TRYING NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT:

THE LIMITS OF INTER-IDEOLOGICAL COLLABORATION IN PREFIGURATIVE COMMUNITIES

Studies of recent protest movements have suggested that by following the anarchist tradition of prefigurative politics, such movements are able to form broad coalitions based on shared practices that sidestep ideological differences. This study examines the limits of this “primacy of practice” argument, by looking into the actual political practices of several ideologically diverse prefigurative movements. Based on a three years ethnography of a New England based prefigurative libertarian community, and a comparison of its political practices to similar previously documented ones adopted by New Left prefigurative movements from the 1960s to 1980s, this study shows ideology to have salient presence in activists’ habitual political action, leading to differences not only in the meanings attributed to ostensibly similar institutions, but in the actual practices themselves. These findings serve to challenge existing assumptions about prefigurative movements ability to form inter-ideological coalitions, as well as to advance social change solely through developing alternative institutions and practices.

The past decade had witnessed a series of protest movements centered around a common call for reform of the democratic system, in favor of more decentralized, participatory, and autonomous political forms. Central to all these movements was their tendency to eschew traditional forms of organization in favor of horizontal anti-hierarchical forms that favor the diffusion of political power across the movement. Research into these movements found such modes of organization to be facilitated by new media technology (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2013; Gitlin 2012; Jensen and Bang 2013; Juris 2008, 2012), as well as by cultural trends towards individualized or personalized politics, valuing participation as a measure of self-expression, autonomy, and recognition (Bennett 1998; Lichterman 1996; Polletta 2014). As many have pointed out, these movements’ organizational forms, as well as tactics, are greatly influenced by anarchist tradition of direct action, as activists, instead of advocating for government to act, adopt practices that aim to directly prefigure the social order they wish to bring about (Brissette 2013; Graeber 2002, 2009; Juris 2010; Maeckelbergh 2011; Porta et al. 2006; van de Sande 2013; Yates 2015). In these prefigurative forms, the ends of the social movement get to be modeled by the very means it carries out to
achieve them, essentially conflating the movements’ actual practices and its desired goals. As such, scholars, and activists themselves, have tended to prime practice as the vehicle for change, as well as the consolidating factor rendering the movements solidary and coherent, attributing political ideology, at best, a secondary role. The consolidation around common practices, so the argument goes, allows activists of diverse ideological creeds to come together in solidarity, collaborate, and act in unison against a system they all agree is unjust. This argument is inspired by an established premise about the “primacy of practice”, assuming it is common practices that actually sustain our political coexistence, regardless of existing disagreements about their justifications (Appiah 2006; Sunstein 1995).

This paper offers an empirical examination into the limits of this argument. As I will show, empirical comparison of left and right leaning prefigurative movements and their practices, reveals ideology to play a central role in shaping the activists’ understanding of their actions, as well as their actual practices. Based on a three-year ethnography of a right-leaning libertarian movements, and a comparison of its practices to documented accounts of New Left movements of the 1960s-1980s, I will show how left and right leaning activists draw on different vocabularies of motive to explain and justify their actions, which in turn translate into a practical difference in the boundaries delimiting activists’ range of acceptable practice. As such, I argue practical collaboration can only go so far, before it will face debilitating ideological differences.

**Prefigurative Politics and the Primacy of Practice**

Prefigurative politics relies on the notion that social movements’ ends are to be shaped by the very means employed to achieve them. As such, the type of practices and relationships prefigurative movements tend to perform aims to model (or prefigure) the kind of society they seek to build, creating, so to speak, “a new society in the shell of the old” (Leach 2013). Historically, such forms consisted, for the most part, of a more participatory, decentralized, and consensus-based organizational style (ibid), however they extended far beyond the public political sphere and into domestic and mundane practices such as parenting (Simi, Futrell,
and Bubolz 2016), schooling (Swidler 1979), sexual behavior (Echols 1992), and even cooking (Williams 2017).

Historically, preliminary forms of prefigurative projects include the 1871 Paris Commune (Ross 2015), Russian soviets in the early 1900s, factory councils and Council Communism in interbellum Italy and Germany, and Spanish collectives during the Civil War (Boggs 1977; Leach 2013), as well as the Kibbutzim movement in Israel throughout the Twentieth Century (Blasi 1986; Goldman 2012). Later incarnations of prefigurative movements can be found in the US in various New Left projects of the late 1960s to 1980s (Berger 1981; Breines 1989; Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002; Swidler 1979), as well as in the women movement (Buechler 1990; Echols 1992, 1989; Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright 2013), and more recently in the uprising against neoliberal globalization (Graeber 2009; Juris 2008, 2010; Maecckelbergh 2011; Porta et al. 2006) and the Occupy movement (Brissette 2013; Gitlin 2012; Gould-Wartofsky 2015), as well as in some localized variation of anti-capitalist “Nowtopian” projects (Carlsson and Manning 2010). Generally speaking, these leftist prefigurative movements share three basic concerns: (1) a rejection of reproducing hierarchical authority; (2) a rejection of political parties and other centralized political organizations, as reproducers of old power relations; and (3) a commitment to democratization through local collective organizational structures that anticipate the future liberated society (Boggs 1977:103).

