Prefiguration, subtraction and emancipation

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Introduction

The expression 'prefigurative politics' (synthetically: 'prefiguration') is used to refer to mobilizations that, to various extents, replace conventional politics and protest with 'direct social action', that is, action aimed at an unmediated impact on its subject matter and addressed to (parts of) society, rather than the state or other power holders (Bosi and Zamponi 2019). Rather than aiming to bring about change in the future, the goal of prefigurative politics is to craft alternatives in the here and now (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Yates, 2015). Action, it is said, actualizes its very purposes; or, 'the means applied are deemed to embody or "mirror" the ends one strives to realise' (van de Sande, 2013, p. 230). Examples cited in the literature include boycotts, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, solidarity purchase groups, open source seeds communities, participatory plant breeding, community energy initiatives, transition towns, time banks, community-based credit systems, urban gardening, cohousing, eco-communities, self-organized healthcare, education and child-rearing, open software, digital commons, occupation and self-management of factories, housing and other spaces, and so on.

Prefigurative politics pursues what Erik Olin Wight (2010) calls 'interstitial transformation', circumventing, rather than challenging, existing relations of domination. By no means new, its recent upsurge, variedly connected with the effects of neoliberal globalization and its protracted crisis, has elicited growing debates. Students usually link the transformative potential of mobilizations to their *affirmative* element, or put differently: to what they envisage, demand and aim to bring about. However, as Foucault and governmentality studies have argued at length, late modern forms of domination build to a crucial extent on eliciting and influencing desires and behaviours, rather than on commanding and prohibiting. This raises questions about the emancipatory import of *affirmativeness* and suggests that such import might rather be located in the *subtractive* element of prefiguration, or put differently: in what prefigurative politics rejects, refuses and seeks to leave behind.

The aim of this article is to elaborate on this ambiguity, and thereby add to the theoretical tools for inquiring into the transformative potential of prefigurative practices. I start by noting the importance of the relationship between subtraction and affirmation, as testified by scholars' frequent use of the trope of prolepsis. Yet, to what extent subtraction or withdrawal – to reject and disengage from something – is in itself sufficient, remains an open question, also when considering anarchist and autonomist outlooks. Moreover, both positive and critical assessments of prefiguration focus on the dimension of affirmativeness, thus neglecting Foucauldian insights into power in the age of biopolitics. Such neglect can be related to the dominance of what I call 'affirmative thinking', a theoretical standpoint of growing hold whereby emancipation stems from the unbridled expression of vital forces. The unwarrantedness of such claim, I argue, becomes fully visible when one considers the flaws of the post-workerist thesis about the emancipatory import of cognitive labour (as extended also to nonhuman labour) and of recent theorizations of degrowth as unproductive waste of surplus energy.

For an alternative route I turn to Adorno and Agamben. The former makes a case against the modern self-affirming subjectivity, elaborating on the emancipatory force of negation; the latter translates this argument into a case for *inoperativity*. This notion does not mean passivity but activity building on the capacity to *not being* or *not doing* something, that is, to leave potentials unused, unrealised and in a non-actualized state, and thus to resist the lure of endless (self-)valorization. Borrowing from Benjamin's account of revolution, the transformative potential of prefigurative politics may reside, I argue, more in doing things differently than in doing different things. Expressions of subtraction in the empirical realm provide significant clues in this regard.

Prefiguration and its flaws

Prefiguring means anticipating the future in the present. As a faculty of imagination, prefiguration is a necessary element of rational action. Prefigurative politics, however, means not just imagining but also enacting elements of the desired future. To be sure, any political movement can do this to some extent, but prefigurative politics prioritizes such move (Frank, 2018). It takes precedence over other goals, short-circuiting, so to say, imagination and practice. This, analytically, entails a two-step movement: first, withdrawal (from some arrangement); second, affirmation (of something different). As we shall see, the question of the emancipatory import of prefiguration boils down to whether the two moments are distinct from each other and set in opposition, or whether the second is already contained in the first, implying that subtraction is itself assertion.

Scholars acknowledge the relevance of the relationship between subtraction and affirmation by devoting considerable space to the issue. One of the tropes most frequently used is *prolepsis*. People, it is said, act as if they had achieved already a stage of development which is still in the making, often without a clear outcome in sight but rather in an experimental manner, entailing at any step a revision of both means and ends (van de Sande, 2013; Yates, 2015; Swain, 2019). This makes prefiguration differ from a secular version of Christian eschatology. In the latter case, the reassuring certainty about the future hampers the generativity of action, which in the former is helped by the lack of predefined ends (Newman, 2016; Gordon, 2018). Saying that prefiguration is proleptic is a way of accounting for the close coupling of subtraction and affirmation, or indeed their overlapping. However, it does not answer the question of whether one can do without affirmation, that is, whether subtraction may be sufficient in itself. The point remains unresolved also when one turns to the two bodies of political theorising most often implicated in accounting for prefiguration: anarchism and autonomism.

