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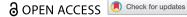
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**ABSTRACT**

Collective alternative everyday practices (CAEPs), such as community gardens, clothing swaps or repair cafés, have become a prominent sight in the critical-creative milieus. So far, CAEPs have been mostly conceptualized in terms of prefigurative politics, i.e. as the strategy to change society through an everyday conduct that fully reflects idealized notions of the Self and society. However, there is increasing evidence of practitioners who engage in rather irregular, spontaneous ways and remain bound to an unsustainable consumer lifestyle. Scholars have identified such volatile participation as a problem for mobilization, but have not answered a) how the lack of continuous embodiment can be understood from a social movement perspective, and b) what the political quality of this behaviour might be. In this article, I address these research questions by drawing on theories of the late-modern subject and existing qualitative studies. Late-Modern Subject Theory assumes that individuals increasingly construct themselves through the market and in a multi-faceted way, due to processes such as commercialization, flexibilization and acceleration. From that perspective, volatile participants attempt to mobilize an idealized Self but are unable to do so persistently, due to the structural constraints (such as lack of time resources) and personal liberties (such as excess of consumer options) that define everyday life in late-modern society. The result are figurations of utopia that are bound to fail, but repeated ever again. These 'refigurations' maintain a political element through conveying a critique of and an alternative to the status quo, if only for a moment.

## Introduction

In recent years, Western societies have seen a reinvigoration of collective actions that centre on the alternative provisioning of everyday needs. Community gardens, food-sharing, repair cafés, sewing workshops, open bicycle workshops, clothing swap initiatives, upcycling groups and free-shops are only some examples. What these practices have in common is that a) they are shared by a locally-embedded collective of individuals, b) they demonstrate alternatives to everyday practices that are promoted by the capitalist

market and liberal democratic parliaments (i.e. purchasing consumer goods and voting during elections), and c) they involve the hands-on furnishing of mundane needs, such as food, clothing, electronic devices, bicycles etc. With research on these collective actions still evolving, a neutral denominator for them is still missing. Based on the three criteria developed above, I suggest the term Collective Alternative Everyday Practices (CAEPs). Analytically, CAEPs can be distinguished from other forms of collective action that are situated in the lifeworld of activists, such as political consumption (Micheletti, 2003) and lifestyle movements (Haenfler et al., 2012). Whereas the latter two are articulated by individuals within an *imagined* collective and often consider the market as a *platform* for change, CAEPs are constituted by individuals within a *manifest* collective and mobilize a *competing* logic to the functional differentiation of the economy and politics – namely a community-based mechanism of allocating everyday goods.

Concerning their constituencies in the global North, CAEPs are articulated by socially marginalized and vulnerable communities (Davidson, 2016; MacGregor, 2019), but also by groups within the so-called critical-creative – or 'post-materialist' – milieus (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2018; Grossmann & Creamer, 2016; Naegler, 2018). The latter are composed by individuals from the middle and upper middle classes who hold the deepest ecological and democratic values and show the strongest support for the goal of a social-ecological transformation of society (Benthin & Gellrich, 2017). This corresponds to the reported motivations of critical-creative practitioners, which reach from embodying a critique against an unsustainable consumer culture and paving the way to radically different institutions (De Moor et al., 2019; Mincyte & Dobernig, 2016; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019) to the desire of 'doing something good' and seeing a concrete impact of their actions in the world (Kropp, 2018; Naegler, 2018; Schlosberg & Coles, 2016, p. 176).

Against this background, the proliferation of CAEPs in the critical-creative milieus has produced a certain euphoria among sustainability and social movement researchers. In various publications, collective alternative everyday practices have been dubbed 'new materialist movements' (Schlosberg & Coles, 2016), 'everyday environmentalism' (Loftus, 2012), 'postenvironmentalism' (Certomà, 2016) or 'pioneers of change' (WBGU, 2011). While these conceptualizations are rooted within eco-political, socio-philosophical and sustainability scientific literatures, one can distinguish a critical theoretical thread that runs through most arguments. According to this theme, CAEPs challenge the political-economic order due to their subversive, prefigurative and transformative character. By replacing unsustainable consumer practices and creating new forms of micro-governance, they undermine the power of corporations and defunct institutions of liberal democracy (Schlosberg & Craven, 2019; Welzer, 2011). By demonstrating the possibility of a different and more sustainable way of organizing everyday life, practitioners reopen the future after decades of neoliberal TINA (There Is No Alternative) and once again contribute to the creation of concrete utopias (Certomà, 2016; Monticelli, 2018). Finally yet importantly, the experiences made through collective alternative everyday practices have a substantive effect on the practitioners: they rewire them to a community, teach them self-efficacy and ignite the will to emancipation. As such, food-saving, cloth-upcycling and tool-sharing correspond to reflexive actions of deeply alienated individuals who suffer from the non-realization of their democratic and environmental values (Kropp, 2018; WBGU, 2011). In terms of its theoretical roots, the literature on CAEPs draws on central ideas of New Social Movement Theory and

Prefigurative Politics, and refashions them in neo-marxist, new materialist or performativist terms.