As had been pointed out, many of these more recent movements often failed to articulate a clear and coherent ideological worldview, or even political demand, and instead congregated around a series of common practices, supported by a feeling of collective effervescence, as a source of unity and solidarity. For many, in the mainstream media as well as the progressive left, this was interpreted as a sign of confusion and immaturity, but for the activists, as well as some sympathetic analysts, it was this exact multitude of voices that came to define the movements, and indeed were a source of their strength (Bennett and Segerberg 2013:6–7; Calhoun 2013; Gitlin 2012:1126; Graeber 2002:70).
As the argument goes, in prefigurative movements, the emphasis on ideology and distinct political goals have been replaced by a focus on “process” or “practice” that construct actual alternatives to the existing world order. The diversity of ideas translates to a diversity of power loci, which is concomitant with the movements anti-hierarchical tendency, and is essential to the movements’ horizontal mode of organization (Maeckelbergh 2011). As such, it is the movements practices themselves – of creating new forms of organizing democracy and personal life – that are de facto their ideology (Graeber 2002).

By that, prefigurative politics, both today and in the past, is apparently influenced by some anarchist philosophical traditions, particularly by that of “direct action” (Epstein 2001; Graeber 2009, 2002; Juris 2010). As anarchists have always rejected state power, they do not seek to pressure the government to institute reform, and direct action rises as a means of “acting as if one is already free” (Graeber 2009:203). Instead of appealing to the state to act, the direct action tradition urges activists to act as if the state simply does not exist. As such, direct action is prefigurative action, and as its advocates argue, by focusing on action in the present it allows activists to circumvent any disagreements they may have over long-term visions and goals (Graeber 2002). Put differently, as practices take the front stage of political debate within prefigurative movements, ideology is pushed into having, at most, a secondary role (Graeber 2009:211–21).

Writing on a broader scope then just prefigurative movements, philosopher Anthony Kwame Appiah dubbed this approach to politics “the primacy of practice” (Appiah 2006), arguing that “our political coexistence depends on being able to agree about practices while disagreeing about their justification” (1193). As our practices are, for the most part, habitual we can easily find ourselves living together, and even collaborating, without ever having to fully articulate the moral justifications for such action, which may indeed diverge (see also: Sunstein 1995). Implicit in this approach seems to be the pragmatist philosophical notion of precognitive practice. As pragmatist philosophers have argued, cognition has a practical function, only emerging when our habitual practice confronts an obstacle whose overcoming requires cognitive attention. Attention, therefore is a product of a crisis in our otherwise precognitive
situation, bringing our cognition to the fore only when something is “out of gear”, and only to allow us to go back to our precognitive state (Blattner 2000; Dewey 1908).

Practical collaboration, therefore, seems to be facilitated by this precognitive state, allowing ideologically divided actors to be engaged in a common practice simply because no attention to ideology is needed. However, such seamless collaboration appears to reside under the looming threat of some impending crisis which could require actors’ awareness, making dormant ideological differences salient. Understanding the actual occurrence of such crises in the ongoing life of prefigurative movements’ activists, changing a practice from merely habitual to ideologically charged, may help us therefore understand, not only the way activists experience their political practice, but also the limits of the primacy of practice itself.

**Prefigurative Practices: Self-sustainability and Child-rearing**

Prefigurative practices are far from being limited to the public sphere. In fact, since the tradition of direct action is aimed at creating actual change in the present, rather than advocating for government action, many prefigurative practices are particularly mundane, aiming to prefigure the everyday lifestyle of the utopian society. This study focuses on two such practices: self-sustainability and child-rearing. Unlike explicit political practices, such as collective decision-making or protest, mundane activities are probably more likely to descend into a habitual activity, unmarked by the ideological aura of politics. The daily activities of helping your child with her homework, or hoeing your garden, are bound to become routine, and thus provoke less cognitive attention and ideological reasoning. As such, when these practices do evoke such discourse they offer us a telling insight into the emergence of crises within precognitive practices. In other words, it is by observing it emerge in humdrum workaday activities that we can learn the most about the creeping of ideology into habitual practice.
Self-sustainability practices are one of the hallmarks of prefigurative movements. For the most part, such practices aim at producing products and services that can offer alternatives to similar ones provided by the dominant social order, thereby prefiguring the mode of production imagined in the utopian future. Thus, activists in the antinuclear movement were encouraged to plant trees, grain, and vegetables, as well as to fish the rivers, and to bring solar cookers, small windmills, and compost toilets, so as to “build a model of a sane, energy independent society on a restored and venerated land” in the demonstrations’ campsites (Epstein 1991:83). For the activists, the development of self-sustainable practices was related to democratic aspirations, mainly the creation of a diffuse model of production (particularly energy production) alternative to the centralized model governed by nuclear energy corporations. These aspirations were often rooted in ecofeminist ideology that associated the domination of women by men with the capitalist aspiration to dominate nature (176-7). In the commune movement self-sustainable survival skills were viewed as valuable against the impending collapse of urban industrialized society, and were imagined to prefigure the somewhat post-apocalyptic society that will succeed it (Berger 1981:108–11). For both, the rejection of industrial-capitalism was greatly influenced by leftist anarchist tradition, as well as Marxist themes of alienation and community.

