

The Master's Tools

Prefigurative Politics and the Abolition of Violence

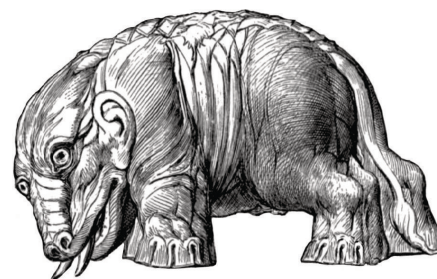
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Abstract

In the course of the past decade, radical political theory has seen an increased interest in 'prefiguration'. Stemming from anarchist and feminist traditions, this idea prescribes a high measure of consistency between the means and ends of revolutionary practice. But what is the place of violence in a prefigurative politics? Does it imply nonviolence as a moral or strategic principle? Or should its practitioners at least be prepared to engage in self-defence? After reconstructing various positions on this matter, this paper seeks to offer an alternative perspective. Rather than to see violence as a means or instrument that one willingly employs in a revolutionary situation, it should instead be understood as a social given: something that is often already implied in such a context. The question, then, is not whether or how prefiguration and violence are compatible, but rather how violence could be dealt with in a prefigurative way.

Keywords: Prefigurative Politics, Violence, Anarchism, Feminism, Social Movement Strategy

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Introduction

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The occupied Tahrir Square in Cairo has become an iconic symbol for revolution both within the region and beyond. Behind the barricades, its temporary inhabitants had erected a miniature society-in-development, in which they experimented with alternative forms of organisation, representation, communication, and distribution (Van de Sande 2013; De Smet 2016). In the course of the past decade, this ‘utopian republic of Tahrir’ (Khalil 2011, 247) has continued to inspire a global wave of similar ‘assembly movements’ (Butler 2015): from the Spanish *15-M* movement to *Occupy Wall Street*, and the 2014 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul to *Nuit Debout* in 2016. This list has continued to grow in the past years, with the Sudanese revolution of 2019; the occupation of another Tahrir Square, this time in Baghdad, in 2019-2020; and the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle, which sprouted from local *Black Lives Matter* protests in 2020.

Notwithstanding the obvious demographic, cultural, and political differences between them, these various assembly movements all shared a particular political repertoire. Within the confined space of their occupied squares, they experimentally embodied or enacted the kind of future society that they sought to realise on a grander and more durable scale (Douzinas 2013; Flesher Fominaya 2020; Graeber 2013; Smucker 2017). This technique or repertoire is often referred to as ‘prefiguration’: a term that originally stems from anarchist and feminist theory (Franks 2003; Gordon 2018; Rowbotham 1979), but has gained significant traction in the wake of these recent movements. In a prefigurative politics, the means employed in political action are understood to resemble or ‘mirror’ the pursued ends. One aims to abolish the hierarchy, exploitation, and violence that inheres in capitalism and the state – not in a distant future but in the ‘here and now’. Such an abolitionist politics is “not about what is possible, but about making the impossible reality” (Abolition Collective 2020, 7). Although many recent assembly movements did not explicitly use the term ‘prefiguration’, this is arguably what all of them tried to do.

However, if we look more closely, it also becomes clear that for many of these movements, the prefiguration of a future society was mostly an aspiration. In practice, the immediate abolition of repression or state violence was not an attainable goal at all. The iconic tent camp on Tahrir Square may serve as an example. The ousting of Mubarak has sometimes been depicted as the execution of Gene Sharp’s (2012) script for a ‘peaceful’ revolution. But one often tends to forget that Tahrir Square was repeatedly sieged by thugs and state security forces, and that hundreds of protesters lost their lives protecting the occupied square (Abul-Magd 2012, 566; Schenker 2016, 229). “Aside from the civilized scene at the center of Tahrir displayed in the Western media,” Zeinab Abul-Magd argues (2012, 571), “the front lines of Tahrir and several other squares across the nation were engaged in bloody street fights or a guerrilla war with the police.” Very few accounts make mention of the so-called ‘people’s prison’, which was located at the stairway down to Sadat Metro Station that underlies the square. It is here that state thugs subdued in battle, and the *agent provocateurs* and infiltrators whom the revolutionaries discovered among their own ranks, were detained before being handed over to the army (Ketchley 2017, 69). In some cases, such detainees also

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faced physical abuse (Khalil 2011, 248f.). In short, ‘The Republic of Tahrir’ may be understood as a prefigurative experiment in radical democracy, but it was by no means devoid of violence as it reproduced at least some features of the repressive state that it sought to confront.