While these conceptualizations certainly capture the grievances and motives of many activists in the critical-creative milieus, they touch surprisingly little on a particular mode of engagement that has been diagnosed among them. According to empirical studies, there are individuals who refrain from organizational tasks and participate in more sporadic and spontaneous ways, for the purpose of experimenting with a single alternative practice (Foden, 2016; Kato, 2015; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019; Welzer, 2011). Moreover, investigations into the everyday life of practitioners indicate that many of them remain inclined to an unsustainable consumer lifestyle, especially in the domains of fashion, mobility, food, and electronics (Eversberg, 2015; Kleinhückelkotten et al., 2016; McNeill & Venter, 2019; Mincyte & Dobernig, 2016; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019). Scholars have referred to this episodic and insular manner of engagement in CAEPs as 'limited' (Davidson, 2016, p. 63), 'fugitive' (Eckersley, 2019, p. 15) or 'fleeting' (Kato, 2015, p. 157), but we may also call it 'fluid' (Foden, 2016, p. 188): practitioners switch between a CAEP and their usual everyday practices at their own option. As such, they make use of the open design of CAEPs, which allows virtually everyone to join, without being required to get involved in organizational matters or to demonstrate a particularly ecological way of living.

With good reason, authors have acknowledged this volatile mode of participation as a problem for future mobilization. Activists who engage in such flexible ways might limit the scalability of initiatives (Welzer, 2011), avoid more conflictual situations when necessary (Schlosberg & Coles, 2016), or push the tedious work of organizing on the shoulders of a small group of people (Kato, 2015). Other scholars have called the ambitions of fluid participants into question: they might not be interested in social change, and rather seek to 'present' (Paech, 2012, p. 90) or 'imitate' (Hayward & Schuilenburg, 2014, p. 32) an attitude towards sustainability. This suspicion can also be found within the practice communities themselves, where radical leftist activists try to distinguish themselves from so-called 'hipsters', who allegedly fail to reflect the dangers of co-optation and gentrification in their search for the 'authentic' (Naegler, 2018, p. 516).

Scholars have not, however, conceptualized how fluid participation affects the understanding of CAEPs as prefigurative, and more importantly, political practices. As mentioned above, nascent theories of CAEPs emphasize the 'utopian' character of community gardens, repair cafés and clothing swaps – and by doing so create the impression that practitioners are generally driven by an 'orthodox practice of prefiguration' (Yates, 2014, p. 17). The latter implies the aspiration to problematize and overcome capitalist social relations through an everyday conduct that fully reflects the ideals of a just society – an endeavour that has, most prominently, been diagnosed within anarchist and autonomist groups (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Yates, 2014). The fugitive participation of many critical creatives, however, does not mirror this ambitious project, which challenges the very idea that makes prefiguration political: the *personal embodiment* of a critique against the status quo and the *continuous perpetuation* of alternative lifeforms in a horizontal way. This raises two questions: how can fluid participation in collective alternative everyday practices be understood from a social movement perspective? And, connected to that, what is the political quality of fluid participation in CAEPs?

The aim of this article is to answer these questions by reconsidering dominant ideas of what has been known as the individual 'subject' in collective action. Nascent theories of CAEPs, and Prefigurative Politics per se, draw on a subject-theoretical assumption that originated from New Social Movement Theory: individuals mobilize in order *to construct an alternative Self within a reliable social order*. Jürgen Habermas, Alberto Melucci and Alain Touraine have traced movement activism back to individual experiences of domination and fragmentation in modern society, and the emancipatory hope of organizing social relations based on social values, of realigning the outside world with the inside world. Thus, new social movement activists were conceived as individuals who struggle towards the norm of alternative 'solidity': becoming autonomous from an alienating political-economic system and fully integrating one's personal values and actions (Blühdorn, 2017, p. 10; McDonald, 1999, pp. 207–212; Touraine, 2000, pp. 93–94).

In the case of fleeting participation in CAEPs, this assumption seems outdated and requires a revision. Following authors such as Ingolfur Blühdorn and Alain Touraine, I argue that theories of the *late-modern* subject are key for that task. According to Late-Modern Subject Theory, 'liquefying' processes of modernization, such as commercialization, acceleration and flexibilization, have rendered the norm of an alternative Self precarious: it remains a central point of reference for identity-construction, but is increasingly difficult to adhere to. This theoretical observation is supported by empirical studies that have shown practitioners who seek to develop a consistent conduct, but are repeatedly discouraged by structural barriers (such as the high-paced time regime that governs everyday-life) and attractive freedoms (such as instantly meeting spontaneous desires through consumption) they encounter in their everyday lives (Foden, 2016; Kannengießer, 2018; Mincyte & Dobernig, 2016). As such, these practitioners try to embody a utopian society, but fail at sustaining that embodiment, then try again, fail again and so forth. These acts of 'refiguration' do not mobilize an idealist subject in the sense of prefiguration, because they are destined to never reach a utopia in the eschatological sense. Nonetheless, refiguration holds a certain political element: in times when the capitalist economy and liberal democracy are permanently in crisis and without a suitable alternative, it allows practitioners to communicate an 'I prefer not to' and an 'I prefer things differently' towards the status quo, if only for a moment.

