

'Don't just do something, sit there': Contemplative activism and 'being political' as prefigurative politics

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Suzanne Klein Schaarsberg

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Suzanne Klein Schaarsberg

Department of Practical Theology and Religious Studies, School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholars have considered how activists are 'being the change they want to see in the world' and have developed the concept of prefigurative politics to describe how movements for social change align the means of their changemaking practices with the end goals of their organisations. Whereas being and embodiment seem to be central to this slogan, relatively little systematic scholarly reflection has occurred on how 'being political' emerges as a form of prefigurative politics. This article introduces one example of how being can be a form of prefigurative politics by thinking through contemplative activism: the use of contemplation as a way of responding to global challenges. It shows that the political imagination of transformation that contemplative activists offer is a form of being (a state of existence) rather than doing (working towards a particular goal). This article considers how a study of contemplative activism as a prefigurative form of being political can contribute to three main debates within the literature on prefigurative politics: the specific relationship between means and ends, temporal distinctions between the present and the future and the actualization of goals. Ultimately, the article argues that considering social change to occur on an ontological level contributes to advancing a broad understanding of prefigurative politics that not just includes non-hierarchical models of organization but also comprises affective, embodied, and spiritual experiences as forms of prefigurative changemaking.

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Introduction

In response to global challenges, thousands of people gather on their weekends as part of a broad variety of events to sing mantras, practice 'peace' meditation in front of a giant inflatable Buddha or engage in indigenous rituals to make the world a better place. The people engaged in these practices, what I call contemplative activism, use spirituality and in particular contemplation as a form of protest. The change *contemplantivists* want to see in the world is enacted through contemplation: the experience of inner calm, peace, and

CONTACT Suzanne Klein Schaarsberg  s.t.kleinschaarsberg@tilburguniversity.edu  Department of Practical Theology and Religious Studies, School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University, Warandelaan 2, Tilburg 5037 AB, The Netherlands

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compassion according to them creates a society in which anger, violence and suffering are diminished. As these experiences are embodied and often happen in silence, these ‘acts’ are not so much ‘done’ as they are felt and embodied (Klein Schaarsberg, 2021). Contemplative activists do not (solely) build more democratic decision-making structures as part of their movements, nor do they march the streets loudly carrying placards with thought-provoking slogans. Instead, they sit down in (semi-)public spaces in quiet contemplation either as part of bigger protests, such as Extinction Rebellion or as stand-alone initiatives, such as the Belgian sit-in Silence for Peace. As one of my interlocutors puts it: ‘If we really want to change the world, you know, instead of going out on the streets and protesting this or against that (. . .), let’s just sit down and *be* peace.’

In this example, peace is not an outer condition but an inner experience through which social change is enacted and the distinction between inner and outer transformation seemingly loses its relevance. The means (contemplation) and the ends (peace) are conflated: it is by experiencing peace that the world becomes more peaceful. Contemplation could be seen as something one ‘does’ (*contemplativists* are consciously sitting down to become aware of the present moment in response to global challenges) and yet, paradoxically, contemplative activism cannot be *done*: my interlocutors tell me they cannot enforce a contemplative experience. As soon as they *want* it or try to *grasp* it the essence of the experience is already lost. Being the change one wants to see in the world for my interlocutors primarily revolves around an ontological experience behind words where effort (or doing) ceases. Being, in a sense, becomes a way of ‘doing’ and enacting change. Don’t just do something, sit there!

The ideal of ‘being the change one wants to see in the world’ has become somewhat of a slogan for political prefiguration. Movements of social change have long considered the importance of coherence between the means – the activities undertaken to provoke change – and the ends of social action – the preferred outcomes or ideal society. Whereas these debates amongst activists originated in the late 19th century, it was not until the 1970s that the term ‘prefigurative politics’ was introduced for this phenomenon by Carl Boggs (1977): the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.

The concept was subsequently taken up by scholars of the New Left (Breines, 1989; Epstein, 1993). One of the strengths of prefiguration as a concept to analyse political action is that it recognizes the micropolitics of changemaking capacities in (everyday) practices that ordinarily would not be understood as transformative (Krøijer, 2015b; Raekstad, 2019). The concept has been mobilized to understand a multitude of activities ranging from the occupation of Wall Street (Naegler, 2018; Teivainen, 2016) and Tahir Square (Sande van de, 2013), the alter-globalisation movement (Maeckelbergh, 2011) environmental direct action (Szerszynski, 1999) to small scale, local forms of cooperation such as car sharing, guerilla gardening initiatives (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2021) and ‘free spaces’ (Polletta, 1999).

Whereas Boggs explicitly refers to embodiment as an aspect of prefiguration, much of the existing literature emphasizes prefigurative politics as a form of ‘doing’ politics, rather than as a way of ‘being’ political. Debates around the major characteristics of prefigurative politics – the specific relationship between means and ends, temporal distinctions between the present and the future and the actualization of goals – emphasize the core

aspects of prefiguration as forms of doing, referring mostly to acts, practices, and tactics of provoking societal transformation. Relatively little attention has been paid to embodied experiences more generally and spiritual practices more specifically as a form of prefigurative politics. This is remarkable as the concept of political prefiguration is often linked to the idea of *being* the change in the world one wants to see and building a ‘new world in the shell of the old’ (Graeber, 2009, p. 203). It thus directly relates to the ontological level as it is concerned with shaping reality. Nevertheless, the ontological component of prefigurative politics has not yet been systematically reflected on.

