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▶ **To cite this version:**

Laura Centemeri, Viviana Asara. Prefiguration and Ecology: Understanding the Ontological Politics of Ecotopian Movements. Lara Monticelli. The Future Is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics, Bristol University Press, pp.130-143, 2022, Subject Banner Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century, 978-1529215656. hal-03787963

HAL Id: hal-03787963
https://hal.science/hal-03787963v1

Submitted on 30 Sep 2022

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Laura Centemeri and Viviana Asara. 2022. “Prefiguration and Ecology: Understanding the Ontological Politics of Ecotopian Movements”. In Monticelli, Lara (ed.) *The Future Is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, pp. 130-143

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Prefiguration and Ecology: Understanding the Ontological Politics of Ecotopian Movements

Laura Centemeri and Viviana Asara

In this chapter we discuss prefiguration from the perspective of environmental activism, interweaving the concept of ‘ecological prefiguration’ with the related debate on ‘ecotopia’, and point to some of the challenges social movements face in striving towards an ecological society. After reviewing the literature that discusses ecological prefiguration and ecotopia from different disciplinary perspectives, we argue that ecological prefiguration should be approached from an ‘ontological politics’ perspective. This shows that what is at stake in ecological prefiguration is not so much the anticipation of some desired features of the future in the present but rather the disclosure of a potential ontological alternative that can open a space for the radical imagination of alternative value practices. This can help to clarify both the transgressive potential of ecotopian initiatives as expressions of a larger movement of everyday environmentalism as well as the specific challenges that this form of engagement entails. Using the example of the transnational permaculture movement, we show how investigating ‘value practices’ can shed light on how ecological prefiguration can contribute to creating a more just and sustainable society but also

the limitations it poses when it sidelines more confrontational or contentious approaches to socioecological change.

ecologism
ecotopia
everyday environmentalism
environmental movements
ontological politics
permaculture
prefiguration
prefigurative politics
social movements
sustainable materialism
value practices

Introduction

In this chapter we discuss prefiguration from the perspective of environmental activism, interweaving the concept of ‘ecological prefiguration’ with the related debate on ‘ecotopia’, and point to some of the challenges social movements face in striving towards an ecological society. After reviewing the literature that discusses ecological prefiguration and ecotopia from different disciplinary perspectives, we argue that ecological prefiguration should be approached from an ‘ontological

politics’ perspective. This can help to clarify the transgressive potential of ecotopian initiatives as expressions of a larger movement of everyday environmentalism. Using the example of the transnational permaculture movement, we show how investigating ‘value practices’ can illuminate the value of ecological prefiguration in creating a more just, sustainable society **[add:** but also the limitations it poses when it sidelines more confrontational or contentious approaches to socioecological change**]**.

Critical distancing and direct engagement: different approaches to the study of ecotopian movements

Prefigurative initiatives have been a vital feature of environmental activism since the 1960s at least, probably due to the key role of utopianism in contemporary environmental discourses and practices. Despite the growth of grassroots action since the 1990s, however, social scientists have largely neglected ecological prefiguration until recently.

For geographer David Pepper (1996, 2005, 2007), utopianism – ‘critical, creative thinking about alternative social worlds’ (Pepper, 2007, p 290) – permeates not only radical but also reformist environmentalism in ways that are commonly marked by idealism – that is, by a ‘poor understanding of the structural dynamics of current society and what it will take to change them’ (Pepper, 2007, p 290). However, far from criticizing utopianism per se, Pepper stresses that utopian thinking and practice play a crucial role in environmentalism. This is because they provide

1 conceptual and material space for developing the 'transgressive potential' necessary
2 for imagining a future ecological society and 'crossing the boundaries of present
3 society and moving closer to one which is ecologically and socially strongly
4 sustainable' (Pepper, 2007, p 289).

