PREFIGURING THE STATE[1]

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Academic abstract

Merging means and ends, prefigurative politics perform life as it is wished-for, both to experience better practice and to advance change. This paper contributes to prefigurative thinking in several ways. It explores what it might mean to prefigure the state as a concept; takes its inspiration from a historical episode rather than imagined time ahead; and addresses what, if anything, prefigurative conceptions can do when practiced. Central to my discussion is the plural state – taking shape as micro, city, regional, national and global formations. Plural state thinking makes room for divergent kinds of states but does not necessarily foreground progressive ones. Thus, to explore in more detail a transformative left conception of the state, discussion turns to 1980s British municipal radicalism. Taking up this adventurous episode in governing as a "thinking tool", an imaginary of the state as horizontal, everyday, activist and stewardly emerges.

Key words: state, prefigurative politics, concepts, legal pluralism, state pluralism, radical local government

Praxis abstract

Many on the left argue states are inherently oppressive, vertically dominating and controlling society. This paper offers a different approach. It suggests our understanding of what states are depends on how we conceptualise them. Can we then conceptualise states in ways that might support progressive transformative politics? This discussion explores what statehood could mean if states weren't only nation-states. Micro and local states offer forms of statehood that are far less grand, powerful and authoritarian. To explore local states' potential to inspire more progressive state thinking, I draw on an episode of radical urban government which experimented in a statehood that was accountable, community-embedded, active on

behalf of those with little power, caring and supportive. But if we take up, without romanticising, radical episodes to think about what states could be like, what does this do? Is reconceptualising the state pointless or politically valuable? The final discussion addresses this question.

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> [R]esistance cannot and ought not abandon the state to neoliberalism. If we accept that the state is primarily a shill of neoliberalism, we cede too much. (Martin and Pierce 2013: 67)

Prefiguration has become a popular vital part of much left politics. Boggs (1977: 100) characterises it as embodying "within the ongoing political practice of a movement …those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal". Against a linear notion of left politics, in which attaining a socially just future may entail fiercely unjust practices, prefiguration refuses to wait (see Maeckelbergh 2011: 4). Instead, prefigurative politics perform present-day life in the terms that are wished-for, both to experience better practice and to advance change.

Prefiguration has been extensively discussed in relation to social movement activism, particularly do-it-yourself, anarchist-inspired politics (e.g., Maeckelbergh 2011; Yates 2015). As a spatial practice, prefiguration is transformative, creatively generating innovative and experimental spaces where horizontal forms of decision-making, new ventures in well-being and more collaborative relations are advanced: from autonomous social centres and free schools to queer sex spaces and alternative trading schemes (Ince 2012; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006; also Cooper 2014). Prefigurative spaces don't exist in a vacuum; they are embedded within wider contemporary conditions, concerns, and spaces. Nevertheless, their practice produces a "critical distance" that denaturalises prevailing ways of doing things while simultaneously inspiring, crafting and developing alternatives.

This paper contributes to discussions of prefiguration's temporal and spatial praxis through an exploration of conceptual prefiguration. I use this term to indicate a political project which approaches concepts – and I mean here commonplace concepts, such as property, markets and states, not academic terms of art - *as if* their meaning was otherwise and, more specifically, as if their meaning was one desired.[2] Against the assumption that

more progressive conceptual meanings must await their right time and space, that they will follow the material practices such meanings are intended to "capture", conceptual prefiguration is performative. It acts as if preferred meanings are currently operative, while knowing that they are not both to reimagine what things could mean and to put new meanings into practice. Refusing the naturalised dominance of status quo understandings, conceptual prefiguration treats the terms through which everyday life and institutions are understood and enacted as if they could be otherwise.

For the most part, writing on prefiguration tends to focus on its practice-based dimensions; what happens when new values or ethics are enacted. Maeckelbergh (2011: 3) writes, "prefiguration is something people do". Process and lack of finality (Ince 2012: 1652) are important elements, particularly in contemporary prefigurative thought. What can get decentred in this process, however, are the sources for more progressive ideas about practice. While these emerge in part from doing politics and organisation differently, they cannot only be emergent. Those prefigurative writers who talk about putting future goals, aims, and values into practice get closer to the question central to this paper: namely, from where do we find our "ends" ? In the case of prefigurative conceptualising, sources for innovative thinking come sharply to the fore as other spaces and other times – pasts as well as imagined futures - provide the ground for reimagining concepts. Utopian fiction is a useful resource here as are social experiments and innovative ventures in other time-spaces (Cooper 2014).[3] This doesn't mean conceptual prefiguration simply extracts and re-implants meanings from elsewhere. Drawing from what seems to be actualised in other time-spaces involves a process of conceptual re-narrating anchored also in the concerns, possibilities, knowledges and methods of the here and now.