It is by no means my intention to discredit the Egyptian revolution or the occupiers of Tahrir Square, who had no choice but to defend themselves against Mubarak’s supporters. But this discrepancy between ideal and reality does give rise to a number of questions on the role and legitimacy of *violence* in a prefigurative politics. One may seek to abolish the violence that lies at the root of capitalism and the state. But is it at all possible to remain consistent when one intervenes in such a hostile environment? And how, or on what conditions, could violence possibly be employed in a prefigurative practice?

In order to address these questions, I will first briefly sketch the history of this concept of ‘prefiguration’ and show how it is embedded in various anarchist and feminist traditions. I subsequently discuss various views of how a prefigurative politics or strategy relates to (non)violence: whereas some anarchist revolutionaries have argued that prefiguration implies a principled rejection of violence in its every kind, others claim that radical political change would be unattainable without the ability and preparedness for self-defence, or even armed struggle. After laying out the contours of this debate, I argue that both positions are implicitly based on the same instrumentalist understanding of violence: in both cases, violence is read as a means or instrument that serves a particular end. And this end, at least in ideal terms, is ultimately the establishment of a society that is devoid of (at least some forms of) violence. But what if violence instead is a social given – something that unfortunately emerges in any social and political context? Rather than simply being ‘for’ or ‘against’ it, I will argue, the real challenge for those engaged in radical politics is how to deal with violence in a prefigurative manner.

Anarchism, feminism, and the history of prefigurative politics

The concept of ‘prefiguration’ or ‘prefigurative politics’ originally stems from the anarchist tradition. Since the late 19th century, anarchists have consistently argued that a classless and stateless society cannot be realised by means of the state as a political instrument, lest it gives rise to new class distinctions and other forms of inequality (Graham 2015). Instead, the means of revolutionary struggle should always be consistent – or, at least, to the greatest degree possible – with its ends. As the classical anarchist theorist Mikhail Bakunin argued in his polemics against Karl Marx “liberty can be created only by liberty” (1990, 179). And thus, the state ought to be abolished on the very first day of the revolution. As the anarchist feminist Emma Goldman phrased it in 1924, reflecting on her experiences in the newly founded Soviet Union:

There is no greater fallacy than the belief that aims and purposes are one thing, while methods and tactics are another.

[...] All human experience teaches that methods and means cannot be separated from the ultimate aim. The means employed become, through individual habit and social practice, part and parcel of the final purpose; they influence it, modify it, and presently the aims and means become identical. [...] No revolution can ever succeed as a factor of liberation unless the MEANS used to further it be identical in spirit and tendency with the PURPOSES to be achieved. (Goldman 2003, 260f.)

The task of the international workers' movement, then, was not only to topple, but also to simultaneously replace the capitalist state and its institutions. It ought to provide an organizational structure for the future society in an embryo form – or, as a famous syndicalist phrase from the early 20th century has it, to build 'a new society in the shell of the old' (Graeber 2013, 232f.). Since the 1970s, the term 'prefiguration' has come to be used in reference to this principle (Boggs 1977; Gordon 2018).

In the course of the 20th century, a larger variety of social movements would adopt prefiguration as a guiding principle. Radical feminists endorsed a similar view of radical politics when they insisted the personal is political too – and, hence, that immediate social change should not only be established on the work floor, but also in the household and the bedroom (Rowbotham 1979). In the 1960s and 1970s, New Left and student movements experimented with decentralized forms of organization and sought to establish more horizontal power relations within their own movement (Breines 1989; Epstein 1991; Kaufman 2017). The so-called 'alterglobalists' around the turn of this century employed prefigurative forms of consensus-oriented decision-making on a large scale (Maeckelbergh 2009). And antiracist or indigenous movements have sought to prefigure new political discourses and sources of identification without reproducing the many aspects of colonialism that still inhere in our society today (Coulthard 2014). In short, long before the emergence of *Occupy Wall Street* or the 'Arab Spring', the originally anarchist idea of prefiguration has explicitly or implicitly informed the repertoire of countless social movements. The logic underpinning this particular view of radical political change is arguably best grasped by this famous passage from the feminist and antiracist author Audre Lorde, which in many respects echoes Goldman's statement quoted above:

We have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. (Lorde 1984, 123)

This idea of prefiguration clearly has implications for our understanding of violence as a revolutionary means. There are different, ethical as well as more strategic, arguments to support the claim that a prefigurative politics must be nonviolent. At the same time, other anarchists have argued that a principled nonviolence stands in the way of radical political change. It could also be argued that prefiguration is only one part of a more diverse activist

toolbox, which may also contain instruments such as self-defence or even armed struggle. I will engage with both positions in the following sections.