This article does two things. First, it introduces contemplative activism as a form of prefigurative politics. Secondly, by thinking through the example of contemplative activism as prefigurative politics, it broadens the concept by introducing *being political* as a form of prefigurative politics. The aim of this article is thus, on the one hand, to understand contemplative activism as a form of prefigurative politics, and, on the other hand, to use this example to make a theoretical contribution to the concept of political prefiguration. I explicitly do not wish to put forward contemplation as a ‘better’ or more ‘effective’ form of prefigurative politics than what the field has hitherto considered, or even as an effective form of activism in and of itself. As I discuss later, it is questionable whether it subverts the status quo and, interestingly, *contemplactivism* itself seems to introduce a conception of change that is hard to measure in terms of its effectiveness, particularly over time. In this article, I will therefore predominantly use contemplative activism as one example of how politically engaged people contend they prefigure an alternative reality through *being* rather than *doing*.

Engaging with the field: practices, methodology and positionality

Contemplative practices are increasingly used as a form of protest in response to global challenges, such as war, terrorism, the arms trade, climate change and racial injustice. As a participant observer, I attended over 10 of these *contemplactivist* initiatives in the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom,¹ such as, for example, a World Peace Meditation organized by the Enlight Your Wish Foundation in Amsterdam, a sit-in organized by Silence for Peace in Belgium, a multi-day Inner Peace Conference in Amsterdam, a meet and greet event in London called ‘Meet the Contemplative Changemakers’ organized by Movement for Change and a multi-day retreat called ‘Radical Wellbeing: Mindful Living for a Better World.’ I selected events that specifically aimed to change society through contemplation yet differed in their approaches: events, such as the World Peace Meditation and Silence for Peace involved mass meditations and emphasized silence, whereas conferences and meet and greet events involved more talking. I selected events across a spectrum of scale: small events such as retreats (10 to 12 participants), medium-size initiatives, such as collective sit-ins (400 participants) and large-scale conferences (1500 participants). Another criterium I used for case selection was accessibility: some events took place in publicly accessible spaces, others required payment. I also chose events that took place in different spaces: outside on public squares (i.e. Silence for Peace), in retreat centers in the countryside (Radical Mindfulness), in old churches in European city centers (Inner Peace Conference) or community hubs (Meet the Contemplative Changemakers).

The events I engaged in covered multiple aspects of contemplative activism such as silent contemplation (most widely and dominantly practiced – i.e. sitting still in silence or meditation), practices of deep listening and sharing circles (the paying of undivided, non-judgmental attention when someone shares contemplative experiences), mindful walking or embodied movement (i.e. walking in nature, yoga and moving exercises), rituals (creating an altar, singing mantras, honouring the elements or the day) and community events (cooking and eating together).

As the motivation for my fieldwork was predominantly theoretical – I wanted to understand what exactly happens in the moment of contemplation that provokes ‘change’ and put this in conversation with political theory – I have not collected data on the identity and socio-economic position of my interlocutors. However, my observations match the findings of other scholars who point out that the spaces of contemporary spirituality are predominantly accessible to white, cis-gendered, middle class, able-bodied persons. Fitting within this privileged category myself meant that I was able to move through the field relatively unproblematically. I was, however, frequently asked whether I was ‘spiritual’ or if I had a ‘practice’ of my own attempting to locate me on the insider/outsider continuum (I reflect on this elsewhere, see Klein Schaarsberg, 2021).

I attempt to understand my interlocutors on their own terms and take my fieldwork encounter as a starting point to ask theoretical questions about existing concepts in political theory; are our concepts able to help us understand contemporary practices of changemaking and if not, how can they be adjusted? Adhering to such an interpretivist methodology (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), I conducted 20 to 30 relational interviews as part of these events not to capture ‘data’ in words per se but to engage directly with my interlocutors in the very processes of meaning making (Fujii, 2018, p. 9). The interviews were sometimes set up in advance when I wanted to follow up on conversations I had with participants during events but mostly they happened spontaneously as I chatted with people during and after events. This meant that I did not have a set list of people I wanted to talk to when ‘entering’ the field. I used my observations on site to distinguish between different roles, hierarchies, and functions in a particular context and spoke to people across these spectra: I interacted with the organizers of events and meditation teachers, as well as participants and volunteers. Interviews generally took place on the site of the event or in a café or restaurant if I was invited by my interlocutors to dinner or drinks after events.