I will elaborate this argument in four steps. First, I will reconstruct the subject-theoretical tenets of New Social Movement Theory and of the concept of Prefigurative Politics, for assessing their strengths and weaknesses in understanding CAEPs in the critical-creative milieus. Second, I will work out the idea of the subject in theories of late-modern society, and demonstrate their potential in unravelling fluid participation in CAEPs. Third, I will draw on observations from empirical studies to refine the late-modern perspective and formulate the heuristic concept of *refigurative politics*. Fourth and finally, I will reflect on the utility of this concept for social movement research and reconsider the transformative potential of CAEPs as a complex social phenomenon.

## The consolidating subject of new social movements

New Social Movement Theory (NSMT) and the cognate concept of Prefigurative Politics (PP) have proven to be highly instructive for illuminating why collective alternative everyday practices have been pursued by ecologist, feminist, peace or anarchist

movements since the 1970s. According to Jürgen Habermas and Alberto Melucci, food cooperatives, anti-authoritarian kindergartens, reform-psychiatric groups or free-shops function as 'counter institutions' against the colonization of the lifeworld by the administrative and economic system (Habermas, 1981, pp. 36–67), and as 'cultural laboratories' in which alternative meanings were developed and tested, before they could be articulated in public protests against the technocratic codes of complex systems (Melucci, 1989, p. 60). This understanding of CAEPs as everyday bulwarks against the alienating forces of modern society, and as cultural infrastructure for creating radically different social relations, also found its way into common definitions of prefiguration: constructing a new society 'within the shell of the old' (Epstein, 1993, p. 261). According to Luke Yates, this idea of building alternatives is intrinsically linked to the one of *prolepsis*: to enact the social life of a utopian society as if it was already achieved (Yates, 2014, p. 4). So following NSMT and PP, collective alternative everyday practices need to be understood as strategic actions in a defensive and a preparatory sense: they shield individuals off against the cultural mainstreaming of the capitalist market and technocratic politics, and they allow them to physically and consciously design a better society in the here and now.

Importantly, this reading of CAEPs assumes that activists are informed by a certain norm of the subject: an individual who seeks to constitute itself as a consistent actor vis-á-vis a consistent social order. While we might commonly think of social movements as collective struggles for societal *change*, New Social Movement Theory recalls that this pursuit can only be meaningful to individuals who aspire to a pacified identity within a harmonious society. This is not least due to the dialectical progress that has been attributed to modern society in the 1970s and 1980s: The social, economic and technological developments that Western societies were undergoing after WWII gave rise to an escalating market economy and a highly intrusive administrative body, but also to a young cohort that held unprecedented educational, financial and time resources for their self-determination and self-realization (Habermas, 1981; Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1981). The participants of the new social movements perceived the existing social order as alienating in a personal and a universal sense: not only was it individually disturbing, but it also derailed modernity in its potential of liberating humanity and nature (Blühdorn, 2007, p. 4).

Consequently, radical change was considered as a necessary, albeit temporary process for remediating modern society – up to the point, when it was a reliable social order that fully reflected the values held by social movement activists (Touraine, 2000, p. 81). Ulrich Beck perfectly captured this view in the term 'reflexive modernity'. Facing the self-endangering risks that industrial modernity produced, the new social movements realized that modernity could no longer live up to its millennial promise of universal emancipation. In turn, the new social movements sought to reformulate the project of a stable social order, by problematizing the risks of industrial modernity and experimenting with new social configurations that could permanently avoid them (Beck, 1992). As such, new social movements can be considered as critical, yet still committed towards the achieving of a *solid modernity*, 'a final state of perfection', which constituted the normative horizon of societies in the 19th and 20th century (Bauman, 2012: p. viii).

Such a modernity could only be achieved and maintained by individual actors that were similarly stable. It is in this context that it becomes understandable why the new social movements invoked the norms of *autonomy* and *cohesion* more than any

emancipatory movement before them (Blühdorn, 2017, p. 51; Touraine, 2000, p. 110). It was only through gaining independence from the fragmenting forces of the economic and political system, and through aligning one's actions with one's values – of retrieving and reconstituting oneself – that a truly modern society could be born. In more abstract terms, New Social Movement Theorists have described these co-dependent ideals of the subject as gaining *sovereignty over personal space* and *time* (Melucci, 1989, pp. 60–63, 103–105, 178), the *autonomy of actions* and the *continuity of life histories* (Habermas, 2009, p. 282) and the *autonomy for action* and the *unity of personal identity* (Touraine, 2000, p. 218). So not only were new social movements a collective claim to define and realize personal identities (Melucci, 1980, p. 218, 1989, p. 61), they were also a collective claim to define and realize personal identities *that take a solid form*. Alain Touraine, most fervently, has argued that NSMs only take shape once individuals develop the will to become manifest actors and recognize each other in that will (Farro, 2016; Touraine, 2000, p. 80). Building upon Bauman's terminology, I suggest that we can describe new social movements as *consolidations*: as collaborative attempts of individuals to change society by constructing themselves as consistent subjects – and with themselves, a consistent modernity.