5 Pepper uses the term 'ecotopia' to denote 'utopian writing, thinking and action
6 in which environmental problems and themes are central rather than incidental'
7 (Pepper, 2005, p 6).[1] His analysis relies on ecotopian writings and academic literature
8 discussing initiatives – which we characterize as 'ecological prefiguration' – that seek
9 to build locally responsible and sustainable economies, such as alternative currencies,
10 local circuits of food and energy production and consumption, alternative agriculture
11 experiments and intentional communities (such as ecovillages – on this topic see
12 Clarence-Smith, this volume). If prefiguration is 'the embodiment, within the ongoing
13 political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making,
14 culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (Boggs, 1977, p 100), what
15 is specific to ecological prefiguration is its emphasis on both *social* and *ecological*
16 relations. In other words, the 'ultimate goal' of ecological prefiguration initiatives is
17 formulated in more-than-human terms; it is the embodiment of forms of coexistence
18 between human beings and other living beings, with the intention of sustaining the
19 transition to **[change 'transition to' to 'transformation toward']** an ecological
20 society.

1 Pepper identifies diverse intellectual traditions that fuel radical ecological
2 prefiguration, such as the deep ecology approach (principally American
3 bioregionalism) and anarchist- and socialist-inclined radical environmentalism
4 (exemplified by Murray Bookchin’s municipalism).[2] In his opinion, this intellectual
5 eclecticism causes radical ecological utopianism to be riddled with tensions and
6 dilemmas. Indeed, while deep ecology is an ecocentric approach that attributes
7 intrinsic value to nature, collapses the Western philosophical dualism between nature
8 and society and criticizes Enlightenment values, anarchist- and socialist-inclined
9 radical environmentalism adopt a more materialistic analysis of social change – one
10 centred on anti-capitalism and environmental justice (see Piccardi, this volume).
11 More specifically, Pepper focuses on four dilemmas and tensions of
12 ecotopianism. First, ecotopian thinking encompasses both ‘technophilic’ and
13 ‘technophobic’ positions, which sometimes go as far as depicting scenarios of ‘future
14 primitivism’ or sustaining ‘technocratic’ tendencies. Second, ecotopianism tends to
15 express itself in rigid social blueprints, based on principles of ‘equilibrium’ or
16 ‘biomimicry’,[3] which Pepper sees as regressive because they are grounded in an
17 imagined past – one characterized by harmony between society and nature – rather
18 than in present material realities. Third, ecotopianism argues that all ecological
19 principles should be universally observed and applied, including celebration of the
20 virtues of diversity, which actually translates into ‘the right to be culturally and socio-
21 economically different; even to the extent of living ecologically-unfriendly lives’

1 (Pepper, 2007, p 297). Fourth, the ecotopian idea that 'localism forms the source of
2 most appropriate values and behaviour, and giantism and globalisation are often
3 regarded as enemies' risks contributing to 'simplistic, reductionist explanations of
4 environmental problems' (Pepper, 2007, p 303). For Pepper, even when ecotopian
5 practices are motivated by radical intentions, their results are 'reformist' at best;
6 rather than stimulating the 'radical imaginary', he argues, they merely promote small-
7 scale responsible capitalism, which supports non-profit initiatives without really
8 challenging the system. In his view, the potential of these institutions to bring about
9 social change ultimately depends on their capacity to build internally consistent and
10 rigorous reasoning, and their failure to do so explains why they eventually become
11 assimilated into the society they oppose (Pepper, 2007, p 307).

12 The work of anthropologists Joshua Lockyer and James R. Veteto on ecotopia
13 is in opposition to Pepper's critical distancing approach. Inspired by the writings of
14 socially engaged anthropologists, such as Arturo Escobar and David Graeber, they
15 observe practices from a position 'beyond disengaged cultural critique', instead
16 looking for 'viable possibilities' for moving towards a more just and sustainable
17 society (Lockyer and Veteto, 2013, p 3). Defining ecotopia as 'bodies of ideas and
18 groups of people who are attempting to enact just and sustainable alternatives to
19 existing political and economic hegemonies' (Lockyer and Veteto, 2013, p 6), they
20 focus on what they see as the most relevant 'ecotopian movements' – bioregionalism,
21 permaculture and ecovillages. These movements aim to create 'moral economies