A number of features characterizing prefiguration are well-known form the anarchist tradition: the predilection for direct action, self-organization and mutual aid; the transformative import of these experiences for the individual; the distrust towards revolutionary vanguards and comprehensive theorizations; the idea that means (actions and their organization) must be consistent with ends; the 'contaminating' effect of exemplary actions on the surrounding social world (Graeber, 2009). Subtraction here takes the shape of a refusal to relate with the state, acting as if it did not exist anymore. Yet, even the radical negativity of Bakunin, while rejecting a Hegelian synthesis of contradictions, entails the affirmation of an alternative: a stateless society, true to human nature (Leier, 2006). On this view, more than *anarchist*, emergent mobilizations are *anarchic*, in the literal sense of free of principled assumptions (Newman, 2016). Moreover, globalization has shifted much of state power to markets and economic actors, which is, to some extent, reflected in current prefiguration's privileging of 'economic forms of resistance', aimed not at the abolition of the state but at the 'reconfiguration of relations of property, production, and

communication outside of the state' (van de Sande 2015, p. 183). This makes subtraction a more complex, questionable affair than if considered within the traditional anarchist framework.

The Italian workerism (*operaismo*) of the 1960s and 1970s also made a case for horizontal relations, direct action, means-ends consistency, and withdrawal – first and foremost from the capitalist enterprise. Its rationale was that it is not capitalism's technical and organizational evolution that gives shape to the workers' struggles (the Marxist received wisdom) but the other way round and that, for this reason, it is crucial that workers self-organize to enact resistance in the shape of absenteeism, slow working, sabotage and other forms of subversion gathered under the heading of 'refusal of work' (Tronti, 2007). This 'refusal to work' then implies the refusal of the deal between capital's expropriation of work and workers' share in growth that characterized the *Trente Glorieuses*. Equally, it implies opposition to factory discipline and a social organization designed to reproduce workforce for capital, and a farewell to state and party politics.

This idea of a subtractive strategy also reappears in 'post-workerist' autonomism. Paolo Virno (2015), for example, sees it as the only way to revive the revolutionary goal after the failure of the 1970s' insurrectional attempts. This move refrains from an open confrontation with power choosing instead the route of desertion, a mass defection from existing institutional arrangements to develop alternative ones. However, this idea is contingent on a case for the affirmative power of human (and nonhuman) forces, which ends up obscuring workerism's original emphasis on deposing activities. I shall return to this further below. For the moment, let's note that both the anarchist and the autonomist perspective fail to clarify whether subtraction can be self-sufficient, stand alone, rather than being instrumental to the affirmation of something else.

Positive perspectives on prefiguration commonly underline the dimension of affirmativeness (e.g. Graeber, 2009; Maeckelberg, 2011; van de Sande, 2013; Yates, 2015; Gordon, 2018; Swain, 2019). For example, after a comparison of the anarchist and autonomist strands, van de Sande (2015) finds an encompassing framework for prefigurative mobilizations in Negri's case for the multitude's constituent power. This primacy of affirmativeness emerges even more sharply from critical accounts – in the sense that they highlight deficits in this regard. For example, from a review of literature on urban agriculture Davidson (2016) extracts various critical points: productive potentials being too low to offer a real alternative to conventional food markets; organizational fragility and insecurity of land tenure vis-à-vis urban development pressure; an over-representation of the white middle class with consequent confirmation or enhancement of racial and class inequities; neoliberal leanings whereby solutions to social problems are located within the market rather than the state; and the depoliticizing effects of 'self-help' mantras and the establishment of food banks and similar organizations. Similarly, plenty of literature dwells on how easily and frequently digital commons are instrumentalized by corporate designs (e.g. Bauwens and Pantazis, 2018; Berlinguer, 2018). The transition towns movement, a celebrated form of prefiguration in the energy field, is found vulnerable to a post-political 'defensive localism' committed to building small heavens. Also, it is accused of engendering protectionism, particularism and misrecognition of internal differences and wider social interests and connections (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014). As for economic activism such as purchasing groups, time banks, mutual cooperation or housing and factory occupation, its coincidence with crisis and austerity policies (testified by their previous flourishing in the 1970s) leads some scholars to argue that prefiguration boils down to a significant extent to coping strategies vis-à-vis the lowering capacities of the market and the state to provide goods and services (Bosi and Zamponi, 2019). In this respect, Mouffe (2013) is particularly drastic. In her view, it is prefiguration as such that does not work: the failure of Occupy and similar mobilizations in bringing about significant results

shows the enduring value of robust, traditional organizations and of a direct engagement with political institutions.