The political idea and project of prefiguration, too, can be located within this paradigm of the consolidating subject. Not only should a utopian society withstand the fragmenting force of the dominant formation of society, but it should also be persistent enough to eventually replace that very formation, and remain intact ever after. Indeed, one can only speak of successful prefiguration, if an alternative practice has become a stable element in the cultural landscape of a social group (Yates, 2014, p. 14). The same must apply to the individuals who are building, maintaining and inhabiting this radically different society: without an actor's firm orientation towards independence and integrity, the utopian society would eventually collapse and be incorporated into the political-economic structures of capitalism (Breines, 1989, p. 7). The individual project of consolidation also echoes in *prolepsis*, another understanding of prefiguration: to represent the ends of activism in the means of activism (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p. 15). Applying non-violent communication and gender-equal discussion rules within the struggle against sexism, for example, mirrors a normatively perfect Self within a normatively perfect community. Consequently, some other society can only be created and achieved, if the desire to become an autonomous and cohesive subject is present in the beginning and constantly present during the process of prefiguration. In that sense, the norm of alternative solidity is a pre-condition as much as a guiding principle of prefigurative activism.

As such, the idea of a consolidating subject is useful for understanding individual engagement in CAEPs in the past, but also, to a large extent, in the present. Whenever practitioners actively participate in a community garden, food-sharing or tool-exchange, next to other commitments towards an ethical and sustainable everyday practice – be it through veganism, reusing things or non-flying – we may see a firm and multi-faceted struggle towards personal consistence. This does not mean that practitioners *actually* achieve full independence from the market and congruence between their values and actions (which is very much impossible), but that they seek to orient their day-to-day practices and political activities towards these ideals, as two major *points of reference* of their identity-building. Fluid participation, by contrast, implies the spontaneous, non-committing engagement in CAEPs, and a sporadic divergence from an unsustainable

consumer lifestyle. As such, it does not reflect the 'eschatological' element of consolidation, i.e. the element of preparing oneself – with others – for the utopia that ought to come (Pellizzoni, 2020, p. 11). It is exactly here that New Social Movement Theory and the concept of Prefigurative Politics hit a conceptual wall. As I am going to show in the next section, Late-Modern Subject Theory offers some key ideas for dealing with that problem.

## The liquid subject of late-modern society

Theories of late-modern society comprise a number of authors who have been studying how large-scale changes of modern society alter some of its key parameters, including subjectivity. Such processes of 'modernization' include, inter alia, de-traditionalization, individualization, globalization (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), but also commercialization, acceleration and flexibilization (Bauman, 2007; Rosa, 2010; Sennett). According to theorists of late-modern society, these processes have affected the ways in which macro- and micro-structures of society are being reproduced – international mobility regimes and national job markets as much as family life and romantic relationships. Connected to that, scholars have identified new forms of how individuals come to think, feel and act according to what they perceive as their inner me, or in other words: how they determine and realize themselves. In general, theorists of late-modern society assume three fundamental dynamics that have irretrievably shaped personal identity-work: 1) the dissolution of traditional societies through capitalist industrialization, which dis-embedded but also freed-up individuals; 2) the shift from an industrial class society to a pluralist society, in which individuals began to strive for freedom and identity-recognition through new social moments; and 3) the proliferation of markets, mass organizations and media after WW II, which increasingly pervaded and atomized individuals in their attempts of identity-construction (Zima, 2010, pp. 43–52, 360).

The first two dynamics have been strongly associated with the writings of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens on the 'reflexive' individual, whereas the third dynamic has inspired theorists to advance Beck and Giddens' ideas into what might called the 'flexible' individual. These two waves of Late-Modern Subject Theory (LMST) shall be fleshed out in the following.

The concept of reflexivity has already been introduced above: due to a stark increase in life choices and globalization in the post-war era, individuals were being forced to negotiate with themselves 'not only about how to act but who to be' (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). Facing the unprecedented risks of an increasingly dynamic society, individuals began to incrementally construct their identities in a reflective and reactive way. Accordingly, their attempts of self-determination and self-realization became intertwined with the problematization of industrial modern society and the proposition of more emancipatory forms of social organization. Unsurprisingly, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens identified the new social movements as the collective amalgams of exactly that reflexive individual (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). It is important to note that the authors developed their subject-theoretical tenets against the backdrop of Western European societies in the 1970s and 1980s, with a clear focus on the unprecedented identity situation of the new middle classes and post-materialist milieus. According to

this first wave of LMST, individuals cultivate a doubt of the *content* of identity and modernity, but not of the norm that these should take a reliable form.