In this paper, I explore prefigurative conceptualising in relation to the state. Rather than focusing on the state's reform or elimination, and in contrast to political projects which foreground the preconditions necessary for states to change or "wither away", prefigurative conceptualising asks: how else might we understand what it means to be a state? Addressing this question can take several forms. One is to articulate a new counter-definition, tightly organised around the "better" state that is sought. A different tack, and the one adopted here, is to retain a broader definition of the state while tracing one particular prefigurative conceptual path. This is a path organised around the state's relevance for a transformative progressive politics where "the state" names variously scaled (and scale-producing, Swyngedouw 1997) political governance formations, including formations embedded in

communities, active in transforming relations of power, and caring. Thus, in relation to prefigurative politics, the paper involves four distinct turns. First, it centres on developing new meanings and imaginaries rather than tracing prefigurative forms of practical politics (while recognising that these processes are densely enmeshed); second, its focus is the state rather than counter-institutional forms of organising; third, it draws on a historical episode – 1980s British municipal radicalism - rather than an imagined time ahead as the source for thinking prefiguratively, echoing Esteban Muñoz's (2009: 4) queer utopian adoption of "a backward glance that enacts a future vision"; fourth, it asks, what can prefigurative meanings do? If activists, policy-makers, academics and others use concepts in ways that trouble, or fail to cohere with, conventionally recognised understandings, what political traction, if any, can this have? This is an important question in the light of many current projects that seek to reimagine social life and its conceptual terms. While the phrase "prefigurative conceptualising" is rarely used politically or academically, reading the present *against* the terms of prevailing conceptual assumptions is more extensive as work on the more-than-capitalist economy reveals (e.g., Gibson-Graham 1996). In the discussion that follows, I draw on legal pluralism to open up more plural ways of conceptualising what counts as a state. But first, I want to ask: why, in the face of compelling left critiques, recuperate the state's terms? Doesn't the attempt to extend the state's embrace, seeking inspiration from "radical" institutional practices, risk rendering the state even more dominant within left political imaginaries?

Retrieving the State: But on What Terms?

For many on the left - anarchist-inspired writers and activists, most prominently - the state as the "central institution of authority, claiming a monopoly of violence" (Ince 2012: 1651) holds little prefigurative appeal. According to Holloway (2010: 58), "The state is a way of doing things: the wrong way of doing them." Extensive scholarship exists naming and confronting the coercive, exploitative and disciplinary activities of states from policing, war and imprisonment to social security, colonialism, and capital accumulation. Critical scholarship addresses state functions and projects; and the constitutive work states perform, whether in relation to modes of production, political rationalities, relations of gender and race, or time-space organising principles. While some critics focus on particular kinds of state – capitalist, neoliberal, colonial; others treat the state itself as inherently and always problematic. For Saul Newman (2001), the state is "an abstract principle of power and authority that's always existed in different forms yet is more than these actualisations". For

many scholars, radical change cannot emerge from (or within) the state but only from "outside"; and it is the presence or *potential* for an outside which is key, for it is here where real transformative struggles occur. Discussing the alterglobalization movement, Maeckelbergh (2011: 13-14) writes, "The aim of developing … new structures is to slowly make the state and multilateral organizations obsolete".

But, of course, not all critical writers and activists reject the state. Alongside those who see the only "good" states as workers states, or states in the process of "withering away", are those who find transformative potential even in the depths of liberal capitalist states as they uncover contradictions, inconsistencies, and plurality in state systems, logics, actors and rationalities (e.g., Chappell 2000; Martin and Pierce 2013; Newman 2012; Newman and Clarke 2014). Capitalist liberal states may reproduce dominant social relations and benefit elites but they also provide social welfare, steward resources, establish fora for public debate, make new critical forms of knowledge possible and, to some limited degree, protect populations, including more vulnerable and precarious populations, from civil society's violence and discriminations. Progressive state activities and effects vary by time and place, are routinely compromised, more promised in rhetoric than practice and, in their fragility, typically defeated by more powerful state agendas. Progressive actions are also often unauthorised, or initiated by subordinate state actors drawing on residual or unintended resources. But for engagement-positive writers and activists, the *potential* (at least) for states to provide a productive terrain where progressive politics can happen, given not everything can be organised and resolved through outside-the-state, micro-scaled grass-roots decision-making, remains vitally important (see Cumbers 2015; Martin and Pierce 2013; Newman and Clarke 2014).