Criticisms therefore converge in attributing the negligible or perverse effects of prefigurative action to its being insufficiently affirmative. This is more than just academic rumination, for activists, too, share this concern. For example, Portwood-Stacer (2013) and Naegler (2018) report how post-Occupy Wall Street activists engaged in initiatives such as service centres, urban farms and other forms of mutual aid, are afraid that this type of micro-politics, rather than undermining capitalist relations, may, unintendedly, (re)produce exclusionary relations and strengthen the consumer paradigms it aims to oppose. Activists, in other words, worry that their 'constructive resistance' (Sørensen, 2016) ends up being nothing more than 'simulation exercises' (Blühdorn, 2017) – lifestyle choices which are harmless to capitalism or even welcomed by it as being lucrative, and which, by diverting energies away from open contestation, are post-political in outcome, if not in purpose.

The limits of affirmative thinking

The above does not necessarily mean that the fate of prefiguration is sealed; yet, in order to assess its emancipatory capacity, more attention needs to be paid to the features of the power with which it is confronted. In this regard Foucault and governmentality studies are instructive. They have extensively accounted for how, since the dawn of the liberal state, the sovereign power of 'taking life or letting live' has increasingly been complemented by the biopolitical power of 'making live or letting die'. The latter, instead of prohibiting and destroying, seeks 'to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize and organize the forces under it, […] making them grow, and ordering them' (Foucault, 1990, p. 143). This variety of power characterizes the neoliberal way of governing to the extent that neoliberal thinking traces the whole of human life to the market- and *homo economicus*-form, making it governable through the promotion of a relentless drive to self-valorization within a setting dominated by uncertainty and insecurity (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1998; Dardot and Laval, 2014).

It is against this backdrop that the emancipatory capacity of today's prefigurative politics should be assessed. As hinted above, concerns focus on its allegedly insufficient affirmativeness. The equation between affirmation and emancipation, however, is hardly questioned at all. This, it seems to me, does not depend solely on its apparent logical stringency (how can one implant the future into the present if not by replacing something with something else?), or on a straightforward extension of the rationale of contentious politics (claiming something entails affirming the entitlement to this something), but also, and possibly primarily, on the success enjoyed in social theory by what may be termed 'affirmative thinking'; a success that leads to downplaying the role of the subtractive aspect of prefiguration.

Foucault conceived the relation between power and resistance as an endless chase between forces that take shape from one another, letting deliberately unresolved the tension between a dominative *pouvoir* that bends life to its own purposes and the emancipatory *puissance* of life's self-normativity. In contrast to Foucault's analysis, however, a trend has taken growing hold, especially after the turn of the century, which, borrowing from heterogeneous sources such as Deleuze, Spinoza, Whitehead, Actor-network theory and philosophical anthropology, makes a case for an 'affirmative biopolitics' grounded on the overarching potency of vital forces (Greco, 2005; Esposito, 2008; Campbell, 2011). A common thread of otherwise variegated positions, often gathered under the umbrella term of 'new materialisms', is a view of materiality as exhibiting

agency, inventing capacities, generative powers. This outlook challenges the living/non-living, matter/language, nature/culture and other binaries foundational of modern dominative structures (Coole and Frost, 2010). A corollary to this is a devaluation of discursive critique in favour of the idea that a crucial site of resistance, opposition and subversion is the embodied assertiveness of ontological difference (Grosz, 2005; Escobar, 2010); or, as Deleuze put it, that 'practical struggle never proceeds by way of the negative but by way of difference and its power of affirmation' (1995, p. 208).

Assessing comprehensively the implications of affirmative thinking goes far beyond the limits of this article. I shall confine myself to reflecting on its impact on two intellectual strands which are of direct relevance to prefigurative politics. One is autonomist Marxism; the other is degrowth theory. As for the former, one can compare the workerist focus on refusal as self-standing action with the post-workerist thesis about 'cognitive capitalism'. This thesis holds that, as capitalism relies ever-more on linguistic and communicative abilities formed outside production processes, cognitive workers increasingly find spaces for developing post-capitalist relations and thus can become a revolutionary vanguard (Virno, 2004; Vercellone, 2007). Mass defection, in this picture, does not entail negativity, as with workerist 'sabotages' of capital's productivity, but coincides with the general intellect's capacity to engender a different way of producing. The thesis has been recently extended to nonhuman labour, namely the 'infinitely productive' potentiality of nature, 'as something presupposed, but not produced, by state and capital' (Braun, 2015, p. 11). In particular, the expanding role of 'ecosystem services' (from resource provision to regulative and supporting functions like carbon sequestration, waste decomposition, soil formation, crop pollination) is seen to illustrate the growing relevance of 'self-organizing dynamics and regenerative social-ecological capacities outside of the direct production processes' (Nelson, 2015, p. 462). Again, capital is deemed to build increasingly on something it cannot control, bound to engender a radical transformation (Nelson and Braun, 2017).