Prefiguration and the principle of nonviolence

Anarchists and abolitionists have always had many reasons to eschew any form of violence within one's own practices or organizational structure. Some of these were more ethical, others more strategic. Already since the early 20th century, anarchist pacifists have insisted that nonviolent action is not only just, but also the most (or even the only) effective means to force the capitalist state on its knees. In his book *The Conquest of Violence* (first English edition from 1937), the Dutch anarcho-syndicalist Bart de Ligt argues that, throughout the history of humankind, violence has always bred class distinctions, inequality, and domination. When revolutionaries employ violent means for their own cause, De Ligt asserts, there thus “appears a flagrant contradiction between such means and the goal in sight” (1989, 72). As a syndicalist, De Ligt instead advocates the General Strike as a revolutionary method. But, unlike for instance George Sorel (2004) or Rudolf Rocker (2004), he claims that such a massive secession of the proletarian class from capitalist production should and could take place in a nonviolent fashion.

A similar, but more institutionally focused, strategy of nonviolent secession was advocated by the American Quaker and peace activist George Lakey. In his 1973 manual *Strategy for a Living Revolution*, Lakey proposes to set up a network of alternative, radically-democratic institutions that should aim to gradually replace the existing order. “As these institutions grow, they become part of the unfolding new society. The people transfer allegiance from the discredited institutions of the past to these new institutions” (Lakey 1987, 48). Both De Ligt's and Lakey's proposals for a nonviolent, prefigurative strategy have had significant impact on various anarchist and pacifist social movements throughout the past decades (Cornell 2011; 2016; Graeber 2013, 194f.).

Such a non-violent, secessionist strategy may thus be seen as the most effective way to establish radical political change in the long term. But there are also other strategic reasons to observe non-violence as a principle. It can also be a source of inspiration or empowerment. One acts ‘as if’ a society based on the principle of nonviolence were already in place – thus providing “a critical tool for uncovering problems concealed within the status quo” (Thaler 2019, 1009). By establishing nonviolent forms of cohabitation and organization within one's own activist practices one shows – to oneself as well as to others – that a radically different society is indeed possible. Thus perceived, one important function of nonviolent prefiguration may be to win people's hearts and minds for the radical cause and “to displace common sense and the everyday routines by institutionalizing new patterns of behavior” (Vintagen 2015, 286).

Next to these strategic considerations, finally, there is also a more deontological argument for prefigurative nonviolence: if one aspires to live in a more just, equal, or peaceful society, then one should also take care not to reproduce the very forms of domination, exploitation, and violence that characterize the present one. Violence, also when it is committed in an act of self-defence, is inevitably done to others. And thus, the very idea that it might

serve a legitimate goal implies that its potential victims or targets can be degraded to mere objects. As Judith Butler (2020, 74f.) states in her recent essay on nonviolence, every human person bears the characteristic of grievability. Denying this to anyone else – even to one’s opponent or oppressor – implies a fundamental societal inequality, and thus contributes to its perpetuation. Seen from this perspective, then, non-violence is observed not merely for its strategic or mobilising functions, but because one seeks to oppose the very instrumentalist logic that arguably inheres in any form of violence. In short, there are several – ethical as well as strategic; deontological as well as consequentialist – arguments as to why abolitionists and revolutionaries should eschew any use of violence within their own radical practices. At the same time, however, some radicals emphatically advocate the right to use violence, at the very least in self-defence. They instead insist that an abolitionist politics cannot always be – or should even explicitly *not* aspire to be – nonviolent.