Child rearing practices also play a central part in prefigurative politics in more than one way. Members of prefigurative movements who have children often practice “activist parenting” to sustain intergenerational solidarity and reinforce their own activist identity (Simi et al. 2016). Among the alternative practices related to child rearing, free schooling is one of the most eminent. The free school was part of a series of alternative organizations inspired by the experience of proponents of the civil-rights movement, the New Left, and the counterculture, alongside free clinics, legal collectives, and communes, all united in their rejection of authority as a valid principle for regulating group life. Inspired by writers of the 1960s who described the destructive effects of conventional schooling on children, free schools contrasted the image of "wasteful cruelty", authority, regulation, and humiliation with that of children reaching out for new experiences in a positive environment of kindness and respect. As such they were designed as prefigurative models of a new
kind of society (Swidler 1979:2–3). Rather than defining teaching as imparting information from teachers to students, free schools’ teachers imagined their role as liberators and nurturers of students’ own best selves (24). In the commune movement this philosophy extended beyond the classroom and into the act of parenting itself, as children were raised in a way intended to allow them to grow “naturally”, autonomous, and free (Berger 1981:67–73). In both contexts, children were allowed considerable responsibility for influencing their own education, so as to develop their sense of agency and independence, with emphasis put not on the content of education itself, but on the organization and style of the child’s environment. Child rearing is especially meaningful to prefigurative politics, as it is through this practice that activists could not only foreshadow the utopian society to come, but actually shape its future members.

CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a three-year ethnography of a right libertarian movement-community named “The Free State Project” (FSP) which is active primarily in New Hampshire. The movement emerged in 2001, with an internet pledge aimed at recruiting 20,000 libertarians who are willing to move together to one state in order to consolidate power and establish both the conditions for and reality of a libertarian society. The initiative gained remarkable support and by late 2003 recruited almost five thousand individuals (Belluck 2003). By congregating and conversing in the group’s online forum these first five thousand pledgers eventually voted on New Hampshire as their destination state, for the most part, due to its small size and already libertarian leaning politics. As of today, according to the movement’s own statistics, over 20,000 people already signed the pledge, out of whom approximately 5,000 currently living in New Hampshire, either because they had moved there or because they lived in the state to begin with.

Being a libertarian movement, the FSP has no central organization mechanism. The only official body associated with the movement is Free State Project, Inc. a registered 501(c)(4) organization, whose sole
declared purpose is to recruit signers and solicit them to move. As part of these efforts the FSP, Inc. holds two annual events – the Porcupine Freedom Festival (commonly called PorcFest), an outdoors mass camping event in the summertime, and Liberty Forum, a more ‘academic’ conference-like event in the winter – where pledgers and movers come together to attend both recreational and educational activities. Activists organize mostly via online networks and personal ties in their local communities, and their forms of activism vary from running for office through civil disobedience to pure prefigurative forms such as homeschooling, offering alternative services, and adopting self-sustainability practices.

My study of the Free State Project consisted of three years participant observation, from winter of 2016 to summer 2018, with past, present, and prospective movers, both in New Hampshire and Southern California. During that time I attended three ‘PorcFests’, and one Liberty Forum, and “hung out” with members at their community “clubhouses” and other social events, including two vigils and two weddings between activists couples. I joined their political events, accompanied them to protests, went on hikes with them, and met them for lunches and drinks both individually and in groups. In total I conducted over 320 hours of participant observation, producing over 600 pages of fieldnotes and 24 hours of audio-recorded conversations. The fieldnotes and recordings were uploaded to NVivo11 software, and analyzed following the extended case method as to “derive generalizations by constituting the social situation as anomalous with regards to some preexisting theory […], which is then reconstructed” (Burawoy et al. 1991:280).

The decision to compare the FSP to New Left movements rests on both the commonalities and differences between the two. There is a historical affinity between libertarians and the New Left in America. The allegiance libertarians felt with the counterculture in the late 1960s was greatly responsible for the rift between the libertarian and traditionalist faction at Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), the predominant conservative student group of the 1960s, a rift that ended with the purge of libertarians from the movement. Libertarians and New Leftists shared an antagonism to centralized authority and bureaucracy, and were united in their support for replacing the hierarchical power structure of the state with decentralized, self-governing communities. They were also united in their stand on civil liberties, opposing government
restriction of abortion, pornography, and mutually consensual sexual acts, and many rightist libertarians embraced the counterculture both in their attitude and lifestyle (Klatch 1999). Still, while New Leftists stressed collective self-management in the economic, political, and social spheres, libertarians tend to reject any form of collective organization and focus on the individual as the locus of political action. These common affinities and distinctive political rationales allow for an interesting comparison of ostensibly similar practices that draw on morally different justifications. Such a comparison of ideological differences would probably be more difficult with more contemporary left-affiliated prefigurative movements precisely because these movements’ political rationale remains somewhat undetermined, involving multiple separate ideological influences, and presenting a mixture of collectivist, individualist, socialist, and capitalist creeds (Epstein 2001; Juris 2010).