This claim, however, is questioned by scholars who note how considering human creativity as free-floating means overlooking the role of precarious work conditions and prescriptive cultural and organizational models of fulfilment, achievement, reward and orientation to client demand (Dardot and Laval, 2014). These objections can be extended to the emancipatory force of nonhuman labour. The more the economic value of ecosystem services is recognized, the more the self-organizing, regenerative capacities of nature become the object of appropriation and commodification. 'Valuing nature' may be a complex and controversial endeavour, yet this is not hampering the expansion of the ecosystem services economics (Robertson, 2012). Celebrating today the self-normativity of life means downplaying how capital is ever-more committed to directly extracting value from reproductive forces, including gamete donation, gestational surrogacy and other forms of 'clinical labour' (Cooper and Waldby, 2014) where the human (especially female) body becomes itself a 'service'. Nor do unpredictability and surprise, usually taken as expressions of the unbounded creativity of life, represent anymore hindrances to accumulation, as financial derivatives on weather instability testify (Cooper, 2010).

Degrowth theory gets caught up in similar problems. Prefigurative activists may be more or less happy with being associated with it, yet there are undeniable affinities between the type of initiatives enlisted in prefiguration and degrowth scholars' case against endless value extraction and commodification of human and nonhuman productive and reproductive forces, and for a downscaling of production and consumption aimed at improving social equality, human well-being and ecological conditions. Part of degrowth theorization, however, has increasingly emphasised that scarcity is socially produced. Not that physical limits to growth are now deemed inexistent.

The claim is rather that their relevance in the socio-ecological crisis should not be overestimated, not least because evidence about stagnation and diminishing returns on innovation is inconclusive (Kallis, 2018). One has therefore to focus on how capitalist culture and relations set up a context of generalized scarcity and endless need, spurring a limitless increase in value extraction and accumulation. From this perspective, Georgescu-Roegen and Daly, with their thermodynamic theories of economy, take a backseat and Bataille comes to the forefront. For him (Bataille, 1988), outside the restricted economy of bourgeois society, there is always an excess of energy available, ultimately coming from the sun, that asks for being consumed, wasted. From his perspective, what is contingent, in the general economy of life, is scarcity, not abundance. Humans (as nonhumans) use energy only in part for biological conservation and reproduction. The rest goes to *dépense*, non-productive expenditure – art, luxury, games, wars, and so on. The problem with capitalism is that it builds on concealing this very issue. Even the imaginary of environmentalism is 'strongly wedded to the idea of natural scarcity. But scarcity is social' (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p. 218): it depends on ever-growing individual expectations and uneven distribution of resources. The task of oppositional forces, therefore, is to hollow out surplus, literally to waste it, directing it to unproductive uses; to replace individual overconsumption and social austerity with individual sobriety and social expenditure, doing things that '"burn" capital out and take it out of the sphere of circulation, slowing it down', for example by 'spending in a collective feast, […] subsidis[ing] a class of spirituals to talk about philosophy or leav[ing] a forest idle' (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p. 217).

A straightforward objection to this argument is that productive and unproductive expenditure can be hard to disentangle. Organizing feasts or philosophical discussions can be lucrative, and this also applies to a forest left idle once it is conceived of as an ecosystem service. Sobriety can be commodified as a cherished market niche. The basic point, however, is that while Bataillian affirmative biopolitics can be valuable for contesting capitalism as a restricted economy, it is hardly helpful to challenge capitalism as an institutionalized order 'coextensive with social, political and ecological life' (Braun, 2015, p. 1), and ever-more thriving on vitality itself. What post-workerists and Bataillian degrowth scholars fail to acknowledge, in short, is that human and nonhuman energies are increasingly made subservient to capital valorization *without* harnessing them, and precisely for that. In this framework, celebrations of social festivity, human creativity and nature's vitality look pretty much consolatory simulations of a vanishing agency, post-political in their very conception, let alone in their outcome.