Debate on the left over the benefits and dangers of relying on liberal states to act as agents or sites of progressive change has been long-standing. However, despite sharp differences when it comes to identifying the actions, potential and agendas of liberal capitalist states, a prevailing tendency within progressive scholarship, both pro and anti-state, is to treat the state as something that can be properly *known*.[4] Whether the state is an agentic network, contested terrain or abstract principle of domination, the state (or its formations) are treated as having an identifiable shape, presence or form. Yet, there is also tremendous variety in what statehood is taken to mean and incorporate (from the family and organised religion to tap water and domestic dwellings). Given such variety, given also the state's rich conceptual history,[5] and apparent capacity for new conceptual futures, is it possible to reimagine the state

in ways that displace the currently "vertical" tropes of "the state as an institution somehow 'above' civil society, community, and family" (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 982)? Certainly, the political question of whether to recuperate-by-reimagining concepts historically tied to dominant social relations, or leave them for potentially less sullied ground, is a debate that extends far beyond the state (Cooper 2014). However, in relation to the state, the risk of disavowal is of leaving the state's conceptual imbrication with dominant forces intact. Indeed, such imbrication becomes reinforced in conditions where all other (progressive) governance formations necessarily operate in the state's shadow. Anarchist-inflected discussion of the dominating state underscores its differentiation from the seemingly far more positive scape of everyday life (e.g., Holloway 2010: 58). Adopting a more pluralist, quotidian account of the state, by contrast, offers a different political strategy in which the state is embedded and enmeshed with everyday life, while also cut down to size;[6] where the nation-state, with its histories of exclusions, dominations, exploitative extractions and claims to prestige and grandeur, is just one kind of state among others in a list that could also include guerrilla, micro, city, regional, and global states (e.g., Aretxaga 2003; Scott 2009).

From Legal Pluralism to State Pluralism

But while I am interested in extending and pluralising the language of the state, I don't want to fetishize its terms. Just as legal pluralism refers to "legal and normative orders", we might talk about "state and political governing formations" to trouble and bracket any clear-cut distinction between the two. This reformulation is important. My aim here is not to reject left state critiques, but to suggest there is also room within the left's political toolkit for prefigurative conceptualising, which not only reimagines what statehood could mean (decentring the notion states inevitably mean nation-states), but which also rejects a sharp distinction between states and other political governance formations. Blurring the distinction between state and other forms of public political governance provides a form of state refusal. Instead of rejecting state terms as anarchist-inflected work does, it takes them up *as if* they were unexceptional - so autonomous or grass-roots forms of self-organising, for instance, become re-characterised as micro-states. This parallels the kind of approach legal pluralism adopts.

Developed to illuminate normative and regulatory diversity, legal pluralism presumes that more than one system of law (or normative ordering) exists in any social field (e.g., Merry 1988). Macdonald and Sandomierski (2006: 611), for instance, cite the "'law' of the

playground, of the barrio, the classroom, the market place, the workplace, the family" as well as of the state. Legal pluralism counters what John Griffiths (1986: 3) describes as "the ideology of legal centralism", where law is "the law of the state, uniform for all persons, exclusive of all other law, and administered by a single set of state institutions". Legal pluralist scholarship recognises legal (and normative) orders are far from equal in the power they exercise. Yet, no order is treated as fully sovereign, with absolute and exclusive dominion, in a given social field. An important distinction, drawn in different ways, is between strong and weak legal pluralism (e.g., Griffiths 1986) – a distinction that can operate as normative, descriptive or interpretive (and, not uncommonly, slides between the three). For my purposes here, I want to approach it as a distinction of conceptual orientation. Weak legal pluralism recognises subjects and spaces can be subject to different legal norms from different sources; however, subordinate sources of law acquire (and depend upon) superordinate permission, whether from a central legislature, judicial system or governing constitutional text. In weak legal pluralism, different sources of authority fit to form a single coherent whole and authority clashes are treated as resolvable. Strong legal pluralism is different; and it is this version of legal pluralism which is most useful here. In strong legal pluralism, law and its legitimacy don't derive from one superordinate body or principle, but from multiple, potentially incommensurable sources, as plural forms of authority are *claimed* rather than given. This means that activities a nation-state considers illegitimate or illegal may be authorised by the rules or norms of a less powerful or dissident body - a radical political party, free school, militant trade union or teenage gang, for example, or by countervailing authorities, such as religious legal orders. Strong legal pluralism also challenges constitutional assumptions that law and legal authority are mono-perspectival (see also Ruggie 1993). Not only may perceptions of the authority, legitimacy and normativity of particular laws or organised bodies be contested, but there may be no agreement on the authoritative source or procedure for determining which laws and bodies prevail.

What does this mean for conceptually prefiguring the state? Drawing on Griffiths's initial (1986: 2) formulation, state pluralism might mean "that state of affairs, for any social field, in which [activities] pursuant to more than one [state] order occurs." In "strong" state pluralism, competing formations aren't subject to a single agreed framework. Instead, state and political governing formations draw on different sources of authority generating conflict in ways that can prove constitutionally irresolvable. Conflict, though, is not inevitable. If formations, or their sources of authority, are incommensurable, they may not meet on the

same political plane; they may not even notice each other or at least not in ways that would render the conflict intelligible as one of competing *state* formations. But as with law in legal pluralism, approaching the state pluralistically begs a fundamental question: what does it mean to be a state? Do entities have to resemble nation-states to be recognised as states? What are nation-states assumed to be (like)?