Nonviolence and the perpetuation of (state) violence

A first, and arguably most principled argument against the idea of non-violence is that it serves to perpetuate the status quo. The state will only tolerate – or, to some degree, even facilitate – protest and contestation as long as it does not pose any significant threat to its own hegemony. But of course, this is precisely what any radical movement worth its salt seeks to establish. “If we were allowed to live the change we wish to see in the world,” the anarchist activist Peter Gelderloos (2007, 134) argues, “there wouldn’t be much need for revolution.” However, when protesters choose to categorically uphold the principle of nonviolence, they implicitly leave it up to the state to determine the limits and control the outcomes of their actions. And this is only acceptable to those who are privileged enough to settle for less than systemic political change. It thus follows that a principled nonviolence can have racist and sexist implications: it denies minorities the right to use any means necessary in their resistance against their own repression or exploitation (Churchill 2007, 85). When it is used as an axiom, the principle of nonviolence thus may also effectively serve as one of the ‘Master’s tools’ in its own right.

The question, then, is how the employment of violence or self-defence may be compatible with the ultimate aim of establishing a society that is free from any form of exploitation, repression, or violence? As Ward Churchill, a staunch critic of nonviolence, admits, “it seems the highest order of contradiction that, in order to achieve nonviolence, we must first break with it in overcoming its root causes” (Churchill 2007, 104). But it could be argued that, in a society based on various forms of structural violence, it is simply impossible to consistently prefigure a radical alternative to it. According to Leon Trotsky (1973, 42), for instance, “the revolution itself is a product of class society and of necessity bears its traits.” Surely, one can dream of a radically different world. But the instruments that one has at one’s availability now, are the products of the present one. There is no other option than to use them for a different end. In that respect, the means of revolutionary action indeed are “subordinated to the end” (ibid., 42). Seen from this perspective, then, a consistent employment of revolutionary means that prefigure or even

remotely resemble their future ends is simply impossible. To stick with Audre Lorde's metaphor: revolutionaries have no other tools but the ones that they have appropriated from their erstwhile Masters.

Another possible view would be that, although physical violence or self-defence may indeed not be prefigurative in its own right, they may nevertheless be practiced alongside each other. In fact, (the possible threat of) violence may sometimes be necessary to render certain forms of prefiguration, such as mutual aid or consensus-oriented decision-making, possible in the first place. Even if one may explicitly favour prefigurative politics as a way to establish radical change in the long run, one simply does not control the circumstances in which one intervenes. This view does imply, however, that one gives up the pretension to always act consistently with one's ultimate end – or, at least, when it is applied to every aspect of one's political practice. But as the anarchist philosopher Matthew Wilson (2014, 175) stresses, full consistency between means and ends may never be attainable “within a wider context deeply antagonistic to [one's] principles.”

The experiences of Egyptian revolutionaries in 2011 may well serve to illustrate this. It is clear that, without the activists and ‘ultras’ who engaged in street battles with Mubarak's security forces, the activist tent camp on Tahrir Square probably would not have lasted for long (Abul-Magd 2012). But in many other cases, the threat of (armed) self-defence against state repression has been a *sine qua non* for prefigurative politics to emerge – think, for instance, of the Zapatista movement in the South of Mexico and the Kurdish movement in Rojava, who both faced state repression on a military scale (Stanchev 2015). Another interesting example is the Common Ground Collective, a solidarity group that emerged in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. When the state initially abandoned the city's poor, and predominantly black, population, the Common Ground Collective set up an emergency clinic, field kitchens, and a tool-lending station, and other forms of mutual aid (Solnit 2009, 289ff.). However, the collective also needed to fend off white supremacist vigilantes and the police. As one of its founding members Scott Crow suggests, building a new society often requires an ability to defend oneself against the old one:

Self-defense opens up the possibility of changing the rules of engagement. It doesn't always make situations less violent, but it can help to balance the inequity of power. [...] We can dream, we can build new worlds, but to do so we must not forget to resist on our own terms (Crow 2014, 58).

Violence and self-defence are not prefigurative, for the simple reason that they cannot be consistent with the ultimate end of a just (and supposedly nonviolent) society. But the ability to defend oneself may give rise to new power dynamic and empower those in weak social positions. More importantly, it may be a necessary precondition for prefiguration to emerge. Prefiguration is only one among several tools in the revolutionary toolbox, which may be employed alongside each other or at various phases of a revolutionary process. One thus needs to make a distinction between demolishing and building a house (Coulthard 2014, 148). Whereas a specific and more refined toolset may indeed be required to erect a new building, the Master's tools

may nevertheless be instrumental in breaking down the old one first (Jensen 2007, 18).

