# On Non-Capitalist Subjectivities, Prefigurative Politics, and the Role of Anthropologists in Cooling the World.

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Cooling the World: Anthropological Holism and the Search for Alternative Ways of Life.

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When I strolled over the *Bundesplatz* on Tuesday, September 22, 2020, I was fascinated by the large infrastructure that had been erected in no time at all. There were tents everywhere, a huge stage, compost toilets, a recreation tepee, and a community kitchen. I felt impressed by the number of people that have gathered and the elevated and fierce atmosphere. People were moving, dancing, shouting, and chanting. Some had instruments, others used their voices or were swinging banners, signs, and flags. It seemed to me that despite the ongoing COVID pandemic, the youth, responsibly wearing masks, was filled with political energy and a commitment to do something about the climate crisis.

In the early morning hours of September 21, 2020, activists of the *Climatestrike* movement occupied the *Bundesplatz* in Bern. This action took place within the *#RiseUpForChange* action week. The prominent and symbolic place where the action would take place came at great surprise. Demonstrations on the *Bundesplatz* during parliamentary sessions have been prohibited since 1925 (Marti 2020). But a formal prohibition couldn't stop the activists from taking action. Climate change is an existential threat which is why, civil disobedience was not only justified but mandatory, as they expressed in a communiqué:

"The ignorance on the part of the decision-makers is intolerable in view of the worsening situation. We therefore consciously resort to peaceful civil disobedience against this climate-destroying system" (Climatestrike Switzerland 2020; translation mine).

In contrast to that ignorance, then, their action should work against a system that not only threatens our world's ecologies but the future existence of most species.

The occupation was planned to take place for one week and a detailed program had been developed, including activities that ranged from demonstrations to workshops on ecofeminism, to a bicycle-powered cinema, and yoga classes, etc. (ibid.). Unfortunately, the protest camp was evicted after failed negotiations with the cantonal authorities and the police force, which led to the detention of over 100 activists (Bandle 2020). Although the activists were not successful in carrying out their occupation as planned, their action can be judged as a success. For weeks, media reports engaged with the activists and their demands, giving them a platform to voice their concerns. Climate change was a ubiquitous issue on the public agenda<sup>1</sup>.

Inspired by the voracious energy of these mostly young activists, I wish to explore in this essay how such protests articulate new sites for being and becoming. With this question in mind, I will examine if the climate protest can be understood as a space in which non-capitalist subjectivities (Gibson-Graham 2006) can be fashioned and cultivated and what such a conceptualization helps us to grasp. Drawing on the concept of prefigurative politics, I will argue that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Some activists, however, have lamented that media coverage and public discussion wrongly focused on the political action of the occupation rather than on the ongoing climate crisis.

the occupation not only acted against a current order, exemplified in carbon-driven capitalism but also brought about new worlds, enacting them by pretending that they are already reality. In the last section, I will engage with the question of what role anthropologists like me can play when they stumble upon such protests.

### Non-capitalist Subjectivists and Prefigurative Politics

Capitalism is a serious threat to our world's ecologies and their future existence. Moore (2017) argues that primitive accumulation led to a new world praxis which he calls Cheap Nature. Capitalism, then, is premised on the differentiation of nature and humanity. The externalization of Nature enabled the cheapening of resources whether human or not by positioning them in the natural domain. In that way, empire and capital could expand which effected dramatic landscape revolutions (2017: 600ff.). Appropriating Cheap Nature, then, still allow for tremendous profits, whether as palm oil plantations on Borneo, as copper mines in the Atacama desert, or as industrial livestock production in Iowa.

But what alternatives to capitalism do we have? What other ways of dwelling in this world are realistic options? Gibson-Graham plea for a collaborative project which entails the performance of "alternative economies in place" (2006: ix). For the authors, this project entails four phases: the deconstruction of capitalist hegemony, the creation of new languages of economic difference, the cultivation of non-capitalist subjectivities, and building community economies in concrete places (ibid.). It is the third phase, that is most interesting for my essay.