FINDINGS

Self-Sustainability: Morally Charged Practices

Self-sustainability ventures take up a significant portion of Free Staters’ political activism. In the community’s argot such practices are called “agorism”, a term borrowed from the writings of libertarian thinker Samuel E. Konkin (2004/1980). Agriculture takes a central part of the practice, and Free Staters (particularly those who live in more rural towns) commonly invest time and effort in cultivating elaborate gardens that may allow them to produce their own food, de facto turning their homes into small farm ventures. Meg, a Free Stater who offers farming training and guidance to other activists, for example, opened one of her agriculture workshops in PorcFest by proudly announcing she and her husband now produce 40% to 50% of the food they consume throughout the year. People like Meg are a valuable source for self-sustainability training in the FSP, and veteran activists commonly guide novices in agricultural skills, especially those crucial to cultivating crops in New Hampshire’s tough granite soil and hard winters. Mark, one such novice who had recently turned his back yard into a vegetable garden, told me he knew
nothing about growing vegetables and poultry when first moving to the state, but another, more experienced activist came over to teach him, and still regularly instructs him when needed. Mark was the first person I met who used the word agorism, and when I asked him what it means he defined it as the idea that you can bring about social change by acting yourself the way you want society to be, and specifically a way to commence trade without government intervention. He then added that for him, self-producing his own food means that he doesn’t have to pay taxes, and thereby doesn’t have to fund the government either.

Agorism, for many Free Staters, is a means of avoiding government intervention and control. Unlike antinuclear activists and communards, it is very rare to hear them talk about their agricultural ventures in ecological terms of “returning the land to its former condition” (Epstein 1991:83), or of preparing for the collapse of urban industrial society. Instead, their farming practices are commonly framed in terms of personal freedom. Amy and Jacob, two of the most industrial agorists in the movement, whose private home-turned-farm has developed enough to not only sustain themselves but to allow them to trade with others in the movement, had decided to turn their farm into a community-supported agriculture (CSA) venture, where other Free Staters can buy “shares” in various farm products, thereby sharing the risk and rewards of the each annual yield. The decision to establish a CSA, they explained to me, was not rooted in values of communal ownership and economic cooperation, but was rather aimed at allowing them to avoid government regulations on food production, as selling shares in an animal, rather than cuts, is not subject to USDA inspection.

While for some people uninspected meat may be suspicious, among Free Staters “Sidpa”, as Amy and Jacob call their farm, became somewhat of a token of quality. Vendors in community events pride themselves on using “Sidpa-pork” and “-beef”, and in one activists’ wedding, held at one of the community’s mass events, the Free Staters who prepared the main course proudly told each other it is “Sidpa chicken”, so as to signal it as quality product. Amy and Jacob assess that about 90% of their “business” come from the community. For them this is has a great moral value. As Jacob explains it:
All of it made me realize too, how powerful is in your community versus outside of your community. So, you know, you buy something from us and it's [traded] off into other different things. So that money all stays as close as it can to our community, [with] people that you philosophically […] agree with. Versus like, you know, you buy something at Wallmart, that money's just gone. It […] really does very little in our community. Maybe somebody is employed there that it helps out, but like that's the best case. Whereas, you know, if you spend money with us and it's spent on somebody who agrees with you and then also uses that money to get those same kind of services from other people that agree with you and stuff. […] So a dollar spent in house has like way more meaning than a dollar spent out of house.iv

For Emily, such autarchic production and trade relations within the community, free of government regulation and control, was a synecdoche of a utopian society:

In a free society, like, if you have a good product you're gonna succeed because people will recognize it. Word of mouth will spread the word: 'Hey, their meat's really good' or 'Ooh, you know what, I had their stuff and it's not good. I'm not gonna buy from them anymore'. And so, […] since we didn't really give up on the markets and the community and selling to everybody word got around that we had good stuff and we're around and you can get it and, you know that eventually caught up to us. Cause I remember when market days first started, like three years ago, we weren’t doing that well as far as sales yet, and it's like our CSA was just starting. But now it's like all caught up, and like, um, all the new movers that are coming [in], they're like 'Oh I've heard of you guys! I'm supposed to get meat from you! Oh, d'dadada'. And so it's really cool that that's how it works. It's like, if you hold up your end of the business then it will get supported. You know?

It is tempting to dismiss such explanations as interest-driven rationalizations. Indeed, Amy and Jacob no doubt benefit from evading the expensive and burdensome process of USDA inspection and approval; and their argument about “spending money in the community” definitely serves their direct material interests.
But what is interesting here is not that they manage to produce ideological rationalizations for following their material interests, but rather the type of rationalization they chose to produce. Indeed, other movements, such as American black separatism, also explored the notion of separate, semi-autarchic markets (Du Bois 1996; Hall 1977); but whereas these movements saw economic separatism as a means for achieving economic self-determination for African-Americans, Free Staters see it as a means for demonstrating the viability and superiority of their capitalist utopian vision. Their rationalization is also distinct from those made by the antinuclear activists, who justified their self-sustainability practices in terms of “returning the land to its former condition”:

A lot of us did a lot of life-style evaluation. We started recycling, not using electricity. We began thinking about what we had become used to. We couldn't really eat bananas if we were serious about being against imperialism. [...] We tried to find ways to live that were much simpler, that didn't need things like [the Seabrook nuclear plant]. The vision was not just feminist. It was about how are we going to live, how are we going to eat, how are we going to raise our children, in a way that won't end up the way it is now. (Epstein 1991:186)

It is possible to imagine Amy and Jacob, as well as Mark, using similar ecological rationale to justify their agricultural ventures, as well as marking their organic, locally grown product, as a moral purchase. But that doesn’t mean their actual rationalizations were any less moral. For them, trading unregulated food products within the community simulates a society they imagine to be morally superior in its adherence to personal economic freedom, and as such these practices enjoy an inherent positive moral value, not unlike recycling or adopting a banana-free diet.