I understand contemplation as an ‘umbrella category’ (Komjathy, 2018) of experiences, which in one way or another emphasize embodiment, interiority, silence, locatedness and presence (being aware of what is happening moment by moment). Etymologically, contemplation relates to ‘to look at’ or ‘to observe’ and meditation more specifically means ‘to consider/to think over’ (Komjathy, 2018, p. 53). In particular, it relates to the Christian *contemplatio*, a term signifying the maintenance of a silent awareness of the divine. Contemplation itself is often understood as a way of being in the world – a state of mind that induces the experience of being present in the moment. This gets juxtaposed to a mode of doing – undertaking goal-oriented practices that relate to conceptions of the past and the future (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Stanley, 2012). *Doing* relates to undertaking an activity to reach a certain outcome. It involves a cognitive evaluation of how things are and how things should be, with the difference being intentionally bridged by action (Segal et al., 2013). Whereas one can do almost any activity contemplatively,

experienced meditators reflect it is not an ‘act’ one does, but rather a way of being, a state of mind or an experience that emerges when all conscious effort to do, achieve or act ceases (Loy, 1997). *Being*-mode is more inward focused, experiential, difficult to capture in words, related to inaction (as when, for example, someone tells you to ‘let it be’ they call on you for inactivity) and open to uncertainty (Segal et al., 2013).

As we will come to see in the next section, however, the dichotomy between action and contemplation is blurred by contemplative activists for whom the practice of contemplation becomes a form of political action. Contemplative activists respond to global challenges not just by changing what they are ‘doing’ – i.e. by creating anti-hierarchical decision-making structures, setting up alternative economic models or supporting black-owned businesses – but by altering the experience of their state of existence (their way of being in the world) from one that is angry, disconnected and hurt, to a state of calmness, peace, and interconnection.

‘Don’t just do something, sit there!’: introducing contemplative activism

In this section, I will briefly draw out three strategies through which contemplative activists interweave inner and outer realities as a practice of transformation: 1) by generating inner resources, 2) by embodying a paradox in the face of violent power structures and 3) by practicing active hope.

First, according to my interlocutors, inner resources, such as happiness and peace generated through contemplation, contribute to their changemaking practices. For one of my interlocutors, Flo, who was hosting a webinar with Alex on the link between happiness and social change, ‘happiness can be a form of social change because it can challenge the consumerist materialist version of happiness that we are sold through current structures of society’ (Scalliom & Nunn, 2018). Mindfulness, for Alex and Flo is a way to ‘draw out positive qualities and emotions that exist in ourselves and that we would like to see more of in the world.’ To that end, they offered a 5-minute mindfulness exercise at this point (‘five minutes to change the world, GO’, Alex added with a smile). Contemplation for them thus becomes a prefigurative practice of ‘embodying some of the [change] we are talking about.’

As the organisation of the ‘World Peace Meditation’ in Amsterdam remarked, group meditation ‘makes a difference.’ Quite literally in this case, the organisation noticed that after meditation, donations for the charities they supported kept coming in. After a ‘Silence for Peace’ sit-in in 2017, one of the shop owners around the square where the initiative took place came up to the organizers asking if they ‘could do this every weekend.’ They had noticed a difference in the way customers interacted with them. For others, contemplation *changes* something because the inner calmness it cultivates spreads out into the world: ‘when I feel at peace within myself, it radiates out.’ Two ambassadors for Silence for Peace argue that generating these inner feelings of contentment through meditation is a condition for peace in our societies. In a workshop at the Inner Peace Conference, 2018, speaker Dr. Scilla Elworthy, a three-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, agrees there is ‘a political reason for developing inner power’ because without it ‘our unresolved emotions, like anger and fear can be projected onto others.’ At an initiative called Meet the Contemplative Changemakers someone recalled how he used to be an angry man and remembered that when he engaged in riots he would usually be

beaten up by the police. 'But the police *are in here*', he said as he tapped on his chest. Whatever was 'beating him up' and making him angry was an internalized version of these power structures that he was projecting onto the 'outside' world. He therefore used yoga and meditation to undo the internalized police to transform his anger ('thank God I found the cushion,' he said, laughing).²

Second, contemplation enacts a paradox in the face of hierarchical power relations through which my interlocutors embody an alternative. It offers another way of responding to societal injustice by not making a lot of noise or marching down the streets. One of my interlocutors, Tom, uses the term 'being a lotus in a sea of fire,' explaining:

When we are silent when everyone is screaming, when we are sitting still when everybody is putting their fists in the air and marching, we are the lotus in the sea of fire; it means something because of the context, we are doing something different that means something because of the public performance in the midst of the protests. Yes, then it is activism. It is radical. And by radical, I mean it goes down to the root. To the root of society – when it is brought into context with the root of society, then it becomes activism.

Radical social change, in other words, emerges by embodying a paradox: it lays bare how society in general functions, which in itself for Tom is a political statement. One of my other interlocutors described the effects of meditation as part of the Extinction Rebellion protests when he was arrested in a similar way:

And this mattered to me, that I was meditating whilst I was being arrested. Because the posture of meditation, it challenges 'business as usual'. The stillness, the rootedness, the embodiedness, it contrasts with the disconnection and the absentmindedness in relation to the natural world that has become normal and makes abuse of the earth for economic growth possible. The meditation posture (. . .) is put in front of authority in order to protect the earth from more industrial growth. We challenge this authority and the worship of the economic machine and let them know *this* is what matters.