Non-capitalist subjectivities, for the authors, "involve new practices of the self, producing different economic subjects through a micropolitics or ethics of self-transformation (2006: xvi). Importantly, the production of new subjects is no simple process, as it refuses "a longstanding sense of self and mode of being in the world" (ibid.). Moreover, non-capitalist subjectivities are not simply positioned against capitalism. Rather, they are able to "desire and create 'non-capitalism'" (2006: xvii). In sum, then, the creation of non-capitalist subjectivities renunciates old ways of relating to the world, replacing them with an imaginative and affective investment into a 'true' alternative.

Here, the concept of prefigurative politics comes in handy. Boggs defines it as "[t]he 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" (1977; cited in Jeffrey and Dyson 2020). Prefigurative politics, then, whether consciously or not, aims to manifest in the present the desired social forms of the future, for which the movement fights. Often, this entails decentralized forms of direct democracy and consensus-based forms of

authority<sup>2</sup> (Leach 2013). Common examples of prefigurative politics include autonomous social centers (Yates 2015), the Occupy movement (Farber 2014), community gardens (Guerlain and Campbell 2016), or the Zapatista Insurrection in Chiapas, Mexico (Stahler-Sholk 2019).

Prefigurative politics, as I would like to argue, can be central a resource through which non-capitalist subjectivities can be cultivated. As we have seen, the latter involve the renunciation of previous subject positions in favor of a new investment into an alternative. In other words, new ways of being and becoming have to replace central elements of our ways of dwelling in this world. Prefigurative politics, then, aims to manifest these new ways of being and becoming through practices and discourses, anchoring a vision or utopia in the here and now. Doing so, this form of politics bridges the gap between the present and a utopian future. For the matter of this essay, it is a useful concept as it allows to examine whether the political protest of the *Climatestrike* movement creates spaces in which different subjectivities can arise and flourish.

### Non-capitalism in the *Climatestrike* Movement

My examination is troubled by several factors. I cannot present an in-depth ethnography that is usually associated with the pretensions of anthropology. Neither did I spend the required amount of time in the field to produce sufficient data that would allow me to write ethnographically about what I have observed. My observations are more of an everyday and eclectic quality. As a consequence, I cannot offer an analysis that is deeply grounded in the local context.

Further, as a classmate pointed out to me, the *Climatestrike* movement does not necessarily position itself as anti- or non-capitalist. Here it is useful to understand social movements as fissiparous and rhizomatic networks (Castells 2010) which entail "diverse organisations and individuals with broadly aligned perspectives on the nature of the problem, but with differing emphases on what to do about it" (North 2011). In the case of the *Climatestrike* movement, this means that despite the consensus that climate change is ought to be averted, there is a great variety of heterogenous actors converging and diverging. For some, the market economy or industrial civilization is the evil per se, whereas others are more interested in technological advancements that would allow to solve our problems, a belief that has been characterized as 'techno fix' (Haraway et al. 2016: 546). The challenge, for me, then, is not to impose notions of non-capitalism on the activists as the empirical reality might prove to be different or at least far more heterogeneous and complex.

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  Someone recently pointed out to me, that this might be an idealized understanding of prefigurative politics. That person argued, fascist political movements are similarly trying to manifest the desired social forms of the future in the present. We thus need to keep a critical stance toward the concept, rather than fetishizing it.

Last but not least, and closely related, social scientists are part of the struggle that they describe, as Bourdieu (2004: 88) has pointed out so elaborately. I have an active interest in encountering non-capitalist alternatives in this world because of the socialization and politicization that I underwent as a teenager. The years spent in Marxist reading groups and political collectives might influence my perception as I do not only have a conception of but an investment into a world, which Bourdieu would describe as a specific *illusio* (Böning 2014). Not only do I have a social scientific interest in non-capitalism, but also a political and personal one.