The force of negation

Žižek (2004) famously defined Deleuze as the ideologist of late capitalism. Without going so far, the idea that affirmative thinking is, at best, ineffective against and, at worst, unwittingly complicit with late capitalism transpires from a variety of recent critiques, for example against the politics of difference and identity on which feminism and the left have increasingly focused, to the detriment of equality and justice (e.g. Poupeau, 2012; Fraser, 2013; Lilla, 2017). Benjamin Noys (2010) sees in 'affirmationism' a failed attempt to respond to the neoliberal attempt to flatten everything to the value-form with an appeal to the irreducibility of either overarching forms of difference, like the multitude, or locally embedded alterity, both of which easily align with capital's thriving on novelty, creativity, originality and authenticity.

As in the current historical juncture the limits of affirmativeness as a pathway to emancipation are becoming increasingly evident, one may ask whether a different understanding of prefiguration is possible – one where withdrawal is not just a premise to building the alternative but constitutes

itself the alternative. Noys's take on negativity pivots on the idea of disrupting and thwarting capitalist dynamics by nurturing non-commodified spaces, preserving or re-actualising traditional social struggles and their achievements, such as welfare institutions like the national health service. In this framework, quite close to Mouffe's standpoint, prefiguration does not fare well. Further attention, therefore, needs to be given to subtraction. To this purpose I will draw on Adorno and Agamben. Putting them together may look awkward, especially considering that the former is hardly mentioned by the latter. Yet, while Adorno highlights the emancipatory force of *negation* as an antidote to the capitalist logic of endless self-affirmation, Agamben gives clues on how negation can actually be lived.

There is a certain irony in turning to Adorno. The most immediate antecedents of current prefigurative politics are often seen in the social movements which emerged in the 1960s (Yates, 2015), about which Adorno was notoriously sceptical. This seems to make him an unlikely companion of prefiguration. Yet, the theoretical value of Adorno for understanding and orienting emergent mobilizations has already been recognized, most notably by John Holloway (2002) and connected scholarship. The feeling of intolerability from which, on Holloway's account, mobilizations rise corresponds to the primacy Adorno gives to the somatic experience of suffering, as the ground of the refusal to justify and perpetuate the wrong. Holloway's 'scream', as Adorno's 'pain', is 'the subject negated by the objective reality turned into system' (Tischler, 2009, p. 109). And Holloway's idea of a revolution which does not aim to seize but to uproot power in order to create something else from the ground resonates with Adorno's notion of negative dialectics, not as a totalizing opposition resulting in a totalizing affirmation but as 'determinate negation', that is, as work on the specific gap between concept and thing: on the latter's refusal to be entirely captured by the former; on the incompleteness and remainder that particularity opposes to universality and indifferentiation. For Adorno, it is worth recalling, this universalizing thrust, which he names identity-thinking, is the engine of the destructive dynamic of modernity, as the hubristic attempt of instrumental reason to control and dominate the world via a perverted mimetic relationship with it. Instead of approaching the other *qua* other, reason seeks to assimilate the other to the self. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) find an exemplary case of this 'repressive mimesis' in anti-Semitism, yet capital's translation of human and nonhuman labour into abstract equivalences is arguably its most accomplished expression.

For making sense of prefiguration Adorno can be taken as a major theoretical reference precisely because boycotts, community supported agriculture, time banks, and many other initiatives can be considered as determinate negations of capital's attempts to reduce everything to the commodity-form. Furthermore, Adorno's idea (borrowed from Benjamin) of *constellation* describes a salient feature of prefigurative mobilizations, namely their resistance to gathering into vast organizations and making universalizing claims, giving theoretical grounds to the intuition that prefiguration's transformative potential resides exactly in the embedded specificity of action, the focus on the here and now. Constellations emerge because 'the determinable flaw in every concept makes it necessary to cite others', illuminating 'the specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden' (Adorno, 2004, p. 53, 162). Constellation, therefore, is a result of determinate negation, as the vindication of the constitutive excess of the world against its reduction to chains of equivalences. Hence, faced with 'extraordinarily strong counter-flows of power' (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016, p. 174), constellation confirms that concerted action is not necessarily premised on gathering under one singular identity or set of principles. For, differentiated experiences can find in exemplarity and complementarity a common thread and a basis for mutual recognition.