Through contemplation, my interlocutors expose an embodied presence that according to them contrasts with 'business as usual,' the neoliberal, capitalist structures that make more economic growth possible at the expense of the natural world. Meditation, as peace activist and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, is a form of resistance to the ever-quickenning pace of life in which people are constantly 'doing' things: 'we have to resist the speed, the losing of ourselves, and therefore we must organize a resistance. Spending two hours with a cup of tea during a tea meditation is an act of resistance, nonviolent resistance' (Hanh, 2005, p. 113). I have indeed engaged in tea ceremonies as part of my fieldwork. *Contemplactivists* prefigure another way of relating to the challenges contemporary society faces by embodying that 'what matters' to them is calmness and non-violence (the lotus) rather than worshipping the economic machine (the sea of fire).

Thirdly, my interlocutors practice what they call 'active hope.' The concept was coined by Buddhist author Joanna Macy (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). She highlights three ways of relating to the problems of capitalist modernity: a) continuing 'business as usual' and people closing their eyes (and hearts) for the (ecological) disaster that is already underway, b) recognizing the catastrophe but stopping short of actual action and c) a position of 'active hope' that is committed to healing the wounds 'business as usual' has caused. Active hope for her is about desire – people can easily describe the future they hope for – not about a guaranteed outcome: 'active hope is about becoming active participants in

bringing about what we hope for' (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 3). It is about prefiguring change *now* rather than fixating on whether the things activists do will result in transformation in the future. Contemplation as a form of changemaking expresses active hope for my interlocutors. Like religious rituals, they argue meditative action has value in and of itself rather than it being evaluated against reaching a particular end. Active hope emerges as a response that my interlocutors practice in the face of global challenges to 'live out' the more beautiful world they think is possible (cf. Eisenstein, 2013) through embodied experiences provoked by contemplation. The contemplative acts undertaken by my interlocutors function precisely to participate in bringing about the future they hope for.

In other words, by a drawing on inner resources, enacting a paradoxical embodiment in the face of dominant power structures and the practice of active hope my interlocutors prefigure social change. For *contemplactivists*, it is about *being* the change one wants to see in the world (i.e. peaceful instead of angry) living it through an embodied experience of contemplation rather than about *doing* things (i.e. marching down the street, signing petitions) that bring about change. The change that is established is an embodied reorientation towards problematic power structures. It enables them to 'be' or exist differently within the neoliberal system as it becomes a radical act to be still, experience the silence and 'just be.' For my interlocutors, nothing needs to be 'done' or 'achieved': being fully aware of the present moment negates a gap between *what is* and *what is wished for*. Paradoxically, letting go of goals to be achieved introduces change on the level of being. Not-doing becomes a form of action and being becomes a form of doing.³ Yet, as we shall see in the next sections, being as a form of prefigurative politics has not yet received the attention it deserves in the literature on prefigurative politics.

Three aspects of prefiguration

Recent debates on prefigurative politics focus on three specific aspects of prefigurative politics: the means/ends correlation, a bridging of the present and the future, and the actualization of ideals (Sande van de, 2013). To begin with, when scholars remark on the equivalence of means and ends as a form of prefigurative politics, they mostly do so to emphasize a movement's commitment to the accordance of methods, tactics and strategies that are being deployed with the movement's goals, aims or ends (Yates, 2015). Some scholars argue that the means used by social movement groups to enact prefigurative politics are *expressions* of their wider goals, which Swain call 'ends-guiding' prefigurative politics (Swain, 2019). Others advocate 'ends-effacing' initiatives (Swain, 2019), which 'is a form of action in which certain means and ends become, effectively, indistinguishable; a way of actively engaging with the world to bring about change, in which the form of action (...) is itself a model for the change one wishes to bring about (...)' (Graeber, 2009, p. 201). Even when following an ends-effacing approach, Swain (2019) warns be there cannot be a one-on-one transferal between the means practiced by an oppositional movement and the 'new' society, or the end, that is being prefigured. Because movements engage in multiple means at any time to reach a diverse set of ends, some distinction between means and ends inevitably remains (Swain, 2019; Yates, 2015).

Second, the ends-guiding and the ends-effacing approaches both generate distinctive temporal framings: a recursive or future-oriented approach broadly aligns

with ends-guided prefiguration and a generative or present orientation fits with ends-effacing practices (Gordon, 2018; Swain, 2019; Wagner-Pacifici & Ruggero, 2020). With a recursive or future-oriented conceptualization of time, the changed society is recognized as a *future* ideal separated chronologically although not ideologically from practices undertaken ‘now’ to bring those ends about. Instead of means aligning with a future still to come, a generative position omits the necessity of linear progression between means and ends and instead introduces a tension between the ‘already’, the ‘not yet’ and ‘what will be.’ As Yates (2015) puts it, ‘to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an “alternative world” in the present, as though it has already been achieved.’ Prefigurative politics, Raekstad and Gradin (2020) argue, ‘means *bridging the gap between what is and what could be*, in a way that implements important aspects of the desired future society in the here-and-now.’