Despite these epistemological conundrums, I am confident in saying that I observed a space where non-capitalist subjectivities were cultivated. This showed in many different forms. The activists had set up a huge infrastructure in a community kitchen to feed the protestors during the occupation. One person told me, that they used only local food and processed edibles that were saved from going to waste. Furthermore, food was for free (although one could donate to cover expenses). However, there was no clear division of labor at play in the kitchen. Participation was encouraged and decisions were taken by all who wanted to be part of the kitchen collective. The social structure constructed around the kitchen then reverberated with the classical Marxian shibboleth "from each according to his ability to each according to his need" (Marx 1989), mirroring a renunciation from capitalist relations to food and the service industry.

The community kitchen, in my interpretation, signifies what Gibson-Graham described as "new practices of the self, producing different economic subjects through a micropolitics or ethics of self-transformation (2006: xvi)". The micropolitics or ethics of self-transformation expressed in the consensus of only using local food and in making it accessible to everyone. Entertaining a community kitchen indeed produces different economic subjects. These economic subjects are guided by a moral impetus of communitarianism that circumvents capitalist modes of food production and distribution.

Another clear site where non-capitalist subjectivities could be cultivated was the supporting program of the occupation. As already mentioned this program included workshops, yoga classes, and other cultural activities. The activists, then, managed to set up a little microcosm in which all could participate and access resources such as education, cultural activities, etc. I interpret the supporting program as an instance in which countercultural modes of being and becoming are exercised. This then allows for an imaginative and affective investment into an alternative by prefiguring it in the here and now.

But how would such an alternative look at large? What do the micropolitics and ethics of self-transformation deployed in such political actions mean for society in general? Here, the activists have not spared any efforts. At the beginning of this year, the *Climatestrike* movement

published the detailed *Climate Action Plan*. Throughout its more than 300 pages, the plan discusses possible measures that could be taken to avert the disastrous effects that of climate change. This document has been developed together with scientists from all possible disciplines. Indeed, more than half of the 70 editors hold academic titles and positions ranging from degrees in community development to chairs in glaciology and biogeochemistry (Climatestrike Switzerland 2021: 7ff.).

The introduction of the plan is titled *Vision – a Message from the Future*. Deploying a speculative and utopian mode of storytelling, this message from the future sketches out the society which lies ahead. In the storyline, a person drives their bicycle to work. Where there had previously been noise by planes and cars, the worker can now hear birds and insects. Through retraining measures, people who had had less sustainable jobs now work as engineers for CO2-absorbing technologies or lead perma-culture farms. People are on a mostly vegetarian diet and spend their holidays on bike tours. 12 months parental leaves, 6 hours working days, and an emphasis on sustainability allow for community service and flourishing social lives (2021: 10f.).

I read this *Message from the Future* as a signifier of the importance that the activists place on exploring new ways of dwelling in this world. Whereas capitalist subjectivities had placed more emphasis on work, wealth, and individualism, life seems to develop towards post-material and community values. Whether these are proof enough of my hypothesis that the activists create sites, where non-capitalist subjectivities can flourish, remains unanswered. Nevertheless, I understand this document as an imaginative and affective investment that is earnestly exploring the possibilities of life beyond capitalism as we know it. Here, it might prove to be interesting to connect this with anthropologies of the future (Bryant and Knight 2019) and hope (Appadurai 2013), a task that I leave for others.

The protest camp on the *Bundesplatz* was an attempt to prefigure that society of the future in a small and temporary setting. Indeed, the political form of a protest camp is one that I have witnessed again and again: My first encounter was after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011 when activists set up a protest camp in front of the *BKW* in Bern. Later on, at the protests against the G7 summit in Garmisch-Patenkirchen in 2015 and the mobilizations against the G20 in Hamburg in 2017, I again stumbled upon this same form of protest. In my experience, these camps perform an additional function to covering the basic bodily needs of protesters such as food or shelter. They also serve as social laboratories in which utopian social models can be anticipated, experimented with, and enacted. They then have a strongly

prefigurative dimension where new possibilities emerge and new worlds are being imagined, anticipated, and acted upon.