The question of what it takes to be (and be recognised as being) a nation-state comes to the fore in instances of serious, often fraught, attempts at state-claiming (as well as state-undoing). But the criteria of state-being also emerge in lighter guise in the ironic claims to republic-founding by protest camps and cities (Routledge 1997; Cooper 2016a). To give an example: in 2015, media and Facebook accounts described moves to secede within the progressive English seaside city of Brighton & Hove following the Conservative Party's unexpected national election victory.[7] While wittily staged, with its promise of a new flag, passports, migration policies, and laws, what is striking in this gesture is how statehood became read as *nation*-statehood, even when enacted in a medium-sized British town. This is the "Gulliver fallacy" Anderson (1996: 151) describes; states can be big or small but are broadly assumed to be the same. But, can we hold on to the concepts of statehood while not only decentring the nation-state, but also troubling the view that states must be significantly alike?

Legal pluralism has struggled with similar questions. Brian Tamanaha (1993: 201) wryly remarks, "the main test we apply to determine whether the proposed definition captures what we mean by law is to measure it against our intuitions about the essential characteristics of state law, *sans* the state." In relation to state pluralism, this would mean identifying properties or characteristics associated with *nation*-states: territory, membership, institutions, procedures, systems, subjects, powers, economic, political and social functions and so on, and then identifying as states all entities that shared all (or most) of them. But does this help in forging progressive state imaginaries or does it keep the category of statehood organised around the vertically oppressive character of the nation-state? In trying to reimagine legal pluralism away from the nation-state's gravitational pull, Tamanaha (2000) offers a way forward. Rather than requiring *non*-state legal orders to resemble state ones, he suggests law is whatever people, through their social practices, recognise and treat as law.

On its face, Tamanaha's (2000) approach seems to support a far more pluralistic, multi-perspectival conception of statehood (see Anderson 1996; Ruggie 1993).

Foregrounding internal recognition means, fundamentally, accepting as states those entities recognised (or treated) by members as states regardless of how they are perceived by others working with other criteria. This seems to support prefigurative thinking. If the state can be whatever people say it is, this validates projects for fashioning new state conceptions in ways that allow prefigurative imaginings to develop and flourish. But there are also difficulties with this kind of formulation in relation to issues of translation, recognition and power. How do we know when people are treating their own "internal" practices as ones of law or statehood, rather than something else, in conditions where conceptual languages aren't closely shared; what does recognition mean when the conceptual framework is disputed; and what can it accomplish – what force and possibilities are attached to some forms of recognition but not others (see Cesari 2012)? These questions, and particularly the last, are central to prefigurative conceptualising as I discuss later; but the radical version of pluralism they are tied to also has more substantive limitations. Pluralism may be an important conceptual move in abandoning a normative framework of statehood organised around the sovereign, mutually exclusive nation-state. However, accepting statehood might be understood and taken up by constituencies in plural, even incompatible, ways tell us little about what progressive statehood could entail. Even the additional claim that states exercise public responsibility, represent a polity, and shape, coordinate and regulate people, places and things still leaves us with a broad conception of states, one that includes democratic and undemocratic formations, just as well as unjust ones. Without unduly narrowing what might *count* as a state, I want to explore in more detail what a progressive "better state" could look like to provide some lines of thinking about prefigurative conceptions of the state in the contemporary global north. This is a state embedded in the everyday, activist and stewarding. I turn to 1980s British municipal radicalism (BMR).

State Conceptualising from the Municipal Left

With global flows attended to and international grass-roots activism celebrated, with British state politics characterised as transnationally regulated, network-based, and institutionally hollowed out, taking municipal radicalism as the ground from which to explore what prefigurative statehood might entail may feel dated on several counts. However, despite the sustained attention paid to transnational movements and global governance networks, despite also the growing association of urban governance with contemporary neoliberalism (e.g., see Miller 2007; Purcell 2008), it is repeatedly at the level of *municipal* statehood where radical exercises of governmental agency and initiative emerge. Hilary Wainwright (2003) is one of

several writers to explore the richness of progressive innovations within local government. Others have written about local and micro-states, historical and contemporary, from the Paris Commune, to Christiania (Copenhagen's Freetown), Marinaleda (the Andaluçian pueblo) and the autonomous municipalities of the Zapatistas (Hancox 2013; Stahler-Sholk 2007; Tombs 2014; Vanolo 2013). While many (neo)Marxists treat local government as responsible for social consumption and for forging investment-friendly urban infrastructures in competitive geopolitical conditions, the following discussion approaches municipal government as an open, embodied, networked formation that is far more than a small, local part of a nation-state apparatus. This is not to reject another perspective. However, since states can be simultaneously read in multiple ways, I am interested in reading local government in ways that foreground its *state-enacting* efforts in order to reimagine what statehood could mean, recognising that some municipal time-space contexts may inspire progressive imaginaries more than others.