A third debate in the literature focusses on the actualization of ideals. It revolves around the question of how the micropolitics of prefigurative action translate into the macropolitics of institution building, strategy and structural change (Farber, 2014; Raekstad, 2018; Yates, 2021). There are worries that the effectiveness of small scale prefigurative action is easily overstated and needs to be supplemented by strategic action to reach revolutionary transformation. Cornish et al. (2016) therefore suggest that any meaningful analysis of prefigurative politics needs to move between ‘micro-level local sites and the larger macro picture.’ For some of the earlier writers like Breines (1989) and Epstein (1993), prefigurative politics should specifically engage with movement building and strategy. Others argue that building a new society automatically challenges the old (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Prefiguring alternative orders by developing revolutionary organizations can itself be a critique of the existing structures and thus a valuable effect of prefigurative protests. Rather than conquering the world, prefigurative politics seeks to build *another world*, not outside of present-day reality but within it, Maeckelbergh (2011) suggests.

Despite this ontological focus on shaping alternatives and other ‘worlds,’ the question of being political as a form of prefigurative politics has not yet been considered in detail within these debates. Scholars consider tactics, strategies and movement-building practices that creating an alternative requires. It is about *doing* - the active shaping of the change one wants to see and about reaching a particular goal. The debate focusses on whether *direct actions* reach their ends and bridge the gap between *what is* and *what activists want reality to be* which, as discussed above, reflects a mode of doing. In other words, means are activities rather than experiences of a particular state of being. The debate focusses on connecting micropolitics with macro goals instead of, in addition, considering how being can become a form of doing. In short, prefigurative politics is emphasized as a practice, a way of *doing* politics not also as a way of *being* political.

Contemplative activism, however, seems to suggest social transformation is indeed about *being* the change one wants to see in the world. Change for my interlocutors happens not only by engaging in movement building, democratic decision-making procedures or reflecting on strategies to achieve social change but also through contemplation. How can contemplative activism inspire a broader conceptualization of

prefigurative politics by expanding the scope of the concept to also include *being* as a form of *doing*?

Political prefiguration and spiritual experiences

There are perhaps good reasons *not* to consider contemplation a form of changemaking. Scholars have questioned whether spiritual practices, such as contemplation are acts of resistance or merely micropolitical gestures towards change (Jain, 2020; Purser, 2019). Meditation, yoga or mindfulness can be interesting lifestyle practices but might not be the most effective strategies to achieve revolutionary social change. Rather than an effective public contestation, *contemplactivism* that grounds social change in inner power or active hope might be a simple form of lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013) and quietism – the renunciation of worldly action or resistance in favour of divine devotion (Carrette, 2005). Daily habits transpose the question of social change onto the self rather than the streets, thereby mirroring the individualistic, consumer-oriented importance neoliberal power structures place on personal lifestyle choices (Haenfler et al., 2012).

In that sense, contemplative activism can be seen to reproduce contemporary inequalities instead of prefiguring alternative, non-hierarchical power structures. Striving for happiness and having hope about the future as more beautiful than the present emphasize individual experiences of personal privilege specifically and the human as the privileged agent more generally. As Ahmed (2010) argues, happiness and hope are unevenly distributed and what shows up as ‘happiness’ and ‘hope’ re-enforces rather than challenges privileged positions in society. Hage (2016) warns that human hope for better futures almost always happens at the expense of nature due to the continued extraction of natural resources. Vice versa, hope for plants, animals and the earth perhaps can only exist by virtue of the ‘death of hope’ (Chandler, 2019) for humans. By embodying a privileged relation to the future, *contemplactivism* serves perhaps not social change, but an individual roadmap through which modern selves can maximize their pleasures. Such a morality of self-fulfillment emerges under a variety of names, such as ‘authenticity’ or self-actualization (Rubin, 2015). Indeed, my interlocutors express such sentiments through sayings like ‘if you want to help the world do what makes you feel most alive!’ or ‘authentically connected human beings will be naturally drawn into being a more positive and contributing member of society.’

There is a tendency for contemporary protest movements to replicate the dominant structures they aim to subvert (Holloway, 2010). Even when aiming to consciously shape and live out an alternative, activists might find themselves opposed to, but not outside of, the socio-political context they challenge. Death (2016) therefore suggests we do not think of resistance as either accommodating or subversive of the status quo. According to him, there is no ‘pure resistance’ but rather we are provided with forms of counter-conduct, which ‘are deeply interpenetrated with the power relations they oppose; and which facilitate or enable the production and performance of alternative subjectivities through processes of ethical self-reflection: ways of not being like that’” (Death, 2016, p. 2). If my interlocutors’ practices do not take place ‘outside’ of the systems they wish to change and, in many ways support dominant power structures, I want to suggest contemplative activists present us with a counter-conduct, a ‘not being like that’ within the neoliberal system.