Most importantly, Adorno cautions against affirmativeness. For example, he stresses how the purported emancipatory import of liveliness misleadingly appears external to historical conditioning while being heavily affected by it, already at the conceptual level, in the sense that 'life keeps reproducing itself under the prevailing conditions of unfreedom' (Adorno, 2004, p. 262). Adorno's insistence on the constitutive relation between society and nature, concept and thing, theory and practice, sounds as a further warning. Many prefigurative mobilizations seek to change social relations by changing also (sometimes primarily) the relations with nonhuman beings, places, technologies (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016). This can be read as the effort to establish a non-repressive mimesis, getting closer, friendlier, to things, giving up the drive to make them 'ours', 'like us', or 'us'. It is also fully consistent with Adorno's 'philosophical-historical "monism"' (Honneth, 1995, p. 103), for which, there being no separation between nature and society, it is not possible to instrumentalize and exploit nonhumans without doing the same to humans (as, for example, Habermas maintains). The consequence Adorno draws from this, however, runs counter to conceiving prefiguration as the affirmativeness of bodily immediacy against the inconclusiveness of discourse. Adorno's monism is dialectical, which entails that thought and thing, theory and practice, are enmeshed from the outset and reciprocally necessary. The thinking subject is bodily, physical, like the object, and conceptualization has non-conceptual, sensuous, material constituents; yet the object shows itself only through conceptual mediations, with all immediacies being mediated (Adorno, 1998a, 2004; Holloway, 2009). Hence, following Adorno, one is to resist any lure of immediacy, any 'shortcut to practical action' (Adorno, 2001, p. 2). Indeed, for Adorno, the hypostatization of practice is 'a symptom of alienation rather than the solution to it' (Wilding, 2009, p. 25). As he stresses, 'meditation […] taken in hand by praxis [is] tailored to fit the results it enjoins' (Adorno, 1998b, p. 261, 265).

In sum, as a theoretical backdrop for understanding prefiguration, Adorno's work is very instructive. The problem, however, is that he denies the possibility of finding in determinate negation a constructive side – which also cannot be found in the utopian future to which he relegates human reconciliation with (their own) nature. Also constellation, if one follows him strictly, finds its cement only in what remains unaccomplished. This theoretical purity has a price: it paves the way to the unwitting return of affirmative thinking. We can see this when Holloway (2002; 2009) reclaims the primacy of practice and the power of human creativity. The capture of this potency is precisely the problem with which we are dealing. A plea for affirmativeness after the scream (and one which implicitly reasserts a hierarchy between humans and nonhumans) undermines the latter's transformative potential. Yet, this is probably inevitable if one accepts Adorno's refusal to elaborate further on negativity and specify, so to say, how negativity may be rendered liveable, how one may fill the void determinate negation creates in the texture of dominative powers with something that resists being absorbed by this very texture. For this purpose one has to look elsewhere. Agamben, and in particular his peculiar account of *inoperativity*, opens up a promising direction.

Inoperativity and prefiguration as 'form-of-life'

Behind the notion of *inoperativity* lies a varied scholarship, including Kojève, Blanchot, Nancy and Bataille. However, Agamben is arguably the author who has most consistently dwelled on the issue. He defines inoperativity as 'an activity that consists in making human works and productions inoperative, opening them to a new possible use' (2014a, p. 69); the 'capacity to deactivate something and render it inoperative – a power, a function, a human operation – without simply destroying it but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive' (Agamben, 2016, p.

273). Inoperativity, Agamben explains elaborating on Aristotle, is possible because the human 'is the animal who is capable of its own impotentiality' (2014b, p. 487, translation modified), that is, of leaving its potential unfulfilled; and this, in turn, because it has no specific 'work', no predefined task to be accomplished. Hence, human potentiality to do or be is such only if accompanied by the potentiality to not do or not be (Agamben, 1999). If everything possible is to be actualized there is no potentiality; for potentiality to exist actualization has to build on its non-necessity, its negative possibility. As Agamben remarks, 'those who are separated from what they can do are still able to resist, they can still not do. Those who are separated from their own impotentiality, instead, lose first of all their capacity to resist. […] Only the lucid vision of what we cannot, or can not, do gives consistency to our action' (2011a, p. 45). Actually, as we have seen, affirmativeness fails because it dovetails with a power that builds first and foremost on cutting off people's relation with their negative potential, making self-fulfilment and reward an overriding, infinite task, to which even sobriety and abstention become functional. Importantly, this works also in reverse, that is, when negation is set as a force equal and opposite to affirmation. For Noys, Adorno's focus on the limits of thought, the finitude of the living and the pathos of the suffering corresponds to a 'weak negativity' that cannot be 'converted into active and successful resistance' (2010, p. 17). Yet, this is the only type of negativity that cannot lead to renewed domination.

Being (re)united with impotentiality is what makes it possible for Agamben (borrowing from Tronti) to talk of 'destituent power' as a political orientation alien to the *puissance* of constituent power and aimed at 'rendering inoperative the biological, economic and social operations' (Agamben, 2014a, p. 70). Similarly, Stefano Franchi (building on Agamben) talks of 'passive politics'. Here passivity is not defined (as with degrowth in respect to growth) as the counterpart of activity, as the latter's reverse and as subjection to an agent's will, since in this way activity 'will sooner or later return because it was never renounced in the first place' (Franchi, 2004, p. 39). Instead, passivity is understood as a 'primary potentiality, […] a fundamental receptivity that acts as a precondition for all possible changes and transformations' (ibid.). Passive politics is a deposing, de-instituting activity. To the extent that post-politics builds on the depoliticization of vital energies, making such energies inoperative and deaf to the lure of valorisation is by itself provided with a re-politicizing import where, more than being contested (Beasley-Murray, 2010), hegemony loses sense.