Cumbers (2015: 70) describes the local state as the form which can push back against neoliberal state bodies to advance commons projects. 1980s British municipal radicalism (BMR) offers a productive ground for prefigurative state conceptualising along these lines. Rooted in democratic, left Labour politics, community activism, radical unionism, and socialist thinking (Lansley et al., 1989), BMR sought to present, in Sheffield city leader David Blunkett's words, "what we could do as a Socialist government at national level".[8] Writing during this heady time, Peter Saunders (1984: 43) remarked: "Cheap bus fares in South Yorkshire, a responsive system of council house management in Walsall and support for worker cooperatives in the West Midlands …are visible manifestations of an alternative philosophy… undermin[ing] the assertions of political leaders who claim that there is no option but to follow the logic of the market." British councils have pursued radical initiatives and rebellion at other times (Branson 1980; Gyford 1985: 10-13; MacIntyre 1979); however, 1980s BMR proved distinctive. Taking shape in metropolitan authorities (prior to their abolition in 1986), most notably the GLC, Merseyside and South Yorkshire, alongside urban councils in London, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Manchester and Sheffield (among others), BMR was distinguished by the range of issues addressed, the extent and diversity of active councils (engaged fully or in part), and by its duration. BMR councils were far from identical, with divergent histories, central government relations, and economic contexts (Cochrane 1993; Seyd 1987). Unsurprisingly, as a result, councils demonstrated different priorities, cultures, constraints, powers, opportunities and orientations, while the focus and intensity of their

radicalism varied across the decade. Even at moments of heightened activity – oppositional and reconstructive, left councils were far from autonomous, being simultaneously embedded in national sector hierarchies, such as education, while leveraged and guided by central government carrots and restraints (Lawless 1988; Loughlin 1996). Nevertheless, despite all this, for much of the '80s, British municipal radicalism constituted an identifiable political project as BMR authorities promoted progressive institutional alternatives to neoconservative and neoliberal rule, advancing a politics oriented to participatory democracy, progressive economics, solidarity, environmental stewardship and equality.

Can we then draw from the BMR experience to reimagine what it could mean to be a good or "better" state, attending along the way to some of the challenges for progressive statehood this example raises? Taking up a historical (rather than present-day) episode underscores the point that prefigurative conceptualising draws on practices from other time-spaces to develop new conceptual meanings not to operationalise a particular design or blueprint. BMR is not envisioned as a political project to be re-installed. Aside from its limitations and failings, including its hierarchies, game-playing, betrayals, exclusions, compromises and disappointments (see Boddy and Fudge, ed. 1984; Cooper 1994; Lansley et al., 1989) – the very different contemporary political context makes any notion of return, even in urban Britain, naively nostalgic. My aim in revisiting BMR is not to appropriate the past – and I write this as someone who was an active councillor in one of London's radical 80s authorities – but, rather, to reflect upon BMR as a stimulus and provocation for reimagining what statehood could mean and entail. As Pickering and Keightley (2006: 921) comment, there is "a distinction between the desire to return to an earlier state or idealized past, and the desire not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future" (see also Cashman 2006: 155; Tannock 1995) – a renewal, of course, which may take a very different form to the past that is politically ploughed.

What's Different about Radical Local Government?

In certain respects, imagining the state through BMR offers a familiar account of multi-purpose state entities, spatially arrayed, with hierarchical structures, bureaucratic systems, and formal, regularised procedures policy-making on behalf of communities. Like other formations identified as state formations, BMR councils condensed the social relations of their locality, managed cleavages and conflict, and presented themselves as acting for particular groups as well as the area as a whole. Yet, in other respects, BMR offered

something more than an instance of a "business as normal" local state temporarily directed towards progressive ends. To explore this further, I want to briefly set out BMR's key contours as a *state* project; and then consider how this project might help us reimagine what statehood could entail. To begin with, BMR demonstrates how statehood can be claimed, including by bodies "giving themselves the law". In the case of BMR, this took several forms, from resisting new national legislation, to creatively interpreting legislative powers, and advancing local priorities and agenda. While BMR's claims to legal authority should not be overstated, faced with intense contestation from central government and repeatedly subject to judicial review, as a state project it illustrates a form of strong state pluralism to the extent that councils, through their politicians and staff, drew on competing sources of authority, legitimacy and power to oppose and counter central government (Cooper 1996; Lansley et al., 1989; Seyd 1987). In this way, BMR demonstrates how the development of statehood, as well as its particular form,[9] comes from what is done.