Prefiguration and violence beyond the means/ends-distinction

We have reviewed a number of different perspectives on the role and legitimacy of violence in an abolitionist politics. Some argue that, in the pursuit of a just and radically different society, one should only employ means that are consistent with these ends. Others claim that such a principled nonviolence precisely precludes the possibility to enforce radical political change, and thus perpetuates the systemic violence that inheres in capitalism and the state. Finally, it could be argued that one may prefigure a new society at least in some of its aspects, but only on the condition that one is able to defend it against the old one. At a fundamental level, however, most of these different positions do seem to have something in common: they often tend to read violence in instrumentalist terms. Violence is a means, a tool, or an instrument. It may be an illegitimate means to a just end; it may typically be the Master's tool, or precisely one that is required to first dismantle his old house – but it is an instrument nevertheless. This is also evinced by the fact that, in many of these accounts, 'violence' appears to be equated with physical violence more specifically. However, I argue that violence should not necessarily be understood in such instrumentalist terms. We should be more reluctant to reduce this rather complex question on the role of violence in radical politics to a matter of being 'for' or 'against' it. What may be a more nuanced or realistic way to appreciate the challenges that activists and revolutionaries face in their attempt to change the existing social order and imagine an alternative to it?

To begin with, it is important to stress that 'violence' is never a neutral term. As Walter Benjamin argues in his essay "Critique of Violence," there is no 'outside' position from which an objective assessment on the legitimate use of violence could possibly be made. Benjamin shows how violence is closely intertwined with the legal order, and fulfils a double function in this respect (2019, 299). On the one hand, it stands at the very root of the law: violence is 'law-making' in that it asserts the law out of nothing, so to speak. And on the other hand, it protects and facilitates this law and the power relations that it constitutes. It thus follows that both our normative views on the legitimacy of violence and even our very understanding of the term is "from the start defined within certain frameworks and comes to us always interpreted, 'worked over' by its frame" (Butler 2020, 136). This is precisely why the state will always perceive any political action that seeks to break with its established order as a violation (Benjamin 2019, 307). Revolutionaries and abolitionists cannot but engage in a context that is already permeated with violence. In consequence, they cannot do so without being perceived or represented as violent – even if one explicitly refrains from the use of physical force. Thus, rather simply a matter of being 'for' or 'against' violence, it really depends on one's position whether a political action will be perceived as violent in the first place.

This does not mean that nonviolent action is impossible, according to Benjamin. It is mostly in consensual and egalitarian, everyday interactions – in collective decision-making, conference, or interpersonal conflict resolution – that one can recognise the contours of a future, peaceful society (2019, 304). What distinguishes such ‘pure’ or ‘unalloyed means’, as Benjamin calls them, from (state) violence, is that they do not project a particular end or aim beyond themselves – and thus escape the intrinsic instrumentalist logic of the latter. Benjamin’s idea of nonviolence as a ‘pure means’ arguably comes close to Peter Kropotkin’s idea of ‘mutual aid’ (2006) or to what the late David Graeber (2011, 98) called ‘baseline communism’: the idea that, under a thin layer of institutionalised repression and exploitation, egalitarianism and solidarity are always already in place in most of our everyday relations and interactions. The many forms of redistribution and democratic decision-making that emerged in the tent camps of recent assembly movements, for instance, exemplify this potential for nonviolent action. Benjamin acknowledges that a complete or consistent abolition of state violence may not be possible under the present conditions (an assessment that arguably still stands today). But by practicing such everyday forms of nonviolence in the ‘here and now’, it may at least be possible to temporarily break the contingent and mythicized foundations on which the current political order rests. “If the rule of myth is broken occasionally in the present age,” he claims, “the coming age is not so unimaginably remote that an attack on law is altogether futile” (Benjamin 2019, 315).

Although there are significant similarities between Benjamin’s concept of nonviolent action or ‘pure means’ on the one hand, and the contemporary notion of prefiguration on the other, there is one significant difference between them. As we have seen, Benjamin’s ‘pure means’ do not seem to serve a particular programme or pursue a predefined end at all (2019, 307). In consequence, nonviolence does not imply any aspiration or pretension to act consistently with one’s ultimate ends. It is at this point that Benjamin’s ‘open-ended’ conception of nonviolent action may help to refine our understanding of prefiguration in the context of contemporary social movements. Perhaps, the common idea of prefiguration as an equivalence of means and ends is often not precise enough (Yates 2015, 18). If the aim is to consistently foreshadow or mirror one’s ultimate ends within one’s own practices, then it follows that “one needs fairly substantive agreement on ends. [...] It is therefore important that the ends are in fact in view, that is, specified to a greater or lesser degree” (Swain 2019, 53). But arguably, one of the key features that was shared by many recent assembly movements – from Tahrir Square to 15-M or *Occupy Wall Street*, and from Gezi Park movement to *Nuit Debout* – was that its participants often did *not* have any clear, predefined ends. Although these various movements may have had a shared critique of the state institutions that they opposed, they also often lacked a clear understanding of what a future society should look like. They thus turned to prefiguration in order to find this out in the first place. In the context of these recent practices, prefiguration must thus be understood as an open-ended and *experimental* process, in which the question what a radically different society may look like, is always immediately at stake. This, then, is where the radical potential of prefigurative politics really lies: not in its ability to consistently or durably enact a perfect, new society or to found a new political order; but in