Ideology, as Bennett Berger argues, is applied selectively to justify circumstantial practice, however “[t]his ideological work sanctions a pattern of behavior produced neither by the arguments themselves nor by *ad hoc* responses to immediate circumstances”. Instead, behavior is produced by the interaction between the beliefs that motivate the action and the exigencies activists face as they manage their daily lives (Berger
In other words, in both the FSP and the antinuclear movement, ideological practice was subject to both material interests and concerns, and ideological rationalization. What is interesting here, is that while both Free State libertarians and antinuclear New Leftist looked for justifications for their self-sustainable, “living off the land” practices, they drew on distinctly different vocabularies of motive when doing so (Mills 1940). Motives, Mills argued, link specific actions with anticipated consequences (906). Prefigurative movements rely on an articulated ideology that directly connect their practices today to the utopian society they wish to bring about, and as the utopian image (i.e. the moral vision) changes, so does the vocabulary of motives. For the New Leftists self-sustainability was rooted in either ecofeminist motives, aimed at bringing about a more ecologically safe economic and social order, or in primitivist motives, aimed at creating a society not dependent on cities or industry. For Free Staters, on the other hand, self-sustainable practices were directed at creating a society free of government intervention, particularly intervention in economic activity. In such a society, people would not buy a product because it is approved to be healthy by some government agency, but because the product is good, and good products enjoy good reputation simply because they are good. These two different models of utopia produce two different vocabularies of motive, and as such make available different rationalizations activists can offer to seemingly similar actions.

But moreover, there is another, more explicitly political, motive for carrying out successful self-sustainability ventures: they prove that such an image of society can actually work. As Steve, a very prominent activist in the movement who owns a small pig farm in the south of the state explained it:

whenever you do this [...] there's always somebody sitting on the sidelines saying, 'oh, well you took one watt of power from the government, so therefore you need the goddamn government!' If you took a pistachio, a penny, you know, one quart of dirt from the government, then 'by God! You need us! And why are you such an asshole about the whole government intervention?' [...] But if you can go off the grid, if you can provide your own electricity with a panel that you paid for, if you can provide your own food with a pig you grown, then at some point or another those people
are stopped in their narrative. [...] And so, for me, that's part of it: just to be able to show [that] we don't actually need you guys. You know, like, you're just here providing a service in an incredibly inflated price, and the fact that you force me to buy it doesn't mean that I need it.

When asking Steve to whom he is proving this, he immediately replied: “People on Facebook? I'm not entirely sure”, and then, after giving it some thought, added:

To speak to who's asking: I literally had Keene City [Councilmen] saying to me "Well, if you don't like it here, why won't you move to Somalia?" or things like that – literally saying things like that. And I [...] having raised my own food I at least have an answer for what their questions might be. Like, you know, maybe, just maybe, we don't need a monopoly on this particular activity or that particular activity, and you don't have to use the force of your cops to make me pay for that. Like, maybe I can do it better then you can. It's possible, like, and maybe the customer base is out there for you to provide it (accentuates) voluntarily... and those are the only things we're asking for. If you have the chance to have a conversation with somebody like that. it's not 'we're trying to drive you out of the service business that you've been in for, I don't know, three hundred years, [...] we're just saying there ought to be an option. And if there is, you're gonna get better, they're gonna get better, and everybody's gonna be happier.

As David Graeber explains, prefigurative politics is meant to be a practice of teaching through example, a “propaganda by the deed” (Graeber 2009:208–10). As such, prefigurative activists who acknowledge this aspect of the practice are bound to find themselves engaged with non-activists who may question the movement’s practices and goals. These may be official government figures, like Keene City Councilmen, but also, and probably more commonly, everyday common folk who happen to engage the activists in conversation (“people on Facebook”). Such everyday conversations, as Steve describes them, call on activists to stand up for their utopian vision, calling explicit attention to their habitual practice, and requiring them to draw on their ideological vocabulary of motives to justify it.
Such moments give palpable presence to the ideological meaning of everyday political practices and make them morally charged. But moreover, as I will shortly demonstrate, such meanings don’t simply shape practices symbolically, but indeed may shape action itself.