Exemplary cases of inoperativity are for Agamben play, where tools become toys and gestures are self-finalized, and the feast, that is, the day where what is done 'becomes undone, is rendered inoperative, liberated and suspended from its "economy", from the reasons and purposes that define it during the weekdays' (Agamben, 2014a, p. 69); from 'existing values and powers' (Agamben, 2011b, p. 111). Considering these examples, which illustrate also the idea of unproductive expenditure, one may ask whether there is any difference from *dépense*. The answer is given by the reading of festivity that Agamben proposes. In the feast, he notes, what is done 'in itself is not unlike what one does every day' (2014a, p. 69). And he draws on Plutarch to argue how in festivity 'what is chased away is not hunger and famine but rather "the hunger of an ox"', bulimia; what is welcomed is not excess but healthy eating, which ceases to be 'an activity directed toward an aim, [becoming] an inoperativity, […] a Sabbath of nourishment' (2011b, p. 107). In this perspective, one may turn degrowth scholars' critique of environmentalism (of using the same imaginary of growth from a reversed viewpoint) against themselves. The antidote to growth can hardly be *dépense* because it draws on the same imaginary of growth, just turning it upside-down. As a result, consumption is set as both the problem and the solution, as unproductive waste or in the reverse version of self-restraint. Yet, just as bulimia indicates 'the impossibility of an authentic festive behaviour in our time' (2011b, p. 107-108), so does its

opposite, anorexia. The point is not setting growth against degrowth, productivity against unproductiveness, work against idleness, abundance against scarcity, compulsion against curbing, collective orgiastic expenditure against individual ascetic abstention, hegemony against non-hegemony, but deactivating all such binaries, disclosing a different relation with things, people and oneself, subtracted from the (expressed or repressed) obsession with consumption, growth, domination and achievement.

That such deactivation may lead to radical change is stressed by Walter Benjamin, when he talks of revolution not as turning things upside-down (which ends up reproducing domination) but as interruption: pulling the emergency brake and stepping aside. Benjamin depicts this 'arrest of happening' (2003, p. 396) as messianic time, and we have seen that prefiguration can be associated with eschatology, hence with a messianic temporality. The latter, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is not *chronos* but *kairos*: not a sequence of instants through which the future unfolds, but a present defined by the forthcoming advent of the kingdom of God, which discloses an opportunity for change. What type of change? For Paul, the challenge is to develop the capacity of living in the form of the 'as not'; a condition where differences such as slave/free, circumcised/uncircumcised, man/woman (but one can add human/nonhuman, living/non-living, growth/degrowth etc.) are rendered inoperative. Agamben links in with this outlook, stressing that, being 'the time that remains between time and its end' (2005, p. 62), messianic time is the time of a remnant, as neither a part nor a residual, but what is irreducible to ruling distinctions and hierarchies (just as, for Adorno, determinate negation discloses what in the thing is irreducible to conceptualization). In this sense, messianic time does not define a closure but an opening, precisely in the proleptic way that characterizes the generativity of prefiguration. What such excess may consist of is possibly captured by a tale from the Hasidic tradition, which Agamben reports having been told by Benjamin to Ernst Bloch. The tale says that, in the world to come, everything 'will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be just as it is now, just a little different' (Agamben, 1993, p. 53).

So, revolution is possibly more about doing things differently than doing different things. To this purpose, one has to consider that crucial to late capitalism's supply-side, innovation-dependent economics is an ever-more self-finalised consumption. 'In its extreme phase', Agamben remarks, 'capitalism is nothing but a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means, that is, […] behaviours that have been separated from themselves and thus detached from any relationship to an end' (2007, p. 87). Prefiguration typically tackles the exploitative drive of capitalism through counter-conducts that build on and stress the expressive value of relations. Precisely for this reason it is exposed to capitalism's capture of pure means. This, as we have seen, is what activists are afraid of, perceiving how their transformative efforts are received as innocuous lifestyle choices. One may object that, if play and festivity, which emblematize pure means, are paradigms of inoperativity, then the latter can hardly offer shelter from capture. Yet, as said, inoperativity is not so much about self-finalizing, as about liberating from dominative, self-enhancing intents the relationship with things, people and oneself. This means recomposing the unity of means and ends that the thrust to value extraction has dislodged into raw material, vital energy, on one side, empty shell, lifestyle, on the other. On this view, prefiguration is likely to express an emancipatory force only to the extent that, through and in subtraction, it departs from lifestyle to become 'form-of-life'.