Does this mean that the activists who occupied the *Bundesplatz* in Bern managed to abolish capitalism by creating temporary autonomous zones (Bey 2003) or even indefinite ones? Not in the slightest. As Gibson-Graham (2006: xvi) argue, producing new subjects is a tedious and lengthy process. After all, it includes the renunciation of old ways of relating to the world, replacing them with an imaginative and affective investment in to a 'true' alternative. This will not happen today or tomorrow. What the activists did, however, was laying ground to explore and experiment with new ways of being and becoming outside the hegemony of capitalist subjectivities

## The Role of Anthropology in Cooling the World

But what does that have to do with anthropology? What can anthropologists do in these urgent if not troubled times? What role will they play in the challenge of battling climate change? What part do they have in ensuring the ongoing existence of our ecologies and habitats? These are not easy questions and there are myriads of possible answers to them. In what follows, I wish to propose a specific answer to these problems. I will argue that one key task of anthropology will be to nurture what Hage (2012) has called the radical political imaginary. Through ethnographies, whether at home or abroad, anthropologists can show that there are other ways of being in and relating to this world. Doing so, they can provide resources for the cultivation of non-capitalist subjectivities, that is subjectivities who "desire and create 'non-capitalism'" (Gibson-Graham 2006: xvii).

When I first read Hage's (2012) *Critical Anthropological Thought and the Radical Political Imaginary Today*, I felt troubled. I was surprised by the easiness with which, in conversation with Viveiros de Castro's work, he reintroduced the notion of radical alterity. I was surprised because it is an idea that I have spent a lot of time deconstructing and because it is a notion that easily leads back to the denial of coevalness (Fabian 2014) which characterized so much anthropological work. Further, ideas of radical alterity haunt the contemporary political climate expressed in discourses of the other as fundamentally distinct (Stolcke 1995) which leads to the problematization and exclusion of migrants (Korteweg 2017). It therefore seemed counterproductive to me to speak of the other as being radically different.

A closer reading of Hage (2012), however, offers a fruitful point of entry into my discussion. To show that, it is important to clarify two of the terms he uses. The first component of his argument is critical thought. Critical thought, Hage argues, is an intellectual enterprise that "enables us to reflexively move outside of ourselves" (2012: 287). In the case of sociology, critical thought allows us to conceive of relations, structures, and forces outside of us. These relations have been interpreted as power relations or relations of domination reproducing the status quo (ibid.). Critical sociology then can become a resource to de-naturalize these relations that act upon us.

According to Hage, the case of critical anthropology is a different one. Embarked on a journey to capture people outside modernity, early anthropologists revealed that we could live differently in this world. Anthropology, then, "widens our sphere of what is socially and culturally possible" (2012: 288). This differs from sociology, in which the studied relations already have a causal effect on us. Nevertheless, they are of importance to us, in that they show that "we can be radically other than what we are" (2012: 289). Anthropology, then, as a comparative project, exposes us to the possibilities of living differently.

The second term, Hage uses, is the radical political imaginary. He defines it as a cognitive and affective structure that leads not only to a conception of but also an investment in to the world (2012: 290). This imaginary contains visions of the perceived enemy, the perceived bringers of change, and post-revolutionary fantasies (2012: 291). Importantly, the radical political imaginary is always characterized by a balance of the anti and alter dimensions of politics: Antipolitics mobilize against the current social order through oppositional politics, often grounding themselves in critical sociological thought. Alterpolitics, on the other hand, is concerned with sketching out alternatives to said social order. Critical anthropological thought, then, is a resource for the latter as it reminds "us of the actual possibilities of being other to ourselves (2012: 292). Whereas, as Hage asserts, the radical political imaginary had been historically dominated by antipolitics, the emergence of new social movements are increasingly turning to alternatives which might give anthropology a privileged role to play (2012: 292f.).