For BMR, an important dimension of this "doing" was the deliberate pursuit of policies that challenged the assumed scale and focus of municipal action (see also Hobbs 1994). Refusing their "lowly" place, BMR councils supported international struggles against oppression, colonialism and apartheid. They challenged the notion that peace and collective safety were beyond their domain of concern by introducing, among other measures, symbolic "nuclear-free zones" (Gyford 1985: 16). They foregrounded the experiences and needs of subordinated people; introduced subsidised public transport and child-care services; supported alternative arts-based projects; sought to monitor and control local police forces; and instituted a radical economic agenda, oriented to public urban regeneration, community planning, democratic control, liveable wages, social useful production and cooperative economics (Boddy 1984; Lansley et al., 1989; Parkinson 1989: 430). These measures generated a form of local governance we might read as rhizomatic – stretching out, activating, and incorporating community projects within a new far-flung, constantly evolving governmental form. While they raise important critical questions about the extroverted *governmentalisation* of politics, municipal state action also took a counterposing, more introverted direction, opening up state structures to greater accountability and participation. Consultative fora, such as youth advisory committees; the introduction of strategic, community-facing equality units (Cooper 1994; Gyford 1985: 58); co-opted community representatives on council standing committees; and decentralisation initiatives that devolved service delivery and, in some cases, decision-making to local neighbourhoods (see Fudge

1984; Hambleton 1988) were just some of the many participatory formats councils developed.

In the discussion that follows, I draw on BMR to explore how prefigurative state thinking can form around a conception of states as embedded, activist and stewardly. My aim is not to produce a conception of idealised statehood. Like other forms of prefigurative practice, reimagining what states could be confronts particular difficulties, challenges and tensions. Here, my interest is in those arising from combining embedded, activist and stewardly qualities. While far from unique to BMR, the scale and ambitious radical agenda of the new urban left refract them, for our purposes, in illuminating and distinctive ways.

Embedded in Everyday Life

A common criticism made by left-wing critics - whether of the state as a concept or of particular state forms - is of its remoteness, verticality, domination and grandeur (Rai 2010), where even democratic states are "elevated above society" (Lefebvre 2009: 86). Does local government, in general, and BMR, in particular, provide a different state trope – in which states are seen as embedded, mundane, prosaic and accessible? One quality BMR draws our attention to, as a controversial local government project, is the limited power some states possess, in conditions where they lack capacity to *impose* order and solutions. Lacking the dominating authority and coercive tools associated with nation-states in the global north, and struggling to retain hegemony in the face of competing local and bureaucratic forces, BMR might be described as a "failed state", with a life-span[10] too short to even count as a state. But this suggests a *normative* vision of states as immortal machine-like powerful institutional structures. Thus, a different reading might foreground the provisional and contested character of BMR, and its short life, as reflecting what embedded states are like when they lack the vertical distance that many progressive scholars disavow. Far from sitting atop their society, in some elite network, embedded progressive states are enmeshed in everyday relations. A striking aspect of this, for BMR, was its role entanglement (Gyford 1985: 57-60; Seyd 1987), challenging the conventional notion that the interests of politicians, bureaucrats and service users are distinct and discrete. Commonly, in local government, politicians and council staff live locally and so, as residents or local workers, use council services. BMR took role entanglement much further, epitomised by contexts in which politicians in one BMR authority often worked as paid officials in another, while community activists were often also

council employees or salaried workers funded through voluntary sector grants (Gyford et al., 1989).

Other participatory currents reinforced and augmented the embedding BMR role complexity produced. These included politicised municipal trade unionism,[11] community activism intent on holding councils to account;[12] Labour party members' involvement in writing and agreeing electoral manifestos; and the multiplicity of informal junctures and networks through which policies were advanced, transformed, gutted, enabled, and thwarted as municipal participants crossed and re-crossed role. Conservative central government opponents eventually outlawed certain overt role overlaps on "conflict of interests" grounds, but, from a prefigurative perspective, we might read these entanglements more positively, as gesturing to a form of embedded statehood more commonly seen in micro-community governance. What BMR accomplished was to create a progressive version of this entanglement at a larger scale.

If embedding in community concerns and politics rather than capitalist or elite agendas is one aspect of a more progressive state, another is a re-evaluation of the everyday. In his striking notion of "prosaic" state practices, Painter (2006: 753) signals the "intense involvement of the state in so many of the most ordinary aspects of social life." This is particularly evident at municipal level. In local government, the micro-materiality of life: from food, housing, and streets, to refuse, drains and sewage comes constantly to the fore. Routinely dismissed as boring and insignificant against the flashier concerns of nation-states, the politicisation of these issues through BMR elucidates their social importance and interest, as disputes about pavement curbs, traffic, housing and pollution became politically sutured to inequalities of gender, race, class and disability (e.g., Goss 1994; Ouseley 1994). Thus, BMR not only affirms the everyday character of stateness, it also demonstrates how - through critique and reform - states might work to create and support new kinds of everyday practices, supporting public pleasures, foregrounding social equality and promoting popular participation and environmental sustainability (see Boddy and Fudge 1984; Lansley et al., 1989).