'Form-of-life' means, for Agamben, 'a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life… [and] in which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself' (Agamben, 2000, p. 3-4). If lifestyle follows an operative logic whereby being coincides with doing (making, getting…), form-of-life follows an inoperative logic whereby what one does (makes, gets…) coincides with what one is. The former expresses detachment between actor and action: pride or satisfaction stem, to a major extent, from the possibility to choose otherwise. The latter is expressed in what people who face deadly dangers with no personal gain, like rescuing Jews from Nazis (Monroe et al., 1990), typically say: 'I just couldn't do otherwise'. This reportedly applies to activists involved in occupations such as those of Zuccotti Square (Naegler, 2018) and Notre-Dame-des-Landes (Bulle, 2018) – as if, instead of the usual small minority, they were all 'unconditional co-operators' in the collective action. Workerist enactments of subversion, back in the 1960s and 1970s, were seemingly of this sort: an attempt to establish forms-of-life impervious to any deal with capitalism (Ovidi, 2015).

The difference between lifestyle, as proliferation of (in)different ways of living, and form-of-life, as doing what one cannot but do (to be oneself), can be pretty much like the 'little difference' of the Hasidic tale. A form-of-life that, rather than opposing capitalism (hence reasserting it in reverse), has deposed capitalist relations may look outwardly similar to other ways of living. Think of farmers' markets or community-supported credit systems; or of participatory plant breeding, frugal innovation or the permaculture movement.[1] Where is the difference with business-as-usual? Goods are sold and bought, money is lent, plants are grown, research and technology development proceeds. To get the difference one has to look at telling clues, especially those 'alternative value practices' (Centemeri, 2018) which run counter capitalist chains of equivalences and (self-)valorizing thrusts, such as the replacement of profit-seeking with 'just price', the adoption of participatory systems of certification, or the 'dilution' of work time.[2] It is on such features that prefiguration can arguably play its cards as a force of change.

Conclusion

If for Agamben 'to think a destituent power we have to imagine completely other strategies, whose definition is the task of the coming politics' (2014a, p. 70), prefiguration – or some of its expressions – may therefore already be forging such strategies. The category of destituent power is beginning to attract attention in debates over new mobilisations (Newman, 2017), as there are initial attempts to apply the notion of form-of-life to prefiguration (Bulle, 2018). This article contributes to this rising field of inquiry.

I made a case against affirmative thinking and for the double-edged character of subtraction as a way to address the emergent downsides of prefiguration, putting in dialogue two authors seldom featured together. Adorno and Agamben belong, and respond, to different phases of modernity. One is faithful to dialectical thinking; the latter's main philosophical influences (from Heidegger to French post-structuralism) are generally hostile to dialectics. Yet, there are evident resonances in their arguments (not by chance Benjamin is a common inspirational source), and their takes on subtraction link up with each other interestingly. Prefigurative experiences can be seen as (attempts to enact) forms-of-life, that is doings coinciding with beings. As such, and to challenge a ruling order governed by chains of abstract equivalences, they should not aim at a unified collective but at a constellation of incommensurables. The article provided clues to how the transformative potential of subtraction can be theoretically substantiated and empirically probed. Work is needed on both sides. Only a combined effort, whereby conceptual elaboration and

empirical enactment and inquiry feed one another, may impart a decisive twist to social forces' capacity to challenge runaway capitalism.

Notes

[1] Participatory plant breeding is an emergent form of cooperation between researchers and farmers, whose goal is to adapt varieties to local ecosystems, rather than the opposite (Ceccarelli and Grando, 2009). Frugal innovation comprises practices spreading mostly in the global South, whereby products and processes are reworked to reduce material and financial burdens (Khan, 2016). Permaculture is an approach to subsistence agriculture that 'considers human settlements as socio-ecological systems designed to reduce and optimise the need for energy inputs (including work)' (Centemeri, 2018, p. 297).

[2] Just price means, for example, that buyers pay beforehand farmers a sum to support their work, in return for an agreed amount of product – or even variable, depending on harvest results. Participatory certification (likewise community-supported credit systems) is based on trust and reciprocal acquaintance, rather than institutionalised expertise. For a combination of the two into a 'flour compact' see www.molinotuzzi.it/patto-di-filiera.php. Dilution of work time means that productive activities are interwoven with others: relational, leisure, etc. (see Centemeri, 2018).

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