1 grounded in forms of discourse other than dominant Western economic rationality and
2 guided by the compass of justice and sustainability' (Lockyer and Veteto, 2013, p 21).
3 The authors have a positive view of the transgressive potential of these initiatives;
4 they believe that having learned from 'the successes and failures of the 1960s
5 counterculture', they can now try to develop 'more effective strategies for moving
6 toward ecotopia' by building 'bridges across a number of divides – ivory tower from
7 village, Global North from Global South, and nature from culture' (Lockyer and
8 Veteto, 2013, p 4).
9 The scope of these ecotopian movements is somewhat different.
10 Bioregionalism is mainly an intellectual movement supporting 'a basic understanding
11 that humans and human activities are fundamental components of ecosystems … and
12 that human organization should be guided by natural systems instead of arbitrary
13 political boundaries' (Lockyer and Veteto, 2013, p 6). Permaculture, on the other
14 hand, is a design method: an 'ethically grounded methodological toolkit for putting
15 the bioregional worldview into practice' by providing 'guidelines for developing
16 sustainable human ecosystems' (Lockyer and Veteto, 2013, p 6). Finally, ecovillages
17 are

18

> 19 intentional human communities that use integrative design, local economic
> 20 networking, cooperative and common property structures, and participatory decision

> making to minimise ecological footprints and provide as many of life’s basic necessities as possible in a sustainable manner. Ecovillages put bioregional thought and permaculture methodology into practice at the community level in service of the fundamentally ecotopian goal of sustainability. (Lockyer and Veteto, 2013, p 15)

The writings of Pepper and of Lockyer and Veteto exemplify two recurring postures in the scientific debate over the ‘transgressive potential’ of ecotopian initiatives: ‘critical distancing’ and ‘direct engagement’. On the one hand, Pepper’s critical distancing is guided by the idea that the goal of social scientists studying ecotopian movements is to assess their success in triggering political change. In his analysis of what makes a movement successful, Pepper focuses mainly on the level of ideologies, while case studies serve to exemplify a general theory and are selected to support an argument that is supposed to be of general validity. On the other hand, Lockyer and Veteto invite social scientists to engage in socioecological transition initiatives and bring their knowledge and expertise to bear in the service of these social experiments. Their approach is more sensitive to the fact that ideologies inspire concrete actions whose transformative potential can never be fully anticipated, because it is measured in concrete situations of action. The case study, then, is not so much an exemplification as an experiment – one that also involves social scientists, who participate by encouraging forms of reflexivity that have an impact on movements’

frames, strategies and imaginary. At the same time, social scientists are challenged in their practices and methods by the need to combine their usual problem-orientated approach with the solution-focused orientation supported by ecological prefiguration initiatives.

Despite different research approaches, however, these authors are united in their conviction that for the transition to an ecological society to take place, a profound transformation is needed in both social discourse and practice.

From ecotopia to the ontological politics of everyday environmentalism

By combining the critical distancing and direct engagement, we can identify two fundamental challenges that ecological prefiguration needs to confront: contravening the hegemonic discourses and power structures it encounters, and rethinking social values and needs consistent with socially and ecologically sustainable livelihoods. As such, the challenge of transitioning to an ecological society is ethical, political and technical, and necessitates simultaneously transforming values, power balances and the material relationship to the environment and non-human beings. For this reason, a critical discussion of ecological prefiguration must consider a perspective of ‘ontological politics’ (Mol, 1999; see also Escobar, 2018, this volume), which assumes that ‘“the real” is implicated in the “political” and vice versa’ (Mol, 1999, p 74), because reality is produced and transformed through open and contested practices

1 and interventions that enact ways of existing and of relating human and non-human
2 entities (see also Pellizzoni, 2015).
3 Ontological politics views reality as being performed in a variety of practices
4 and attends to the pluralism of views or values on reality. It further stipulates that
5 society's complexity stems from an irreducible multiplicity of modes of practical
6 experience of reality, forms of agency and types of objectivity that are intertwined and
7 hierarchized in the institutional forms of common living. Power is therefore
8 understood as operating at the juncture between multifarious practical experiences and
9 the definition of norms and institutions that constitute the social order, making some
10 forms of experience and relationships to materiality and the environment more
11 legitimate than others.
12 It follows that from an ontological politics perspective, the stake of ecological
13 prefiguration is not so much the anticipation and implementation of an alternative
14 future (whose characteristics would already be known), but rather making visible a
15 potential ontological alternative – one that is already inherent in the present. The
16 activation of this alternative reopens previously ignored possibilities of a radical
17 imagination of the future. Consequently, the transformative potential of ecological
18 prefiguration can be assessed through analyzing and observing the 'alternative value
19 practices' (De Angelis, 2017, p 365; see also Centemeri, 2018) that orientate and
20 materially organize ecotopian initiatives. Here, value practices are the social actions
21 through which people define what is valuable in a given situation and act to attain,