**Child rearing: Defining the Boundaries of Freedom**

Child rearing and education is a particularly important issue in Free Staters’ lives. As most Free Staters moved to New Hampshire with the intention to settle down and raise a family in a libertarian environment, the question of how one should raise his children in such an environment becomes paramount. Much like proponents of the free schools, so do Free Staters view traditional schooling as an inherently flawed system, based on rewards and punishments, where children are expected (sometimes quite literally) to “stand in line”, waste their time on pointless disciplining activities, and follow rigid curricula and a frame of thought, instead of letting them think for themselves. Kids, they believe, are internally motivated to learn, and it is the job of the teacher (who is often the parent) to cultivate this motivation. This approach to child education and rearing was manifest in many aspects of child-adult relationship in the movement, and perhaps most of all in its institutionalization through two prevalent and related practices which Free Staters refer to as "peaceful parenting" and "unschooling".

Free Staters tend to reject punishments and rewards as a form of discipline. Although their understanding of what actually constitute punishment can vary, they seem to agree that corporal punishment, yelling, and various forms of bribe have negative effect on the child's education. Instead, as Stacy, a mother of two who led a “peaceful parenting” workshop for other parents in the movement, explained it, they opt for "gentle ways to guide children using empathetic and cooperative solutions". Much like in the free schools, Free Staters aim to abolish authority relations between adults and children, so as to raise children in a new model of human beings, who are essentially independent and free.
For many FSP parents, this educational approach is not merely a reaction to the traditional educational system, but to the style of education they themselves experienced at home. Clark, father of preschool age Josh, described his disagreement with his own father about Josh's discipline and explained how he can't blame his dad for thinking the way he does. His father, he explained, lives in a very small box. He himself, he added, also lives in a box, but a slightly bigger one, and he hopes Josh’s box will be even bigger, and so the boxes will grow with each generation, until maybe one day there will no longer be any box at all. As Clark and other Free State parents imagine it, by modeling such new people, they may actually heal society itself. Such motivation is embedded in popular libertarian philosophy, as was aptly expressed by one speaker in an antiwar libertarian event I attended with Clark in California, shortly before he moved to New Hampshire with his family. While the talk was focused on US foreign policy, during the closing Q&A session, someone in the audience asked the speaker how he thinks parenting style affects people’s attitudes towards war. The speaker answered that he is a great believer in “peaceful parenting”. In traditional parenting, he argued, parents limit their children’s freedom and order them around. Children are commonly taught to be obedient and to follow orders from a “bigger bully,” which makes them into “a universal soldier” or “a company man,” who just wants to be a cog in the machine. “This dynamic,” he argued, “is the nursery of war.”

Whereas peaceful parenting is a broad approach to the relations between children and their parents, “unschooling” refers specifically to the process by which kids are to acquire academic skills, particularly for parents who homeschool their children, as many Free Staters do. Essentially, unschooling is an approach that prizes voluntary and consensual models of learning, or as one Free Stater described it in a talk to parents in PorcFest, it is a "child led learning." In this approach, the topics of learning arise naturally from the child's own interests, and the parents' role is to follow these emerging interests and natural tendencies and cultivate them. By that, Free Staters seem to follow a similar path to left leaning communards and free schoolers, in their aim to attribute and celebrate the children's own sense of agency, and control over their own reality. Moreover, like the New Left activists, Free Staters also understand their educational approach
in prefigurative terms, seeing the nurturing of an uninstitutionalized next generation as the means for healing society.

However, the image of this social healing is very different than the one New Leftist had. This includes some cosmetic differences, such as in the way Free Stater imagine unschooling to help their kids develop entrepreneurial skills, much more than they imagine it teaching them collective collaboration abilities (as had been shown to be the case with Free Schoolers; Swidler 1979, pp. 138–9). But more importantly, Free Staters seem to diverge from the New Left not in the value adults found in the practices of free child rearing themselves, but in the limits they felt obligated to impose on such practice. Put differently, Free Staters and New Leftists mostly agreed on the benefits of free child-rearing, but differed on their understanding of where freedom should stop. Two comparable examples could speak to this difference:

In her notes on the decision-making processes in the free schools, Swidler points out that “[t]he formal arrangements that gave students power did not always lead to student victories” (27). In an incident she describes, students and staff in one high school were called to vote on a new school director. The final decision came down to two candidates, and the students opted for an external applicant, who was also white, over one of the school’s own teachers. This raised an objection from the school’s leaving director, as Swidler recounts:

The director announced that as a matter of personal conscience she could not take the school's decision before the school board for approval because hiring a white teacher from outside the Berkeley schools would mean asking for an exception to the district's policy of a freeze on nonminority hiring. She acknowledged that she was obligated to abide by the school's decision and said that if she were explicitly directed to do so, she would submit the request to the district as the school's agent but without adding her personal support. Her argument turned not on her right to override the students' decision but on the claim that it was immoral to "ask the district to make a special exception, hire another white, just so our school can have the director we want.” (ibid)
The last sentence of the passage is particularly revealing: the justification to overrule the students' decision was articulated, not in administrative, but in moral terms, that seem to have come directly from the New Left ideological vocabulary of motives. The exiting director asked to overrule the students’ decision because it went against the New Left’s moral goal of increasing diversity and integration. Now compare this to the following incident in the FSP:

In an unschooling talk held at PorcFest, the speaker, Ann, shared her experience with unschooling her two children. As she reviewed her success and challenges Ann recalled her time with what she termed a “radical unschooling community,” who had advocated for subscribing unconditionally to the wants of the children. For her, this philosophy has gone too far, as it puts the kids themselves in danger. Particularly Ann expressed her concern with food commercials, and with the toxins added to various food item advertised to children. As children are particularly susceptible to advertising, she argued, they cannot be trusted to choose what is good for them. Eating toxic food, she explained, makes your body fall apart on you, and as you grow up you become dependent on government programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, effectively making you “a ward of the state”.