Indeed, while my interlocutors critique the ‘1% richest people on the planet,’ they also recognize that they are part of the system that produces extreme wealth when they proclaim ‘*we are the 1%*.’ They thereby highlight that ‘the system does not start a meter away from us, it runs straight through us,’ as one of my interlocutors puts it. They stress contemplation is not meant to ‘sidestep the political’ but rather ‘counter-acts “business as usual” by provoking trust, empathy, and openness.’ Contemplation, by invoking self-reflection on one’s position within political structures, they argue opens up the possibility to conduct oneself in another way, as connected, empathetic and open, introducing another way of being within the same (neoliberal) system.

These experiences of contemplative transformation are often not limited to the domain of activism but generate a broader subjectivity of ‘not being like that’ as they also directly inspire people to do particular kind of jobs (i.e. working for organizations that promote silence, happiness and well-being in society), the way people live (in contemplative community houses, off-the-grid caravans or old monasteries), the way they spend their free time (contemplatively drinking tea or going for a mindful walk) and daily chores, such as the dishes (‘doing the dishes is like bathing the baby Buddha. The profane is the sacred, the sacred the profane’ as one note read, next to the sink on the Radical Wellbeing retreat).

However, as we have seen above, prefigurative politics as an approach to revolutionary transformation is rarely conceptualized to include being as a form of political action. Raekstad and Gradin (2020) therefore suggest moving away from a narrow interpretation of prefigurative politics, which focusses mainly on setting up alternative, non-hierarchical models of organisation towards a broader conceptualization that also includes personal practices, human experience, emotions, values and relationships. They tease out how the feminist statement ‘the personal is political’ can be mobilized both theoretically and practically to inform such a wider perspective of prefigurative politics. Inner, personal experiences, they argue, are not limited to the individual but rather emerge through a wider set of cultural practices, power relations and external conditions. Embodied experiences flow from – and to – social relations.

I want to contribute to such a broadening of the concept by introducing spiritual ways of being as forms through which the personal *becomes* political, as political ways of ‘not being like that’ that re-shape social patterns. Some scholars have suggested that prefigurative politics has an ontological dimension and argue it presents us with an ‘otherwise’: a way in which things could also be (Krøijer, 2015a). In Rossdale’s (2019, p. 36) words,

Prefiguration should not be narrowly conceptualized as the rational configuration of means to align with predetermined ends, nor the straightforward embodiment of idealised utopias. (...) It is not so much the attempt to live utopias as it is the necessary (and necessarily problematic) work to imagine ways of being and relating otherwise. (...) Prefigurative politics might then be understood as a process through which we come to know ourselves, and to become otherwise.

If we follow Rossdale’s provocation, prefiguration is a political process of coming to know ourselves in order to become otherwise. I suggest thinking through contemplative activism as presenting us with such a prefigurative otherwise offers additional insights

into the three debates on political prefiguration – the specific relationship between means and ends, temporal distinctions between the present and the future and the actualization of goals – sketched out above.

Contemplation as a form of prefigurative changemaking

Means-as-ends relationalities

As we saw above, one characteristic of prefigurative politics is a coherence between the means and ends of social change. My interlocutors embody the change they want to see in the world and thereby model the future they want to achieve. Much of the literature I outlined above, however, is preoccupied with defining what kind of relation exists *between* means and ends with a particular focus on ‘doing’ rather than on *being* the alternative. And yet, as we saw, being-mode does not introduce a gap between the present and the future that needs to be bridged. What if change is enacted the moment the means are practiced? Practicing an embodied paradox during protests, for example, for my interlocutors is a non-oppositional stance that does not involve blame yet simultaneously challenges the powers that be. This challenge is not a separate end, but in that very moment the means become its own end by turning the body into a ‘lotus in the sea of fire.’ Instead of analysing whether contemplation reaches the ‘end’ of social change, I could ask what means and ends are to be to logically make sense of my interlocutors’ practices of ‘being the change you want to see in the world.’ How could means and ends be conceptualized if they imply each other – when it is not just that ends are not formulated along the lines of a strategic plan, but ends simply are met the moment the means are practiced?

In other words, ‘ends’ in my fieldwork do not seem to emerge as a distant future that can be brought about by effective forms of activism but are practiced *as* active hope, for example, in which the future is enacted *now*. The future is not an object to be found as a particular end or outcome of specific tactics or strategies. There is no ‘effective change’ for me as a researcher to find ‘out there,’ but rather what change *is* emerges within the practices of my interlocutors as enacted in the present. It is, for example, not a specific selection of a particular future that the three stories of active hope represent: they reflect a choice in the embodiment towards change *in the present*, disrupting the idea that somehow the future is a different temporal ‘real.’

Perhaps the meaning we have attached to these terms, means and ends, as separate aspects of prefigurative politics, fails to make sense of *contemplactivism*. Means and ends for my interlocutors are brought into being simultaneously through embodied, contemplative experiences. When I take contemplative activism seriously, means and ends are not distinct aspects for me to analytically separate. Transformation does not happen because means allow activists to reach envisioned ends but rather by enacting contemplation itself as both the means and end of social change. Transformative power does not lie within a particular means to reach specific ends, it lies within the means-as-ends relationality. Change is internal to the means-as-ends relationship: means are internal to ends, and ends are internal to means.

