities tends to favor several strategic entanglements and connections between different ‘refusals’ of power-as-dominance. For example, the projects quoted above have common participants between them. The typical isolation and minimal impact ascribed to these projects is not afterwards so blatant. The idea of interstitial revolution (Holloway, 2010) is, from these examples, already in practice although fragile. Drawing on my personal experience, the intent to put convergences and differences in dialogue is progressively and experimentally taking place. Platforms of communication are being informally created in order to exchange difficulties, strategies and creative impulses.

Conclusion

Even facing clear intents of interconnectedness, distance or estrangements is still always presented. Experiences of otherness can still be a common feature both between inter prefigurative projects and between projects and the outside worlds. Every ecovillage (or other kind of commune) is a ‘concrete island’ with a daily organization which escapes to “typical worlds outside of them” (Sargisson, 2007). In turn, networks of solidary economy can be said as far more disseminated, accessible and social accepted. Comparing, integrating and translating these multiple insights and languages on social struggle is not an easy task to achieve. Moreover, these projects always face a possibility of co-option once capitalism is constantly reconfiguring itself (cf. McCabe, 2013; Young & Schwartz, 2012). Are communitarian ecovillages and solidary informal networks of economy ‘non-capitalistic forms of living’ or just new forms of “social-welfare” within capitalism which aims to suppress its effects and to discharge the role of state? (Amin, Cameron & Hudson, 2003) Are prefigurative initiatives just alternatives or real non-markets possibilities? (Gibson-Graham, 2008) Are they really echoed in radical politics? Some aspects should be noted on this topic. An impossibility of going beyond power (i.e., an impossibility of exodus) is too often mixed up with a minimization of power-to-do and to put in practice possibilities to dominant regimes of power. However, as previous authors have emphasized (e.g., Holloway, 2005; 2010; Graeber, 2002) initiatives led by the intent of direct action and everyday struggle are not about seizing power but rather about the destitution of power-as-domination. Prefigurative initiatives are mainly about seeking autonomy beyond nation-states, international financial institutions, global corporation, and neoliberalism (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). They also aim to go beyond the institutionalization of social movements, the reproduction of authority and oppression, the fragmentation of powers and the inter-conflicts associated with traditional social movements (Cornish *et al.*, 2016). As formal institutions seem to fail, alternative strategies tend to increase as possibilities not only for the most vulnerable groups in a given society but also to the broader deceived masses of people (Fickey, 2011).

The development of prefigurative initiatives by their main actors is also much more complex than pointed out by these critics. Misconceptions and the use of traditional

perspectives on social transformation are commonly mobilized, and wrongly applied. In truth, the repertoires, languages, tools, perspectives on protest, imaginaries, moral engagements, cultural underpinnings, socio-political claims and strategies of resistance of these initiatives are far from being systematically addressed and empirically studied.

To avoid disbelief and underestimation of prefigurative initiatives, efficacy cannot be attained by conventional evaluations (Ince, 2011). By tradition, social movements' studies are too often centred in policy changes as the ends for political forces (Karnabish & Haiven, 2012). To access efficacy means to consider the people who develop prefigurative utopias and how much succeeded they are in their own views (Pitzer, 1997). Prefigurative projects cannot be separated from the power dynamics which are justifying and shaping their own existence. However, such a critical perspective should not engage in a pure celebratory position neither in a dismissal of their potential to animate possibilities towards a world without 'power-as-domination'.

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