At this point, a woman in the audience interjected saying she disagrees with this statement. The woman referred to a book she read by one such radical unschooler, and argued the author presents things differently than how Ann does. Ann retorted that there is a great difference between how things are described on paper and how they really are, as she witnessed herself in that community. Ann then recalled how she found herself berated by that same author online, after arguing against allowing kids to eat “gas station food”. Gas station food, she argues, is poison, and she doesn’t agree you should buy that to your children if they ask.

Evidently, Ann felt a need to justify her decision to limit her children’s agency, maybe anticipating the objection such a decision may raise in a libertarian audience. In doing so, she turned to libertarian ideology to produce her reasoning: children’s freedom is to be curbed to ensure their independence from government in the future. This is particularly interesting as evidently it is not only conversation with non-activists that
call on Free Staters to justify their actions in ideological terms. Here, it is the very fact that she interacted with other Free Staters that raised Ann’s attention to what may be an otherwise habitual action for her (not allowing her kids’ to eat gas station food), and to draw on libertarian ideological vocabulary of motives to rationalize it.

In both examples, of free schoolers and Free Staters, adults’ decisions could be easily attributed to some circumstantial or mundane incentive. The free school exiting director may have wished to avoid the bureaucratic difficulties of asking for an exception to the district’s policy, or maybe she simply favored her old coworker to the outsider. And the desire to make sure your kids eat healthy is certainly not unique to libertarian parents. Interestingly, embracing a natural, locally produced, and organic “countercuisine” was also prevalent in the counterculture, rationalized as a means for battling the exploitative agribusiness, punishing scab supporting food chains, breaking supermarket chains’ monopoly, and even promoting democracy and battling world hunger (Belasco 1989; Lappé 2011). However, what is interesting here is that in both cases the justifications for limiting the free choice of children (or teenagers) were framed in ideological-moral terms, drawn from different vocabularies of motive. Whereas the Free Schoolers drew on arguments related to the integration of minorities and anti-racism (we can’t ask the district to “hire another white”), Ann turned to an argument related to freedom from the state, and particularly independence of state services. Such language, we can assume, is not mere lip service, and indeed corresponds to the speakers own personal beliefs, but it is also likely that their choice to use these specific justifications was influenced by the speakers’ assessment of their audience. Both the exiting director and Ann were not speaking to random listeners, but to people they already knew share their moral commitments and utopian vision. As Mills explained, “[a] satisfactory or adequate motive is one that satisfies the questioners of an act or program, whether it be the other's or the actor's. As a word, a motive tends to be one which is to the actor and to the other members of a situation an unquestioned answer to questions concerning social and lingual conduct” (Mills 1940, p. 907. Emphasis in original). As such, a vocabulary of motives serves as a
type of social control. It limits the range of justification we can make for actions, and as such sets limits on our actions themselves.

It is useful to note here, that although children are ostensibly free to choose and shape the content of their education in anti-hierarchical institutions, they are more constrained in their ability to shape the institutions themselves. To put it simply, the free-reared children may have power over shaping the academic aspect of their free schooling – what will be taught, how and when – but they were never a full party to the practice of designing the free schools themselves. Nor were they party to their parents’ decision to raise them “peacefully”. While the children may have control over the overt curriculum, it is the adults who control the hidden one, namely the patterns of social organization taught implicitly through the organization of the educational system, and the norms of conduct taught implicitly through its methods of social control (Swidler, 1979, p. 133). In other words, while children somewhat control the academic aspects of their education, it is the adults who control the moral teachings. And as the primary purpose of free child rearing is the shaping of kids’ future moral selves, it is on moral grounds that such freedom could be limited.

As moral ideologies differ between the Free Staters and the New Left, so are the limits they feel obligated to impose. Since each ideology also gives rise to a different vocabulary of motives, so are the limits imposed on children’s freedom differ according to the available justifications. But most importantly, it is not only the kids who are limited. In their function as a social control, vocabularies of motive also limit the justification adults themselves can conjure to rationalize their own decisions to limit their kids’ freedom. As such, as adults take on the prefigurative practices of free child-rearing, these practices are shaped (to a degree) by the ideology that serves to justify them. Put simply, while both Free Staters and New Leftists value and practice the free-rearing of children, the two groups have a somewhat different conception of what the range and boundaries of this freedom should be, and as such their actual practices can be expected to vary accordingly.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Observing the recent wave of protest movements, with their emphasis on practical collaboration despite ideological incongruity, students of prefigurative politics seem to have invoked a pragmatist understanding of conduct. As pragmatists philosophers argue, cognition tend to play a secondary role in practice, and our actions are, for the most part, precognitive and guided by habit. Only in rare moments of crisis does cognition “kicks in”, and even then, only to allow us to overcome momentary obstacles to our non-meditated action and revert back to precognitive conduct. This primacy of practice, it is argued, allows differing ideological groups to collaborate simply by focusing on shared political practices, without having to flesh out their ideological disagreements.