One aspect of doing everyday institutional politics differently, while supporting new kinds of everyday life, involves play and experimentation. BMR was no ludic governmental gesture; nevertheless, its desire to innovate invariably made experimentation an important institutional feature. One small introverted aspect was making the town hall an everyday

space. "Town halls were opened up as meeting rooms and advice centres, and for crèches and exhibitions. London's County Hall, in particular, became a giant meeting room for women's groups, black groups, community organisations and Labour party activists" (Lansley et al., 1989: 75). John Gyford (1985) details the initiatives, learning, and mistakes that councils made as left-wing politicians experimented with new roles and formats, often in the face of intransigence (or anticipated intransigence) from the more traditional officers many BMR councils inherited (also Boddy and Fudge 1984). Treating state practice as experimental recognises how new, seemingly innovative measures may prove ineffective or generate new problems; innovation requires ongoing reflection. And as a prefigurative conceptual project, *conceptions* of the state also need to be revisable as they evolve through (imaginative and practical) experiments with what states could be and have been like. In other words, like other forms of prefigurative practice, prefigurative conceptions are reflexive, provisional and emergent rather than clearly identified and fixed.

The Activist State

While the quotidian state emphasises embeddedness, prosaics, new kinds of everyday life and the possibilities of a non-sovereign, less forceful state governance, the activist state draws attention to other characteristics, bringing qualities specific to BMR to the fore. Gyford (1985:53) describes how "The concept of the town hall as a machine for service delivery was to be supplemented, though not supplanted, by the notion of using it as a political base from which to campaign within the community." But aren't all state formations activist in some way? Certainly, as Bob Jessop (1999) claims, "specific forms of economic and political system [such as the state] privilege some strategies over others, access by some forces over others, some interests over others, some spatial scales of action over others, some time horizons over others, some coalition possibilities over others." "Non-activist" states are far from neutral or passive. However, what BMR provides a ground for considering is state readiness, often against more powerful states, to act deliberately and explicitly on behalf of marginal and subjugated interests, including with typically activist paraphernalia: "petitions, periodicals, pamphlets, leaflets,… posters, badges… marches… exhibitions… concerts" (Gyford 1985: 54). Mobilising on behalf of the disadvantaged is rarely associated with states. More commonly, activist accounts depict the state as a target for grass-roots forces' campaigning, organising against apparatuses which safeguard and defend elite interests. But if states are to be conceptualised in ways that make progressive forms possible, their organised ability to combat dominating interests is important.

Imagining states as activist also, importantly, foregrounds a creative approach to power as states intensify and extend the resources they can deploy to advance a change-agenda. Discussing BMR, Stewart Lansley and his co-authors (1989: 67) remarked, "Lawyers were sent off to find new powers, and to reinterpret existing ones." Instead of perpetuating an arrangement in which particular tools and resources are attached to particular policies, activist states recalibrate their powers, mixing and switching resources to strengthen the ability of themselves and their allies to advance political objectives. BMR's use of creative accounting techniques to generate additional resources illustrates this well. Many of these measures were not illegal because their use had not been contemplated. Thus, until the courts ruled on their legality, councils were able to engage in interest rate swaps and creative leasing arrangements, leveraging monies in ways that risked future indebtedness, as they gambled unsuccessfully on a 1987 election victory and future Labour government "bail-out". But while creative accounting illustrates those subterranean forms of municipal power which only surface when exercised, what this example also reveals is the intricately connected character of different states. I have suggested BMR asserted its independence as a politically-driven governing project; at the same time BMR was embedded in a hoped-for future of progressive national government. Prefigurative conceptions of statehood may emphasise plurality but this doesn't mean states are discrete atomistic entities. Instead, fostered and embedded in webs of relations, independence becomes something contingently and relationally asserted; it is not a stable state.

Equally evolving are the issues activist states take up. I mentioned above that BMR councils over-reached conventional boundaries of attention and action, adopting a campaigning position in relation to a range of extra-territorial moral and political issues – from South African apartheid to Northern Ireland, the miners' strike and nuclear armaments. We can read this as a form of "glocalisation" in which locally materialising practices help to build global connections and attention (Swyngedouw and Kaïka 2003; see also DeFilippis 2001). But BMR also "drilled down", rejecting the compartmentalisations which treated corporate decision-making, gay sex, and domestic violence as too private or morally settled for local state interest. Whether focusing on international conflicts or the politics of domestic labour, activist statehood suggests a mode of collective agency more typically associated with social movements. As such, it raises important questions about the relationship between public governance and transformative politics, including the powers rightfully drawn on in the latter's pursuit.[13]