1 and maintain, the condition deemed valuable. This involves both the *discursive* level
2 of value arguments stressed by Pepper (2007) and the *practical* level of modes of
3 valuing considered by Lockyer and Veteto (2013) **(see Figure 9.1)**.

4 Figure 9.1 Here

5 The value practices perspective implies moving beyond social sciences' traditional
6 separation between *social values* and *economic value* to focus on the discourses and
7 practices that socially construct what is economically valuable, starting from a
8 multiplicity of social ways of valuing. From this perspective, market prices are the
9 outcome of not only 'the social structure of the market' but also the hegemonic ways
10 of valuing supported by 'institutional rules, networks, and conventions' (Beckert and
11 Aspers, 2011, p 27). In contrast, many ecological prefiguration initiatives openly
12 assume the monetary value of goods and services, as expressed by price, to be an
13 object of deliberation between actors in the chain between producer and consumer.

14 This focus on value and practice is at the heart of Schlosberg and Coles'
15 (2016; see also Schlosberg, 2019) analysis of ecological prefiguration, which they
16 term as the 'new environmentalism of everyday life' (see Forno and Wahlen, this
17 volume) – a broader concept that includes ecotopian movements and is inspired by
18 research into those movements. This new environmentalism of everyday life includes
19 forms of collective action, such as alternative food networks and energy cooperatives,
20 that prefigure sustainable supply chains as a way to challenge neoliberal capitalism
21 and its 'circulatory power' (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016, p 161). This creates 'flows

1 of technocratic productivity and consumption that increasingly reconstructs the world,
2 human beings, ethics, and political economic institutions in order to maximize further
3 circulations' (Coles, 2012, p 181). According to Schlosberg, 'the objective of this
4 sustainable materialist activism is to reconfigure or *prefigure* a new relationship with
5 the material needs of everyday life and to *institutionalize* it' (2019, p 16, emphasis
6 added), changing the material relationship with the non-human realm (Schlosberg and
7 Coles, 2016, p 171). For Schlosberg (2019), sustainable materialism is a type of
8 activism and politics focused on environmental practices around the basic needs of
9 everyday life, and on the collective development of alternative systems that resist the
10 flows of power and are dedicated to social justice and the functioning and vitality of
11 the non-human realm. Our proposition is to approach this transformation in terms of
12 ontological politics, exploring how alternative value practices developed in
13 prefigurative initiatives can succeed in foregrounding ontologies **[change 'ontologies'**
14 **to 'assemblages']** capable of resisting neoliberal forms of circulatory power.
15 In the next section, we scrutinize how these concepts and analyses are
16 articulated in the case of the permaculture ecotopian movement. In this ecotopian
17 movement (more clearly than in other movements), the ontological politics dimension
18 that characterizes ecological prefiguration plays a crucial role. Our discussion is based
19 on research conducted mainly in Italy in the period 2015–19 (see Centemeri, 2018,
20 2019). Findings draw on a triangulation of different research methods: participant
21 observation of permaculture training courses; ethnographic observation of selected

permaculture demo sites and permaculture association meetings (national and European levels); interviews with permaculturists (including some of the founding figures of the movement); analysis of documents and literature produced by the movement; and analysis of activities on social media in the case of the Italian permaculture movement. Punctual observations were also conducted in permaculture demo sites in Spain, Portugal, France and Switzerland.

