

Beginnings without Ends. Prefigurative Democracy and its Futures.

Book review: Mathijs van de Sande, *Prefigurative Democracy. Protest, Social Movements and the Political Institution of Society*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. 202 pp., £19,99 (Paperback), £85,00 (Hardback).

Protesting in the form of taking to the streets, broadly construed, is an inherently democratic political institution, whose particularly dynamic development took place throughout the 20th century. While street protest, violent or not, always include an element of conflict with the state power, democratic structures developing in many places in the world, especially Europe and North America within the last 150 years, gradually lessened the chances of being killed upon expressing political criticism as a result of this conflict. This, perhaps, is one of the reasons why early 21st century saw a rise of such protests in already democratic, soon-to-be democratic, and aspirant-democratic political realms. In his excellent book, Mathijs van de Sande reads these protest practices using the notion of prefigurative democracy as encompassing different forms of protest conjoined by a very flexible idea: to establish an experimental political space for better democracy.

Prefigurative Democracy begins with an informative introduction, already introducing the notion of prefiguration, its variants and the history of its formation. Van de Sande outlines his notion of direct democratic action in occupy movements and asks a guiding question of this book: “How [...] can this particular understanding of political action or change that was implied in many of these recent movements’ practices be pinpointed?” (5). The answer, as suggested by the book’s title, is democratic prefiguration. While, as the author emphasizes, the history of the term is “messy, complex, and diverse” (6), he links this notion historically to contexts like the tradition of biblical exegesis, anarchism, Marxist theories in the 20th century, New Left and social feminism, and, finally, radical democratic theories and practice. At the same time, the author outlines his case field: Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, and Occupy Wall Street/Zuccotti Park will be his main examples, though he also mentions the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, Movimiento 15-M (Indignados) in Spain, feminist assembly movements in Latin America, and other occupy and protest movements. He also points to the two central theorists, upon whom his argument mainly rests: Ernesto Laclau and Hannah Arendt.

After a solid basis is won from the introduction, in the first chapter of *Prefigurative Democracy*, van de Sande goes back to the movement, which tends to be historically strongly connected with the idea of prefiguration, namely anarchism. He uncovers the origins of the motion of prefiguration in the conflict between Marx’s and Bakunin’s social theories and the split within the First International effected by this dissens. On Bakunin’s side, early concept of prefiguration developed: a theory assuming that the new society should develop in the ‘shell of the old.’ The so-called “‘embryo hypothesis’ was the idea that the International, as a workers’ organization, should seek to embody its ideal of a



future society through its own practices and organizational structure” (24). This idea was refined by Kropotkin, who, in his *Mutual Aid*, “found the seeds for future society [...] in already-existing social practices and relations throughout the (natural) history of mankind” and whose aim was hence to “liberate the already-existing forms of mutual aid” (32), and thus providing the concept of prefiguration with a more ethical character. From there, van de Sande moves to contemporary anarchist implementations of the term to demonstrate how it became more ethical, micro-political, and through this more temporary and local. The latter will become central to his study of prefigurative democracy and occupy movements.

Chapter 2 is largely devoted to a critical discussion of the role of means and ends for the concept of prefigurative democracy. The author discusses four possible ways of relating these two categories: the consistency of means and ends; prefiguration as ‘rehearsal’ or ‘experiment,’ in which aims could be constantly modified; or the possibility that “prefiguration caters to a plurality of (individually held) ends, rather than a single, common end.” (47 – 48). In the face of the latter option overseeing the political and collective character of prefiguration, van de Sande turns to Arendt’s concept of action and argues for understanding of prefigurative politics as beginning(s) without ends. His point of departure is *The Human Condition*, with its distinction between the public and the private (and an common-place side note on feminist criticism of this distinction, which, indeed, still reappears in the respective debates today). The author skillfully explains what differentiates action from other human activities, with particular attention to the question of aims – or in case of action: the lack thereof. Openness of Arendt’s notion of action becomes an asset when conceptualizing prefigurative democracy. The idea of spontaneity of action enters the stage in the discussion of the meaning of politics in Arendt, which is freedom. Freedom of action goes hand in hand with its spontaneity; with its meaningfulness as a new beginning: “Political action typically establishes a break with the status quo.” (62). An Arendtian reading of prefiguration will hence comprehend it as radically open-ended, entailing a meaningful experience, and so nonreducible to its eventual outcomes in its value, as well as distinctively political and collective. This chapter ends with an experimental resolution of the challenge posed by Arendt’s private/public distinction in *The Human Condition*. Referring to a number of authors who did it before him (e.g. Honig, Gündoğdu, Schaap – and it is worth mentioning that also Arendt herself opened a way for this interpretation in the discussion at the Toronto conference in 1972), van de Sande reaches for the figure of politicization (of social/ private issues) to present prefiguration as politicization, which he then illustrates with a number of practice examples.