The second wave of late-modern subject theory sets off from modernization processes that took up pace since the 1990s, such as commercialization, acceleration and flexibilization. According to authors such as Zygmunt Bauman, Richard Sennett or Andreas Reckwitz, individuals are no longer simply reflexive in their identity-work, but increasingly flexible, i.e. they become highly versatile in their self-determination and self-realization (Bauman, 2007; Reckwitz, 2012; Sennett). In terms of *self-determination*, George Ritzer, Zygmunt Bauman or Mike Featherstone have argued that the market place has become the central place for identity-construction. Individuals refrain from the early modern ideal of crafting an identity that is independent from the alienating offerings of the market, and give in to the temptations of consumer-based identity-construction (Bauman, 2007; Featherstone, 2010; Ritzer & Murphy, 2014). Regarding *self-realization*, Richard Sennett, Hartmut Rosa and Andreas Reckwitz have illustrated how personal identities, instead of being worked into a mature and stable character, become increasingly malleable and temporary in order to deal with accelerated time regimes, globalized job markets and ever-expanding cultural opportunities (Reckwitz, 2012; Rosa, 2010; Sennett). Zygmunt Bauman's position is arguably the most radical, given his claim that modernity as a whole no longer tends towards a solid state but a *liquid* one. According to the British-Polish sociologist, capitalism has accelerated social change to such a speed that it is no longer reasonable for individuals to invest in an autonomous and cohesive Self – which is why they adapt to a market-oriented and fragmented one (Bauman, 2012, 37–38, p. 97). In other words, individuals now extend their doubt from the *content* of identity and modernity to the norm that these should take a *reliable form*.

So following the second wave of Late-Modern Subject Theory, it is no longer adequate to assume that modern individuals' identity projects are geared towards a consistent conduct. In contrast, it is more apt to conceive of modern individuals as *subjects of liquefaction*. With economic, cultural and social structures becoming increasingly mobile, social change no longer appears as a temporary necessity but as a permanent condition of modern lifeworlds. And this has fundamental consequences for the norm of alternative solidity in identity-work: the more the market logic is intruding aspects of life, and the more systemic requirements and time pressures rest on the individual, the less practicable autonomy and cohesion become as points of orientation for identity-construction (Rosa, 2011). What is probably most disturbing about this 'going with the flow' of modern subjectivity is that it can be read as the consequence of *domination* and as the result of *liberation* at the same time. Theorists have regarded the flexibilization of the Self as a 'corrosion of character' (Sennett, 1999) that had been induced by a softer form of economic coercion and the weakening of social ties (McDonald, 1999, p. 208). At the same time, the flexible Self has been described as an 'emancipation from emancipatory norms' that was encouraged by an excess of consumer choices and the abandonment of traditional identities (Blühdorn, 2011, p. 47). Arguably, these diverging interpretations allude to how much social change has complicated the ways individuals relate to themselves and the social environment in which they orient themselves.

Turning back to community gardens, tool-sharing and open bicycle workshops, I argue that LMST provides a fruitful perspective on the impetus for fugitive engagement

in these initiatives. First, it allows us to make sense of why many practitioners remain bound to an overtly consumer lifestyle: they no longer determine themselves against the market, but in accordance with it. The capitalist economy is no longer experienced as compromising the identity-work of practitioners – but as supportive, because it makes consumer practices available through which individuals now determine 'them Selves'. For example, actions such as long-distance flying, the purchase of smart devices or living in comfortable apartments allows them to build an identity that holds aspects such as cosmopolitanism, progressiveness or sophistication (Moser & Kleinhückelkotten, 2018; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). Second, and relatedly, Late-Modern Subject Theory makes understandable why fluid participants switch in and out of repair cafés, bicycle work-shops and food-sharing initiatives on an irregular basis: they realize themselves not by integrating life-actions into a holistic identity, but by compiling them into a versatile one, something that does not rely on stable social relationships. Notably, it is the very aspect that New Social Movement Theory and the concept of Prefigurative Politics grapple with – the fleeting engagement and the predominance of an unsustainable consumer lifestyle – that Late-Modern Subject Theory helps to understand.

The latter cannot, however, explain why individuals are attracted by and participating in food-saving, cloth-swapping or repair cafés *as such*. As demonstrated in the previous section, collective alternative everyday practices have always been vital means for deter-mining and realizing a Self that is independent and integrated. Yet if identity-construction is increasingly organized in line with the market system and in a heterogeneous manner, as LMST suggests, then there is simply no need for CAEPs anymore. If modern subjectivities are indeed becoming elusive in an evolutionary way, then the demand for a consistent conduct may decrease accordingly. Nonetheless, individuals with clear signs of a market-orientation and a fractured lifestyle seek out CAEPs and participate in them now and then. From a strict LMST standpoint, this behaviour is irrational: even if individuals felt the need to add more ethical rigour or eco-friendliness to their identity mix, it would be much more effective to seek out a new sustainable consumer good than to engage in the tedious work of CAEPs. The fact that they still do indicates that even under the conditions of liquid modernity, individuals have *not fully dismissed the norm of alternative solidity*. It is exactly here where New Social Movement Theory and Prefigurative Politics come in handy, and where a dialogue with Late-Modern Subject Theory seems useful.