Permaculture: ecotopia meeting ontological politics

The term ‘permaculture’ is a portmanteau of ‘permanent’ and ‘culture’. Founded in Australia in the 1970s, and spread worldwide during the 1980s and 1990s, the permaculture movement strives for a cultural and material transformation of industrialized societies, starting with devising technical solutions for ecological food production and distribution. Permaculture is an ecotopian movement to the extent that it encourages everyone to act to transform their daily practices and experiment with fairer, more sustainable provisioning systems.

According to Bill Mollison (1988, Chapter 14) – one of the movement’s initiators and a supporter of bioregionalism – networking these transformative initiatives should lead to the emergence of new infrastructures and institutions that will make the existing ones obsolete, ultimately leading to a generalized social change – a position that Pepper qualifies as idealistic. However, it is important to note that while bioregionalism remains an important inspiration for permaculture, other

1 political imaginaries, such as degrowth and climate justice, are equally important
2 today. From the point of view of political cultures, the permaculture movement
3 perceives itself **[change 'the permaculture movement perceives itself' to**
4 **'permaculture activists perceive the movement']** as being 'mosaic' – that is, as a
5 movement that values internal difference and is open to collaboration, appropriation
6 and hybridization.

7 Initially, permaculture – which supports a predominantly small-scale
8 agroecological model of agriculture – was born as a critique of the agricultural model
9 imposed by the so-called 'green revolution', which was based on intensive land use
10 practices with massive inputs of chemicals and energy produced from non-renewable
11 sources.[4] More particularly, the permaculture method consists of a set of ethical and
12 practical principles for designing human settlements in a way that seriously considers
13 and integrates local specificities (ecologically, socially and culturally). This
14 adaptation increases the likelihood of local conditions being maintained over time,
15 with a reduced need for external inputs, particularly in terms of energy. Rather than
16 defining blueprints to be replicated everywhere, permaculture insists on a
17 methodology of process design. This is not restricted to the field of agriculture; rather,
18 it is a design method of socioecological processes. As such, this method can be
19 applied to all areas of daily life – from the design of a house, garden or farm to the
20 design of a teaching course, cooperative, production and distribution chain, network
21 of activism and even protest actions (see Jordan, 2009).

1 Beyond the differences in practical implementation, what permaculture
2 initiatives have in common is their preference for technical and organizational
3 solutions based on collaboration (rather than exploitation or competition) between
4 humans, animals, plants, materials and natural elements. The ethical foundation of
5 permaculture is summarized in three principles: care of the Earth, care of people and
6 redistribution of surplus (or fair share). These principles combine elements of deep
7 ecology with materialist concerns for social and ecological justice. Permaculture
8 design principles are inspired by observation of how healthy ecosystems function –
9 what Pepper defines as a ‘bio/ecomimesis’ approach. These principles include:
10 observe and interact; catch and store energy; obtain a yield; apply self-regulation and
11 feedback; use and value renewables; produce no waste; design from patterns to
12 details; integrate, don’t segregate; use small, slow solutions; use and value diversity;
13 use edges and value the marginal; and creatively use and respond to change (see
14 Holmgren, 2002).
15 Permaculture design, therefore, is based on the search for practical solutions to
16 work *with* nature, not against it. This invitation must be understood in the framework
17 of an idea of nature as a process in continuous evolution, in which notions of order
18 and equilibrium refer to dynamic, rather than static, conditions. The debates within
19 the movement today reveal a more complex picture than that drawn by Pepper, who
20 sees ecomimesis as a regressive trend and assumes that the invitation to imitate nature
21 stems from the urge to respect a ‘natural’ order conceived as stable. Permaculturists,

1 instead, draw inspiration from solutions that can be observed in ecosystems *without*
2 evoking the idea of a natural order; rather, they talk about a constantly moving
3 equilibrium (Rothe, 2014). Moreover, empirical observation also shows that the
4 distinction between technophobes and technophiles is less relevant than the distinction
5 between those who believe that technical solutions alone can induce sociopolitical
6 change and those who believe such solutions should be accompanied by protest and
7 conflict. However, this movement's repertoire of action remains largely non-
8 contentious; it focuses on promoting training courses by creating transnationally
9 networked educational organizations and 'demonstration sites' – concrete examples of
10 'permanent cultures' ranging from ecovillages to community gardens, farms and
11 'transition towns' (see Hopkins, 2011).