its continuous attempt to imagine a radically different society beyond the discursive, legal, and political boundaries of the current one.

How may this help us to rethink the relation between violence and prefigurative politics in a more nuanced and realistic manner? If we could understand prefiguration as an open-ended experiment, rather than a claim to full consistency, then it would follow that a prefigurative politics inevitably has its imperfections, flaws, and limits (Gordon 2008, 46). Violence, whenever it appears in a social or political context, may well be understood to pose such a limit. It may not always be avoided – for instance because one is targeted as a victim, or because the perpetrated violence symptomises deeper psychological or societal problems. Violence may then be understood not as a means or instrument that is willingly and knowingly employed in the pursuit of particular ends, but rather as a social given: something that unfortunately occurs in any social practice, including revolutionary or abolitionist ones. The main issue, then, is not how a perfect society *devoid* of conflict or violence should be realised or prefigured in the ‘here and now’. Nor is it the question whether violence should either be employed or instead be eschewed at all costs. Instead, the real challenge for prefigurative movements would be to ask how a more just society may go about dealing with such problems. Think, for instance, of experiments with ‘transformative justice’ or other forms of conflict resolution that do not require law enforcement (Dixon/Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020). This implies that there may always be forms of violence or abuse, and that its complete abolition may never be realisable in practice. Prefiguration, then, is the continuous and open-ended attempt of activist to address such issues within their radical practices. One of the main questions informing their prefigurative politics is not what a perfectly harmonious, non-violent society should look like, but rather how a radically different society would deal with violence as a social given.

Conclusion

This article started with the observation that many prefigurative practices and social movements tend to reproduce (aspects of) the very violence and repression that they seek to challenge – if only to defend or protect themselves. I used the occupation of Tahrir Square in 2011 as an example: whilst between the barricades, the Egyptian revolutionaries sought to prefigure a radically different society, at the outskirts of the occupied square one often had to engage in bloody street battles in order to defend it. Most Western media only covered the prefigurative experimentation within the square, thus construing an idealised image of a ‘peaceful revolution’ that would fit into a liberal-democratic narrative. But how, I asked, should we understand the relation between violence and prefiguration in a more nuanced and realistic way? I reconstructed several perspectives on the role of violence in a prefigurative politics. Whereas some radical theorists and movements insist that violent means can never serve to establish nonviolent ends, others have altogether dismissed the principle of nonviolence. However, I argued that we should be reluctant to accept an all too benign ideal image of radical politics without violence, as much as we should steer away from the idea that ‘in order to make an omelette, one has to break a few eggs’. At the end of the day, both views are underpinned by a similar instrumentalist idea of violence. By

presenting the question of violence as something that one can simply be ‘for’ or ‘against’, I argued, one arguably does not do justice to its complexity.

Engaging with Walter Benjamin, I have sought to offer an alternative perspective on the relation between prefiguration and violence. I argued how Benjamin’s conception of ‘pure means’ may help us to challenge the common conception of prefiguration as a claim to full consistency. Instead, we may also understand prefiguration as an open-ended experiment: as an attempt to form an, inevitably partial or limited, idea of what a radically different society might be like. Seen from this perspective, then, violence is not a means or instrument that should either be employed or dismissed, but a challenge or problem that activists need to address in one way or the other. The question then becomes how one would deal with (the threat of) violence in a radically different society. Seen from this perspective, revolutionary movements do not prefigure a perfect utopia that is entirely devoid of conflict or violence. They merely create a condition in which it is possible to imagine a radically *different* society. This, indeed, is something that was established on Tahrir Square, as well as in many other places in the course of the past decade.

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