## The refigurative subject of volatile participation

As I am going to demonstrate in this section, such a dialogue allows us to formulate a heuristic concept, with which fluid engagement in CAEPs can be fully grasped and its political character be properly assessed. The vital step is to assume that fleeting partici-pants in CAEPs are not able to struggle for a consistent conduct for a sustained period of time and on a global level of their Selves. Instead, participation is about experiencing and demonstrating a Self that is independent from the market and completely in line with ecological values – in a specific place, every now and then, yet without stabilizing it. Community gardens, repair cafés and clothing swaps are ideal opportunities to do that, because they symbolize autonomy and cohesion due to their 'prefigurative heritage', while being low-threshold and open at the same time: one can participate to the extent he

or she wishes to or is able to. One embodies an alternative Self for a moment, then falls back into his or her liquid life, only to re-embody it again after some time. In order to make sense of that behaviour, the writings of two social movement scholars provide some important hypotheses.

The first one is the late work of Alain Touraine, which has made surprisingly little impact in social movement studies compared to the heydays of New Social Movement Theory. At the turn of the millennium, the French sociologist describes a society that is being torn apart by two forces: commercialization (the expansion of markets) and communitarization (the expansion of nationalism). The individual experiences this strain as alienation and fragmentation, and fears to lose its remaining integrity completely. It is when an individual refuses commercialization and communitarization that the personal subject becomes manifest (Touraine, 2000, pp. 39–55, 2002, pp. 389–397). This subject can only be fully realized, however, if several individuals who suffer from that cultural pathology unite in resistance, which becomes visible as a new social movement.

Yet, despite the successes of mobilization, Touraine imagines the subject as highly precarious. For constructing itself as a subject an individual depends on an environment that is 'so controlled that he can integrate memories of the past, contemporary experiences and future projects into a life experience with which he can identify and which he can use to create a personal time and space' (Touraine, 2000, p. 67). Yet, social change is constantly invading that very environment, breaking the subject's efforts and forcing it 'to work every day to repair the torn social fabric' (Touraine, 2000, p. 131, see also Touraine, 2002, p. 397). This makes the subject a tragic, yet central figure of modernity: only its fight for survival can keep society from breaking apart (Touraine, 2000, p. 83). In other words, individuals' participation in the new social movements are attempts to do away with liquid modernity – attempts which are destined to fail, in a manner that is not unlike Sisyphus of Greek mythology. So if we are to follow Alain Touraine, fluid participants actually *do* try to give themselves and society a reliable form, but are disabled, again and again, to do so on a regular basis, because they are interrupted by the centrifugal forces of societal change.

Another hypothesis can be found in the writings of Ingolfur Blühdorn, who also sets off from the idea that the norm of solidity has not vanished in late-modern society, but has become highly precarious. The German sociologist argues that individuals have adapted to a systems-oriented and fragmented Self in liquid modernity, but continue to occasionally articulate the norm of the unitary subject, because it remains the uncontested point of reference for identity-construction (Blühdorn, 2017). This means that individuals engage in discourses and practices that *simulate* autonomy and cohesion: they perform an alternative subject in certain communicative arenas, only to later retreat into their consumption-oriented, eclectic lives (Blühdorn, 2007, pp. 14). Joining a protest against globalization, for example, makes it possible to experience and express a Self that rejects the logics of the market system, yet does not interfere with the activist's daily consumer practices, the latter being the central source of identity-building (Blühdorn, 2006, p. 34). Collective actions, then, lose their role in struggling for a radically different society and become 'theme parks of self-experience' instead (Blühdorn, 2006, p. 38).

Such action might be immediately castigated as defeatist. Yet, at least in addition, it should be interpreted as a highly rational way of dealing with the normative puzzle of late-modern identity-work. Considering that individuals find themselves thrown into

a world that is increasingly shaped by social changes that are difficult, if not impossible to control, adjusting to these processes becomes an option that is not far to seek (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2019). One might still feel indebted to autonomous self-determination and cohesive self-realization, yet it is much easier to experience universality than to universalize experience: in late-modern society, it is more feasible to occasionally enact an alternative Self than to struggle for its full realization. And while the liquefying tendency of modernity will not be overcome in that way, it can at least be buffered, making everyday life bearable, if not more enjoyable.