12 On the permaculture courses Laura Centemeri attended in Italy, an important
13 part of the training aimed to make participants aware of often ignored ecological
14 relationships and to view animals, plants, other living beings and materials and
15 elements from the perspective of their problem-solving skills. For example, if you
16 wanted to protect a plot of land from excessive wind exposure, a permacultural way to
17 do this would be to design a windbreak barrier using a combination of trees and
18 shrubs that have not only wind-breaking but also nitrogen-fixing capacities, thus
19 increasing soil fertility while enhancing biodiversity. Efforts would also be made to
20 find species that combine the wind-breaking capacity with that of producing fruit for
21 human consumption, berries for animals or even simply refuge areas for animals –

1 preferably beneficial predators. The function of wind protection could also be
2 provided by a structure (for example, a tool shed), which has a specific additional
3 function (storing tools) as well as a beneficial impact on the design problem (wind
4 protection).

5 It is in this sense that we talk about an 'ontological politics' dimension of
6 permaculture. The discovery of the reality of ecological relationships, and the
7 previously ignored problem-solving skills of non-human beings, is central to
8 triggering imagination and elaborating technical and organizational solutions that
9 respond to human needs by reducing human impacts on ecosystems. This capacity to
10 combine productive activities with processes that repair the 'web of life' indicates an
11 alternative path for agriculture; indeed, according to Jason W. Moore, this alternative
12 points to a possible way out of capitalism and towards a 'socialist world-ecology'
13 (2015, p 200). By 'processes that repair the "web of life"', we mean, for example,
14 permaculture design practices that consider soil fertility to be the result of successful
15 collaborations between a variety of living beings in a relationship of interdependence.
16 Here, soil is considered not as an inert surface but as an interweaving of relationships
17 between living beings – from nematodes and fungi to bacteria and humans. In
18 performing soil as an interweaving of relationships, the permaculturist is called on to
19 collaborate with this multispecies network to achieve goals such as ecological food
20 production. Moreover, the permaculturist seeks to take into account that the soil is not
21 a plot of land with the sole job of producing food; it is also part of a landscape, a place

to which memories and affections can be attached, and part of a biosphere and processes involving biodiversity loss or carbon storage. In other words, the permaculturist must consider not only multiple ways of *performing* soil but also multiple ways of *valuing* soil.

In particular, observing value practices in various permaculture demonstration sites in Italy revealed the importance attributed to 'emplaced' modes of valuing the environment. By emplaced, we mean ways of valuing the environment based on the situated experience of being attached to and (inter)dependent on specific people, places and ecosystems (see also Pink, 2009). For example, to explain the organizational choices adopted on her farm in the hills of Genoa, a permaculturist considers multiple evaluation criteria equally, such as: the need to contribute to fighting climate change, the possibility to decide her own working schedule with more autonomy, the desire to dedicate time to herself and her loved ones, the will to create a local food network producing high-quality affordable food, the desire to revive an abandoned place and the memories of its former inhabitants, and the pleasure of enjoying the beauty of the place. In other words, the urge to act for social change is combined with the quest for a mode of living based on taking care of those social and ecological relationships that make a specific place unique in the personal experience.

The question, therefore, is not that of replacing one ontology with another; for example, systematically prioritizing an emplaced perspective over a global one. Both

perspectives count for social and environmental sustainability. Rather, it is about recognizing and attributing importance to multiple logics of value and ways of performing reality, and exploring alternative ways of combining – in value practices – both emplaced modes of valuing and logics of value that rely on more standardized evaluation criteria. In permaculture initiatives, social and ecological sustainability appears to be connected with the recognition of this ontological multiplicity and guided by value arguments of care and redistribution. Given these premises, alternative value practices can emerge – ones that try to resist the standardization processes induced by an economy whose only objective is ever-increasing accumulation.