Whereas a conceptualization of prefigurative politics as ‘doing’ introduces a difference between means and ends, a focus on prefiguration as ‘being’ brings into focus how means

and ends can also produce each other in the present. The ontological experience of transformation my interlocutors have, introduces a particular means-as-ends relationality through which the body becomes the site where perspectives of a changed society are differentiated (Krøijer, 2015a). My interlocutors' inner affective states actively prefigure the creation of an 'otherwise' – other ways of relating and being in the world. In short, by considering being as a form of doing prefigurative politics, we can conceptualize means not just as *acts* to reach particular ends, but also as an embodied, affective experience of becoming otherwise.

Inhabiting a time as which we live: 'undoing' as a political act

Just as there are no different means and ends for my interlocutors, there is no different current reality as opposed to the future. *Being the change* comes not with an awareness of the past and the future as in doing-mode, wondering how to bridge a gap of what was, is and what will be. Considering being as a form of doing introduces an intense experience of the now in which one no longer conceives of time chronologically, because the future is experienced in the body as the present. Contemplative activism can perhaps be read as a changemaking practice that takes place as a transformation of chronological time. Holloway distinguishes between the chronological time in which we live (we live in the present that will be followed by the future), and the time-as-which we live, which is the time it takes to create the present and by extension the future – either as fixed or as changed. It is the time it takes to imagine and shape realities. Inhabiting a time-as-which we live, Holloway suggests, could open up a world of possibilities because it allows activists to prefigure the world as changed. Holloway argues that through inhabiting it, we can undo things, nouns, other entities and even societal structures that present themselves as stable but are suppressing verbs. Such undos create cracks in these seemingly fixated structures because people stop 'to make' them. We can, for example, stop to use pieces of paper as money and demonetize it; 'similarly, we make capitalism, and we can stop doing so' (Holloway, 2010, p. 233). If 'things' are done, we can undo them by not doing them. This has important implications for judging the effectiveness of social change movements. As Holloway puts it (Holloway, 2010, p. 236):

Traditional theory sees each moment in terms of its utility for constructing a future. Acts of rebellion are judged in terms of whether they contribute to the construction of a lasting revolution. But if we break duration, and each moment is distinct, then there is no need for acts of rebellion to stand before the tribunal of instrumental time. Each moment is its own justification: each moment of rebellion stands proud in its own dignity.

One could say that contemplative activism emerges as a rhythm and structure that moves away from chronological time into a time-as-which we live by shaping another reality in the present which is its own justification. Just as with means and ends, the future and the present emerge not as distinct 'things' but as a relationality, as the present-as-future that breaks with chronological time. When we consider being to be a form of prefigurative 'doing,' the present and the future do not emerge in a chronological manner but fold into each other as a 'co-present bodily perspective' which is 'radical change unfolding' (Krøijer, 2015b, p. 90).

As I have argued throughout this article, it is precisely a cessation of activity, a not-doing that marks the experience of contemplation as a state of being. Whereas Holloway conceives of such moments of not-doing quite plainly as opposing capitalist time and structures, based on my encounter with contemplative activism, I would suggest that my interlocutor's 'undoing' is much more subtle, as their practices are, as I have shown, less antagonistic and based on an embodied experience. Through *being* the change they want to see in the world, contemplative activists create moments in which a particular means-as-ends relationality potentially disrupts a linear trajectory of time and thereby are their own justification. Following Holloway, such disruptions can be seen as little cracks, moments that 'undo' the fixity of the structures of power that my interlocutors ultimately find themselves complicit in (also see Pellizzoni, 2021). Inhabiting a time-as-which we live, my interlocutors 'stop making' activism an act of loud protest but one of the contemplation, they stop making it an oppositional engagement to achieve future change. By being the 'lotus in a sea of fire,' they are *not doing* 'business as usual' at 'the roots of society' and thereby are prefiguring change. By being arrested in a meditation posture, they 'undo' the police as a fixed entity outside themselves and instead show that 'this,' a non-oppositional embodied experience – 'is what matters.' Paradoxically, things are done by not doing them as being becomes a form of political action.

A spiritual transformation of the self

When being is thought of as a form of prefigurative politics it seems that the actualization of goals is not just limited to organisational models or movement building but includes a spiritual transformation of the self that has political consequences. Cultivating a particular form of spiritual being is understood by my interlocutors not as a matter of political disengagement but as a form of revolutionary politics, as they prefiguratively enact ways of being and relating otherwise. Director of St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, Justine Huxley, contends that in the face of 'consumerism and the extractive economic model that has got us into this mess,' integrating an experience of interconnectedness of both the inner and outer levels of being into politics would be radical. 'What we try to do here at St Ethelburga's is somehow create that space [for integration]. I think what is needed in our society is to realign the inner and the outer dimensions of our experience.'

Landauer, an early-20th century German Jewish 'mystical anarchist,' suggests prefigurative politics is not a form of 'doing' but 'can only come from ourselves, from our own being' (2010, p. 89). In his words, 'only those who have journeyed through their own selves and waded deep in their own blood can help to create the new world without interfering in the lives of others' (2010, p. 88). The power structures that activists aim to challenge are not located 'out there' in the 'external world of social relations' but also within themselves ('the police are in here!'), or as Newman (2020, p. 7) suggests, 'the state is as much inside our hearts.' Revolution, he suggests, 'is not so much a direct and violent assault on political power, but rather an ethical work conducted on oneself, which results in a spiritual redemption whereby the will to be free is reclaimed by individuals.'