Such a philosophical approach flies in the face of both common-sensical understanding of ideas as the prime motivators of action, and classical sociological view of ideas as “switchmen” guiding the way interests translate into real-world destinations and the strategic means through which they can materialize (Eastwood 2005; Swidler 1986; Weber 1946). Indeed, many a contemporary work in cultural sociology tend to forgo consciously articulated ideas in explanations of collective action, attributing the latter to matters such as institutional logics (Friedland and Alford 1991) or patterned styles of interaction (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), with human agency serving at most to mediate institutionally determined scripts with opposing behavioral patterns, material limitations, or other institutional logics (Binder 2007; Hallett and Ventresca 2006).

However, as the finding presented in this paper suggest, ideas have a more significant role in shaping action – especially political action – than what a “primacy of practice” approach may suggest. Prefigurative practices are rendered meaningful by both the ideals they aim to achieve, as well as the world order activists imagine themselves to create by following them. When Free Staters practice self-sustainability or free child-rearing they imagine themselves bringing forth a society free of government control, where self-interested individuals succeed according to their gumption and wits through competition in free unregulated markets.
On the other hand, by following very similar practices, New Leftists imagined themselves to bring forth a more equal, ecologically sustainable, society where everyone gets to participate in the collective decisions that influence their lives (e.g. Students for a Democratic Society 1962/1993). Not only were activists in the two movements aiming toward these distinctively different (at times contradicting) ends, but in their actions they understood themselves to be already living in small-scale, embryonic versions of these very societies. For the two groups the same actions were imagined to be manifestations of very different social-orders, and the materialization of very different values.

These symbolic differences were not latent, as pragmatists may assume, buried beneath the daily routine of habitual action, but were indeed regularly pushed into the surface as activists had to justify their practices not only to outsiders, but to their fellow activists as well. Moreover, these symbolic meanings have the power to shape action itself as activists draw on them to draft the contours of their actual political practice. By defining the vocabulary of motives activists could draw from when justifying their actions to their peers, political and moral ideas serve as a social control, limiting activists’ range of possible action. Ideas, so it seems, have a vivid presence in prefigurative practice, not merely justifying it \textit{ex post facto}, but also shaping it in the process.

This is not to say that the primacy of practice argument is completely without merit. Evidently, prefigurative protest movements have managed to bring together proponents of varying ideologies in practical collaboration. However, given the dialectic relations between ideas and practice, further research may be needed to better understand the limits of such inter-ideological collaboration, and the conditions that allow it to prevail. Perhaps there is something about the settings of mass protest itself, with its potential for engendering a sense of collective effervescence (Jasper 1998), that allows activists to ignore ideological differences, if only momentarily, as they “lose themselves” in the emotional experience.

Moreover, understanding the work of ideas in shaping the boundaries of action may further our understanding of how actors solve emerging clashes of habits, institutional scripts, and material demands
in local settings (Binder 2007; Hallett and Ventresca 2006). It is precisely such clashes that we can expect
to disturb actors’ precognitive practices and require their cognitive attention. Understanding how actors
invoke moral and rational justifications to mediate such clashes may allow us to better account for the role
of human agency, as well as of ideology, in shaping collective action.

Lastly, the limits of the primacy of practice should serve as a caveat for other approaches to politics focusing
on political procedure as a means for delivering a desired moral social order (e.g. Habermas 1974; Saffon
and Urbinati 2013). As people imbue different meanings and moral justifications into similar practices, the
fact that they may subscribe to the same political procedure (or process), does not yet guarantee they share
a moral agenda, nor that they will utilize these procedures to advance the same moral world. Designers of
political processes may find them being interpreted to represent very different values than originally
intended, and used to achieve very different ends. Procedure is undoubtedly important, but it cannot be
isolated from ideology. The ends of political action, this study suggests, are not shaped solely by its means,
but also by the meanings and moral rationalization attached to it.
REFERENCES


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Sociologist offer many varying uses for “ideology”. For the purpose of this paper, and in order to avoid unnecessary confusion, I will use Ann Swidler’s definition of the concept, namely: explicit, articulated, and highly organized political and religious (and I may add “morally guided”) meaning systems.

There are several venues that Free Staters frequent, and became the community’s clubhouses of sort. These are privately owned buildings, where community members get together, hold events, and generally spend their free time.

All names and identifying details have been changed to maintain subjects’ anonymity.

All Free Staters’ block quotes are excerpts of recorded conversations with the activists.

Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) offer an interesting typology of modes of justification aimed at explaining the kinds of morally substantive rhetorics people use to convince others within the civil sphere. Each mode has its own measure of worth, and a test used to assess it (see also: Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Thévenot et al. 2000). However, their typology seems to fall short of fully accounting for the justifications Free Staters are drawing on. One may wonder if another, perhaps idiosyncratic, mode may be at play here, measuring worth as a factor of personal independence and autonomy.