However, the transgressive potential of these alternative value practices is stronger when permaculture initiatives are inserted in mutualistic and collaborative networks, and in processes of mobilization where prefiguration, contestation and strategy are combined in the attempt to transform institutional contexts. For example, permaculture is an important component of the ecological imaginary of the urban movement, which flourished in Barcelona following the experience of the Indignados and the occupation of Plaça de Catalunya. Indeed, after the occupation of the square, the decentralization of the Indignados movement to neighbourhood assemblies led to the birth of various prefigurative projects, such as community gardens, social centres and alternative economic initiatives. Permaculture activists were directly involved in these prefigurative experiments, in which the ethical and design principles of

permaculture were adopted. In this case, permaculture principles thus contributed to the emergence of alternative value practices, as part of a broader intersectional and radical politics of autonomy and the commons (Asara, 2019, 2020).

Conclusion

To some extent, the example of the permaculture movement shows that the tensions and dilemmas that (according to Pepper) characterize ecotopia are real. More particularly, the urge for the movement to encompass a diversity of visions of an ecological society, as well as a diversity of strategies to move towards it, can act as a restraint on the effectiveness of collective action. Indeed, internal diversity often means that the permaculture movement does not take a strong stance in political debates that can be highly divisive. Even more problematic is the fact that permaculture founders supported a vision of a 'non-polarised and non-contentious politic', based on the assumption that 'it is possible to agree with most people, of any race or creed, on the basics of life-centred ethics and commonsense procedures, across all cultural groups' (Mollison, 1988, p 508). The belief in the 'power of life' to create a spontaneous alignment of political goals underestimates the fact that 'life-centred ethics' can be reactionary and not necessarily emancipatory (see Yates and de Moor, this volume; du Plessis and Husted, this volume).

At the same time, many activists (even if not all) engage in reflection and debate over these tensions. For example, the will to combine local ecological

1 prefiguration initiatives with global mobilizations on environmental issues propels the
2 building of networks and collaborations at different scales. In other words, the reality
3 of ecological prefiguration appears to be much less idealistic than Pepper claimed,
4 even if a certain political naivety is apparent in many (not all) permaculture
5 initiatives.

6 Furthermore, the multiplication of collaborations appears as an important
7 strategy – one that enables the imaginary of an ecological society to be moulded on a
8 continuous basis, rather than simply anticipated or fixed once and for all. From this
9 point of view, permaculture, as a set of ethical and design principles, appears to be a
10 potential lingua franca or bridging language of ecological prefiguration. It can be
11 mobilized in more or less contentious initiatives, from the anti-capitalist inspired
12 occupation of lands – as in the case of the Zone to Defend in Notre Dame des Landes,
13 France (Bulle, 2018) – to the Transition Towns network, and from urban community
14 gardens to experimental rural farms.

15 In this chapter, we have tried to provide some tools with which to analyse the
16 transgressive power of ecological prefiguration initiatives by looking at their value
17 practices as a privileged methodology to reveal their ontological politics. By not
18 separating the analysis of discourse from that of practices, or the analysis of social
19 value from that of economic value, we can better understand the transformative
20 potential of radical ecological prefiguration. As the case of the permaculture
21 movement demonstrates, this potential is strongest where these initiatives succeed in

1 ‘contaminating’ other movements, building powerful collaborations that can nurture
2 their radical imaginaries and increasing their chance of institutionalization.

3 ## Notes

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Laura Centemeri and Viviana Asara. 2022. "Prefiguration and Ecology: Understanding the Ontological Politics of Ecotopian Movements". In Monticelli, Lara (ed.) *The Future Is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, pp. 130-143

1 Figure 9.1 Ecological prefiguration as a form of environmental activism

1

[1] The term 'ecotopia' became popular in the 1970s, thanks to Ernest Callenbach's (1975) utopian homonymous novel.

[2] Echoing ideas already developed by Peter Kropotkin and William Morris, Bookchin (1980) imagined a future of decentralized but interdependent eco-communities, run by direct democracy.

[3] Biomimicry is a concept introduced by Janine M. Benyus (1997) to describe a logic of design and innovation that mimics the problem-solving strategies observed in the spontaneous organization of ecosystems.

[4] On agroecology, see Altieri (1987).

Please position the following notes at the end of Chapter 10, before references.