To recapitulate, both Touraine and Blühdorn describe a condition in which individuals still feel dedicated towards the norm of a steady Self and a reliable social order but face a situation in which modernization is chipping away at the structural conditions for meeting that desire. What is left, in their view, is collective action that only allows individuals to occasionally demonstrate and experience an existence that is beyond the market and fully in line with certain inner values. Yet, the two authors differ in their assessment of the specific impetus for fleeting engagement: it may be due to a systematic deprivation of a reliable environment within which one can build a Self and social relations that remain stable (Touraine) or due to the partial liberation from an identity project and political strategy that is only becoming more difficult to realize, if anything (Blühdorn). So are we faced with two irreconcilable accounts here, for why there is fluid participation in collective alternative everyday practices?

Certainly not. As Sherilyn MacGregor claims, authors like Touraine and Blühdorn represent a Western tradition of critical social philosophy that cannot but produce 'strong theory and thin description', a critique she borrows from J.K. Gibson-Graham (Gibson-Graham, 2014; MacGregor, 2019, p. 13). According to the latter, social theorists are able to offer new sophisticated interpretations of recent phenomena, but are bound to locate them on a linear trajectory, which makes them ill-equipped for detecting the complexities social phenomena always contain in real-life (MacGregor, 2019, p. 5). While I agree with MacGregor on this point, it might be premature to dismiss such 'neat framings' in favour of what she calls 'weak theory and situated description' (MacGregor, 2019, pp. 13–14). The qualitative research that has uncovered flexible participation in CAEPs indicates that practitioners are not subject to *one* of the dynamics that have been described by Touraine and Blühdorn, but to *both* dynamics at the same time.

Michael Foden, for instance, has met 'fluid' food-savers who traced their behaviour to the scarcity of food-sharing initiatives in their neighbourhood and the recent availability of more sustainable food products in a nearby supermarket (Foden, 2016, p. 188). Another free-food-collector attributed her participation to the 'freedom from the burden of abiding by rules and regulations' of more institutionalized forms of collective action (Foden, 2016, p. 65). Diana Mincyte and Karin Dobernig, in turn, have encountered community gardeners who were frequently absent from harvesting work because they could only spend so much time given their day-to-day jobs, but also because they preferred going on vacation during the warm season (Mincyte & Dobernig, 2016, p. 1780). Sigrid Kannengießer, too, met a repair enthusiast, who claimed that he did not need a new smartphone every year, but bought one anyway, because he wanted 'to see what's new and what makes sense', selling those devices afterwards that he was not fond of (Kannengießer, 2018, p. 122). These examples indicate how complex the impetus for

fluid practitioners can be, and that it cannot be traced to a single cause of structural impossibility or personal self-liberation. Participating in collective alternative everyday practices in a volatile way can be the consequence of enjoying the consumer freedom of specialized markets as much as it can stem from the overwhelming pressure to participate in them; it can be the result of relishing the come-and-go atmosphere of an open bicycle workshop, as much as it can follow from limited time resources in an over-demanding job; it can be the product of indulging in free-food events without actively contributing to them, as much as it can be provoked by a lack of cultural capital for persisting in the oftentimes cumbersome procedures of bottom-up organizing.

Much more empirical research is needed for deepening our understanding of this entanglement of liberation and constraint, how it emerges from the biographies of practitioners, and in what ways they consider it a problem. Notably, Alberto Melucci has stressed the role of collective identity in propelling and maintaining collective action, yet he traced the origins of new social movements to problems of individual identity-work that were prevalent during his time (Melucci, 1989, p. 61). For making sense of fleeting participation in community gardens, repair cafés and clothing swaps, one needs to map the lifestyle preferences, theories of change, inner conflicts, political orientations, and group-experiences of individuals, and analyse how the norm of alternative consistency is continuously negotiated in their everyday lives. Indeed, 'intent' is not a sufficient indicator for grasping the meaning and political quality of collective alternative everyday practices, but rather a self-description that must be contextualized by the socio-cultural environment of the practitioners (Naegler, 2018, pp. 518–519), and, as I argue, by the alterations of that very environment. Importantly, this does not imply painting a monochromatic picture of *all* fluid participants, but instead being conscious of the fact that modernization processes can affect individuals in very different ways, depending on their class, milieu, gender, age, occupation and other attributes (Middlemiss, 2014).

For that purpose, we may use a heuristic concept that draws on late-modern social thought and remains open for biographical differences at the same time. As argued above, the concept of prefiguration has proven to be a powerful analytical tool for making sense of everyday utopias in the past; and it continues to do so today, in the case of those practitioners who have the capacity and idealism to struggle towards a consistent conduct for a sustained period of time and on a global scale of their lives. Yet, the concept seems less adequate in the case of fluid participation in CAEPs, where practitioners might be caught up between the time pressures of fulltime work, the reluctance towards grassroots decision-making and the attractions of ever-evolving consumer worlds. Here, it seems more apt to speak of *refiguration*. Daniel Jaster has recently proposed this term as a retrospective counterpart to prefiguration. In a very instructive way, he suggests that traditionalist and conservative movements, too, have sought to embody a utopian society – not one that will be in the future, but one that (supposedly) had been in the past (Jaster, 2018, p. 70). For interpreting fluid participation, I also suggest the term of refiguration, but in a different sense. Whenever someone engages in CAEPs in volatile and spontaneous ways, they take the shape of an idealized Self for a short time, collapse, take shape again, collapse again, and so forth. These figurations never remain for long, and yet they reappear after some time. It seems that these embodiments continue to suffer the fate of identity construction in late-modernity, which Zygmunt Bauman describes as follows:

'Yet far from slowing the flow, let alone stopping it, identities are more like the spots of crust hardening time and again on the top of volcanic lava which melt and dissolve again before they have time to cool and set. So there is need for another trial, and another – and they can be attempted only by clinging desperately to things solid and tangible and thus promising duration, whether or not they fit or belong together and whether or not they give ground for expecting that they will stay together once put together' (Bauman, 2012, p. 83)

Arguably, the term *refiguration* best captures this continuous need for a steady personality and reliable social relations in liquid modernity, and the limited ability to foster them and make them permanent.

Finally yet importantly, we can reflect on the political quality of fluid participation in CAEPs. As argued above, refiguration lacks the political subjectivity of prefiguration: it is not the project of attaining a certain 'orthodoxy' of how society and individuals ought to be internally structured. Yet, this does not mean that refiguration is unpolitical. Even though it remains ambiguous towards the norm of alternative solidity, it holds a performative and utopian element: irrespective of how short-lived it might be, refiguration conveys to the public that the dominant way of production, consumption and decision-making is deficient, and it demonstrates that a very different culture can, in fact, be practiced. This strongly correlates with what scholars of post-politics have called 'the political': a space for dissent and the articulation of an alternative (Swyngedouw & Wilson, 2014, p. 303). In times when neoliberal discourse is mainstreamed and the imperial mode of living normalized (Brand & Wissen, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2009), refiguration communicates an 'I prefer not to' and an 'I prefer doing things differently' – not in an open, expressive way, but in a passive one (Pellizzoni, 2020). Yet, this is also where *refigurative politics* inevitably ends: at the short-time experience and demonstration of a critique against the current social arrangement and a utopian alternative to it. Refiguration does not exceed the intermediary phase, it cannot be more than a political of the 'meantime' (Williams et al., 2014, p. 2799). As such, it depends on more stable forms of collective action and established institutions to amplify that critique and work towards the realization of that alternative in an organized manner (De Moor et al., 2019).

## Conclusion

The concept of refigurative politics contributes to a certain theoretical challenge that the discipline of social movement studies is facing at the moment. The emergence of community gardens, clothing swaps, food-saving and similar initiatives beyond their 'usual' constituency – radical leftist and anarchist groups – has raised questions of how strategic, political or movement-like these initiatives are. The framework of prefigurative politics can cater for the utopian element of CAEPs, but struggles with flexible forms of engagement, to which one cannot easily attribute the orthodox strategy of making all forms of everyday practice converge with the ideals of a just society. This indicates that societal change has outrun social movement theory to a certain extent, which requires an analysis of large-scale changes of society, something that has become surprisingly rare in the discipline (Gillan, 2017). As I have shown in this article, refigurative politics provides some important impulses for that endeavour by bringing in the literature of Late-Modern Subject Theory. Doing so allows hitting two birds with one stone: it pays tribute to the dialectical relationship between processes of modernization and the project of emancipation, and it adds a perspective that

cuts from the macro level of social change to the micro level of subjectivities. While more empirical and theoretical work is required to scrutinize and enrich the concept, it may already deliver new insights into collective actions that mobilize idealized notions of the Self in transient, yet recurrent ways, such as 'flexitarianism', flash mobs or artivism.

The evolving research on food-saving, tool-sharing, free-shops, repair cafés, sewing workshops, clothing swaps, cloth upcycling groups or community gardens has already produced a nuanced image of their transformative potential. Scholars have cautioned against expectations towards CAEPs that they may never fulfil: shifting the food system, unsettling the fashion industry, replacing electronic markets, forging transcultural communities, producing new self-understandings or reconnecting with nature. Instead, it has been argued, CAEPs always need to be viewed against the political, cultural and economic conditions of their emergence, which inevitably produce ambiguous constellations: tapping into neoliberal self-help and emancipating underprivileged communities at the same time (MacGregor, 2019); problematizing certain aspects of relations of domination, while remaining silent about others (De Moor et al., 2019), providing alternative visions of society on the local level, while draining energies for contentious politics from the global level (Naegler, 2018). To this list of dilemmas, we may add another one: developing an individual conduct and spaces of collaboration that are stable and resilient, in a society that has learnt to be ever more mobile and adaptive. This is a dilemma that makes failure almost inevitable, but without eradicating the aspiration to succeed at another time. Or as Samuel Beckett (1983) put it:

> 'Ever tried.
> Ever Failed.
> No Matter.
> Try Again,
> Fail Again,
> Fail Better.'

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## Disclosure statement

## Notes on contributor

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