In chapter 3, the author concentrates on public assembly as a way of expressing political contestation, to later move to a discussion of the council democracy as a form of government potentially compatible with prefigurative politics. He starts by recurring to public assembly as a form of political action and discusses the key features ascribed to it in respective debates: an assembly is an encounter; it challenges traditional forms of hierarchy, rulership, and vertical leadership; it has a bodily aspect; it creates and enacts the conditions needed for overcoming a contested status quo; and a symbolic or aesthetic

function is often ascribed to it. The critical question arising from this description is the one about political possibilities of an assembly and the limits thereof. And the most important liminal feature of assembly proves to be its exhaustible duration. Here van der Sande tests Arendt's concept of revolutionary councils as a possible governmental structure. In her political writings, Arendt faces a challenge of situating spontaneous, free action within an institutional frame. She then, inspired by Rosa Luxemburg, as the author rightly notes, reaches to the revolutionary tradition of councils, whose fragility corresponds with the fragility of action. Van de Sande devotes the entire last section to a detailed and scholarly well-informed discussion (as well as well-reflected critique) of this idea and its reception in political theory until today.

The next chapter centers on the important problem of representation: "How may prefigurative democracy be understood to challenge and alter our understanding of political representation?" (102). After outlining the field for further discussion by showing possible approaches to representative politics within and among occupy movements, van de Sande illuminates the distinction between representation as 'acting for' and representation as 'standing for' and argues for the latter to be more relevant for understanding democracy, especially in its prefigurative guise. The author turns to Ernesto Laclau (and a little bit also to Chantal Mouffe) to discuss how establishing of a discourse of collective identity – a common political language of a protesting/contesting group – requires establishing a politically meaningful symbol that offers a source of identification with a particular cause (as the color green is a symbol of pro-ecological politics or, for that matter, of feminist power in Latin America). Importantly, van de Sande avoids suggesting these symbols would stand for ideologies, which would question the freedom of action he assumed for his account, but rather emphasizes a possible variety of interpretations of a symbol (110). He then follows Laclau in answering a question on the distinctively political role of prefigurative democracy of the occupy movements. According to Laclau, radical democratic representation has a form of the synecdoche, which is a figure of speech, where one element represents an entity (as in the example provided by van der Sande: "we have hungry mouths to feed," 116). An occupy camp, as the author argues, can be understood as such a synecdoche.

The question guiding the last chapter is: "How can prefigurative democracy lead to social and political change in the long term?" (130). This question, obviously, is a big one because, and as experience shows, occupy movements and other forms of street protest have their momentum, which at some point just passes. As we speak of democratic structures, it is also important to remember that any political change may prove only temporary and turn into its opposite upon next election, as general raise of right populism in Europe, and perhaps particularly the current far-right government in the Netherlands – which has been perceived as the most liberal European states for decades – show. So, what is at stake here, is securing the social or political change that has been achieved, even if "it is debatable to what extend the meaning of prefigurative democracy, or the value of the experiences that it entails, really depend on its concrete outcomes. It is precisely this instrumentalist understanding of political action the prefigurative democracy seeks to challenge." (130 – 131). Van de Sande offers two non-mutually

exclusive theoretical hints as a possible answer: the phenomenological concept of sedimentation as interpreted by Laclau, and Arendt's concept of crystallization. Both metaphors entail a desire to preserve worldly events, which would otherwise pass and be forgotten, for the future. For Laclau, the social has no essential and objective foundation, so it must always refer to a process of grounding, and he describes this continuous process with the metaphor of sedimentation. Following Laclau, the author argues that if politics is understood as enactment, prefigurative practices can reactivate sedimented practices and relation that continue our social reality. This way, prefigurative democracy could become a source of political change over long term. But, as van de Sande points out, there is a problem here: sedimentation allows preserving only one truth, one set of demands, which eventually turn into a dominant hegemonic discourse on its own.