Following Hage's (2012) proposition, I conclude that anthropology has a central role to play in the attempt to cool the world, for which Eriksen (2016) pleas. What anthropologists can do, among other things, is to nurture the radical political imaginary by opening the perceptive horizon of what is culturally and socially possible. This does not mean that anthropologists need to set out to the Amazonas, although ethnographies of radically alter societies might turn out to be a fruitful resource to imagine otherwise. Anthropologists at home can equally contribute to that critical and radical project. Radical alterity, as Hage (2012) argues haunts all social relations. Anthropologists, then, can show that the hegemony of capitalism is never total. Through rigorous fieldwork and poetic ethnographies, they can show how radical alterity is always

already here. As a notion, radical alterity allows us to reveal the limits of hegemonic systems and perceive what is already flourishing in the cracks of capitalism.

Interesting areas of research, for that matter, might include shared economies as they are practiced and lived by a growing number of people in Bern and elsewhere. The collective Raaupe, of which I know several members, for instance, has been sharing the same bank account for five years now. By collectivizing their salaries and expenses, they wish to create similar opportunities for all members and generate more time for critical education, care-work, and social relations. Although they do not understand this as the abolishment of capitalism, they regard it as a useful step to changing the world (Raaupe n.d.).

In my interpretation, such projects can contribute to the tedious and lengthy process of creating new economic subjects. Anthropologists then can nourish spaces like the one I have encountered on the *Bundesplatz* in Bern with such knowledge about different economic subjectivities and practices. By documenting and analyzing the possibility of radical alterity, whether here or there, our work can contribute to the prefigurative politics of climate protest by showing that another world is not only possible but already haunting us. This ultimately might also contribute to the other phases of performing "alternative economies in place" (Gibson-Graham 2006: ix), that is, the deconstruction of capitalist hegemony, the creation of new languages of economic difference, and building community economies in concrete places (ibid.).

Apart from providing activists with knowledge about radical alterity, anthropologists can also participate more actively in the movement against climate change. Indeed, our discipline has a long tradition of political engagements that was already present at its beginning. Think of Frank Hamilton Cushing, who became First War Chief of the Zuñi and participated in the resistance against the new Reservation in 1877 who dispossessed the Zuñi of the Nutria Valley (Engelke 2017). From then on, anthropologists have found ways to become politically engaged as expressed in the branch of engaged anthropology (Ortner 2019) or activist scholarship (Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009). These modes of scholarship all question the notion of an objective and analytically distanced observer.

It is important to remind here that even in the natural sciences, which uphold the virtues of objectivity, the role of the distanced scientists has been questioned. Brad Werner, a geophysicist, for instance, argued at a meeting of the *American Geophysical Union* that global capitalism has destabilized earth-human systems up to the point that their sheer existence has become compromised. This led him to call for revolting acts, not as a political practice (or praxis) but as an urgency of geophysical dynamics (Haraway 2016: 47). What we can learn from this anecdote is that the ideal of the distanced researchers is worn out now more than ever.

Anthropologists, like all other scientists, have a responsibility to engage with the challenges and urgencies of their times. They have to put themselves in the trouble and mess that characterize our contemporary worlds.

In sum, then, anthropologists who wish to participate in the urgent task to cool the world have two complementary options. Through their disciplinary training, they can provide activists with knowledge about economic alternatives radically alter to capitalism. This can nourish spaces where prefigurative politics emerge and might help to cultivate non-capitalist subjectivities. In addition to that, they can break free from the role of analytically distanced observers and participate actively in movements that aim to avert the effects of climate change. They themselves can undergo the lengthy and tedious process of cultivating subjectivities that desire non-capitalism and by doing so contribute to the urgent task of cooling the world.

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