In this vein, enacting a particular form of spiritual being can be considered not a matter of quietism or (neoliberal) individualism, but a form of revolutionary politics. I spoke with Jack, one of the participants in a meditation sit in during

a rally in London that protested the visit of former President Trump to the United Kingdom in July 2018. I wondered how the two 30-minute meditations at the beginning and end of the march contributed to social change. Jack reflected on the teachings of Buddhist monk and Vietnamese peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh for whom peace work means, first of all, *being peace*. As Hanh puts it: ‘The kind of suffering that you carry in your heart, that is society itself. You bring that with you, you bring society with you. You bring all of us with you. When you meditate, it is not just for yourself, you do it for the whole of society. You seek solutions to your problems not only for yourself, but for all of us’ (Hanh, 2005, p. 77). Jack agreed with Hanh that there is no separate ‘individual’ distinct from society; to bring more peace into the world, people can start by bringing more peace into their everyday lives. The shared, intersubjective silence of meditation and other spiritual practices feels like ‘love’ and ‘does not fit within neoliberal individualism’: conceptions about the world and the self as separate entities are precisely what vanish in it, Jack told me. Contemplation and silence for him are ways to resist or at least pose an alternative to the neoliberal power structures of separation.

Spiritual experiences of silence and peace in the example above ‘lead to a different and more intense experience of the political’ (Newman, 2020, p. 5) by inhabiting a moment of prefigurative generativity through which a political subject detaches itself from former political models of being (i.e. neoliberalism) and shapes itself anew (i.e. love and interconnection). A political imagination of transformation occurs as a form of being (a state of existence) rather than doing (working towards a particular goal) through an embodied experience provoked by contemplation. What contemplative activists enact through contemplative activism is, in line with Landauer’s suggestions, a self-transformation that is political, or, as Yates (2015) suggests, intensely sociable. Having a deep spiritual experience generates for my interlocutors a truly radical context (cf. Krøijer, 2015a). What on the surface might not appear to be congruent – combining outwardly directed activism with contemplative practices that are oriented inwardly – is a false division for *contemplativists*. Contemplative activism broadens the scope, if you will, of both activism and spirituality (Schmid & Aiken, 2021).

Conclusion

According to *contemplativists*, it is through embodied, spiritual experiences of self-transformation that change takes place as they *become* the change they want to see in the world. I have shown that they do so in particular through cultivating inner strength, embodying paradoxes in the face of authority and active hope. Whereas much of the literature on prefigurative politics emphasizes ‘doing’ over ‘being,’ this article grappled with one example in which the ontological dimension shows up as a form of political engagement. As ‘not doing’ becomes an ‘act’ of political contestation, contemplative activism blurs the distinction between ‘doing’ and ‘being,’ action and contemplation, spirituality and changemaking. This article argued that considering spiritual ways of being as a form of political prefiguration can offer us inspiration to expand the toolbox of prefigurative politics with ontological conceptualizations. It contributes to advancing the understanding of prefigurative politics from a narrow one – focused on organisational

structures and movement building – to a much broader concept that also includes affective, embodied and spiritual experiences, in short, ways of being. Future research on prefigurative politics is needed to understand how different aspects of this broader concept work and fit together. Does prefigurative politics need both ‘doing’ and ‘being,’ are these complementary forms of prefigurative politics or is there an inherent tension between them?

Notes

1. The focus on the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom has predominantly been driven by practical considerations during my PhD. Living in the UK and originally being from the Netherlands, limitations of time and money made these the places I could easily travel to.
2. There is some initial work on how contemplation could be an anti-racist practice (Anālayo, 2020; King, 2018; Magee, 2019) but I thoroughly recognize contemplative activism might not be an ‘effective’ form of political contestation when black bodies are physically threatened by the police.
3. In the Zen tradition this doing by not doing is referred to as *wei-wu-wei*: governments are urged to do as little as possible and not to interfere into individuals’ lives (Loy, 1985, 1997; Slingerland, 2003). There is a debate in the literature as to what *wei-wu-wei* means both in the Zen tradition and more specifically how it has been interpreted politically by various Taoist governments. Whereas it would be interesting to trace genealogically how this ideology shaped contemporary political practices in the West, it falls outside of the scope of this paper.

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Notes on contributor

Suzanne Klein Schaarsberg is a scholar of religion and politics and currently a postdoctoral research fellow at Tilburg University. Her PhD research focused on the ontologies of contemplative activism and their implications for theoretical concepts, such as politics, change and subjectivity. She is currently studying esotericism as a form of anti-institutional politics.

Ethical approval

The fieldwork that informs this article has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Aberystwyth University, Wales, United Kingdom. Informed consent has been acquired for each interaction. Due to the nature of the methodology (relational interviewing) consent was obtained orally.

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