At this point, van de Sande returns to Arendt and her concept of crystallization, which he traces back to Kant. Arendt uses the notion of crystallization in two ways. The first can be found in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and serves Arendt to explain how worldly events originate historically (with particular attention to totalitarianism, of course), i.e. by contingent crystallization of certain elements in a particular time and place, which leads her to famously stating that, in terms of how human history develops, 'it could have always been otherwise.' The second understanding of crystallization, in her essay "Walter Benjamin," rather engages with rediscovering crystallized treasures of the past to reveal them, altered and strange, to the world anew. Van de Sande emphasizes that the conditions of such crystallization are always contingent but not arbitrary: "Crystallization, thus perceived, is a process that has no single, identifiable 'root' or 'origin', and no clear, predefined end. It pertains to a sudden fusion [...] of different elements, some of which have been subterraneously present for a long time." (142). The author then moves to the discussion of the political role of the storyteller, which is distinct from the role of a political actor and he observes that "through storytelling, the prefigurative moment may lose some of its initial, 'messy' or 'swirly' characteristics [...] and retrospectively acquire a more concrete and figurative form." (149).

In conclusions, van de Sande formulates the purpose of prefigurative democracy as "political re-institution of society." Prefigurative democracy as politics with many beginnings and no ends is programmatically open to unforeseeable future, and powered by solidarity but free action. This is the first of the five theses, with which the author closes his book; followed by thesis 2) prefigurative democracy is both formal and substantive; 3) prefigurative democracy is horizontal as well as vertical; 4) prefigurative democracy is in, against, beyond and in engagement with the state, and 5) prefigurative democracy is only the beginning. The latter is a decisively Arendtian moment. Having produced their stories, prefigurative democratic movements still "continue to hold promise for the future" (164). Worldly events and experiences, crystallized and perhaps even forgotten, will be rediscovered and becomes meaningful again. Hence, "prefigurative practices and movements [...] cannot simply be assessed by means of the immediate outcomes. Nor can they evidently be appreciated as either a 'success' or a 'failure.' They instead retain their political relevance or potential for the future, long after their momentum has passed." (164). The book ends with a statement that leaves us thinking:

“Prefiguration is likely acquire many new forms, applications and articulations in the future. In that respect, prefigurative democracy inevitably is also prefigurative of itself.” (165).

Mathijs van de Sande’s book is a wonderful read. It is well-informed and written in a style that makes reading it a pleasure. His argument is detailed and reflected but kept within a range allowing also the non-expert readers to enjoy it and learn from it. I would not hesitate to base a MA or postgraduate course upon it. Every notion, which the author may suspect his readers are not familiar with, every argument that might pose a difficulty, is being skillfully explained and backed up by examples. Van de Sande often repeats or summarizes what has already been said but, as a reader, I was not irritated by this, rather thankful.

Relying in his argument on Laclau and Arendt, as well as on a long list of other political theorists/philosophers, made his book both theoretically engaging and practically applicable to the events we currently witness or witnessed in recent past. Extending the historical reconstruction of the notion of prefiguration and its political reception in the first chapter was a smart move and a good opening for the reading of the following chapters. It is partly because both anarchism and revolution are topics, on which considerably more people have an opinion than well-founded knowledge.

If I was to make wishes as for what could still be included in *Prefigurative Democracy*, there would be two. The first results from the fact that van de Sande tends to describe spaces of prefigurative democracy/occupy movements as “happy” objects,¹ incited by solidarity and shared motivation for political action. From where I stand, I would also welcome a short mention of violence that occasionally took place within these spaces. I particularly mean violence against women that was reported from Occupy Wall Street, Tahrir Square and other sites of protest. The second would be a reflection on the content of the protest or the character of political change intended by specific occupy movements. For the examples used in the book, causes for the protests seemed to have been assumed, as if it went without saying, as worthy of support and politically uncontroversial. Thinking about it more critically, this kind of assumption is already political and its limit is always in sight. Pluralist political theories, such as Arendt’s, acknowledge the importance of multiple positions for the sake of the societies/communities of the world, and value dissent as a principle that protects politics from becoming ideology. Would this kind of weak normative claim not be needed to reinforce particular political causes? Granted, prefigurative politics is a tool of political left, as the political right is not interested in prefiguring anything and rather clings to the supposedly glorious past. But is there anything that we, eventually, would not like to preserve through sedimentation and crystallization? Are there not issues that we do not want to inspire future generations; stories we would not like to motivate their actions? And would it even be ours to decide? I hope these not yet ripe questions may inspire further reflection.

Needless to say, this review only slides over the surface of van de Sande’s argument. I recommend this book, from which I have learned a lot, which pushed my thoughts on some issues much further and opened some new fields I yet have to think through, to all

¹ Sara Ahmed, „Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 29–59, and elsewhere.

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readers interested in democracy theories and/or Hannah Arendt studies. I'm sure prefigurative democracy is worth your time and attention.

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