The Steward State

Using state resources to express spatially extended relationships of care and solidarity highlights a third prefigurative state feature: namely, of stewardship. Stewardship challenges the conventional territorial notion[14] that what belongs to a state, in terms of people, land and infrastructure, can be rightfully extracted, deployed and exploited according to state justifications.[15] Stewardship also, at least in some prefigurative forms, challenges a narrow reading of states as responsible only for their legal inhabitants. Like the later sanctuary city movement (Darling 2009; McDonald 2012), BMR illustrates how local states can trouble the notion that care should be provided asymmetrically between established British residents and more recent incomers (particularly those whose status is precarious). Many BMR councils, for instance, controversially refused to give "local people" or a "local connection" priority when allocating municipal housing; resources were also expended in extending community language translations and supporting minority community groups. We can interpret the support for new residents and the refusal to privilege long-established ones as revealing a very different relationship between states and national borders, building on and extending the open approach to municipal borders that local government typically adopts.[16] When it comes to goods, money and people crossing, local government boundaries function very differently from national borders (e.g., see Herz 1957: 474). As such, local government offers a paradigm of statehood in which borders held far less currency and weight. This doesn't mean municipal boundaries are without effect when it comes to allocating resources; however they don't have to be. Alternatively, they may provide the basis for redistribution from rich local states to poorer ones (dampening the incentive for inter-municipal competition).

If state lines become less (or differently) significant, does "bordering work"[17] have any place in prefigurative state thinking? Discussing territory from an anarchist perspective, Anthony Ince (2012) suggests distinctions and borders are a legitimate and necessary part of radical political practice. Ince (2012) describes how groups are able to develop their particular identity and prefigure new modes of organisation through "a rich web of simultaneous territorialisations that coexist interdependently" (1654). In conditions of overlapping territorialisation, where solidarities developed (if often precariously) among BMR states, municipal radicalism reveals the boundary-work involved in constituting "us" and "them" as a division anchored in political dis/agreement, differential knowledge and levels of municipal engagement. According to Gyford (1985: 102-3), these distinctions became exacerbated by the knotty role entanglement discussed earlier. But knowledge,

affiliation and agreement were also cultivatable. One of BMR's aims, at least rhetorically, was to not only assemble but also to *grow* commitment to the norms, policies and agendas it pursued. Cultivating commitment is a common state activity. However, it raises questions for a critical left uncomfortable with notions of state cultivation, particularly in relation to everyday life.

Bauman's (1991) influential discussion of the "gardening state" highlights certain problems that arise when states seek to determine what should grow, flourish, wither or die, where pursuing happiness, security and peace displace the advancement of freedom. Bauman's account has been widely drawn upon (e.g., Binkley 2009; Mottier 2008; Schiel 2005). However, in his and others' critique of state cultivation what often gets lost is the *particular* imagery of gardening at stake; namely, one involving healthy species, rational resource husbandry, and the elimination of "alien nature" (also Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Mottier 2008). Importantly, for thinking about progressive forms of state stewardship, other kinds of gardening also exist: "guerrilla gardening", "non-native" plant cultivation, growing or protecting heterogeneous, wild or weed-filled spaces, and gardening by marginalised constituencies as a form of communal public action (McKay 2011). BMR demonstrates how states can mix these different forms. While it sought to cultivate and strengthen marginalised communities, BMR also enabled divergent progressive agendas to flourish, as it resourced growth that was improvised, often unpredictable, and sometimes chaotic, conflictual and disruptive.

In this discussion, I have set out one particular reading of BMR to highlight how states can be imagined as quotidian, activist and stewarding. These properties are not unique to BMR; and BMR can, as I have said, be interpreted in other ways too (including as a failed political project underscoring, through its defeat, the traction of a *centrist* state imaginary). But while we can read BMR as illuminating what progressive forms of everyday, activist, state stewardship might mean, these dimensions are neither distinct from each other nor always in harmony. Several broad tensions can here be identified. For instance, while the activist state is oriented to visibility and spectacle, the everyday state casts its actions in shadow. Stewardship suggests a division between governing and governed that the embedded everyday state disavows. The everyday state reflects and condenses relations of power, which the activist state seeks to transform. The activist state seeks to advance coherence, unity, and commitment; the everyday state expresses contradiction and ambivalence. The activist state places itself in opposition to the status quo, while the gardening state represents itself as that

which governs. Finally, activist and gardening state projects rely upon and mobilise desires and fantasies about the future, while the everyday state extends the present across all possible futures. These tensions are important. My aim in this discussion has not been to use BMR to generate a neat fixed imaginary of governance, but to explore some of the productive tensions that can emerge when moves towards embeddedness, activism and stewardship get placed at the heart of what statehood could entail.

What Can Prefigurative Conceptions Do?

I now want to return briefly to a question raised at the start: what political value does reimagining the state have? To what extent, does prefigurative conceptualising replicate problems endemic to normative conceptualising and radical idealism, more generally, in refusing or failing to *adequately and critically represent* what is? Arguably, imagining the state *as if* it were already otherwise risks masking and so affirming the state's relationship to dominant social relations - a risk Lefebvre (2009: 55) implies when he declares, "Someone who does not begin with… critique of the existing State apparatus is simply someone who operates within the framework of existing reality, who does not propose to change it and who absolutely does not deserve the title of socialist". Prefigurative conceptualising may not foreground critique, but it takes place acutely aware of the limits, flaws and problems of formations conventionally understood as state formations. Thus, in reimagining what it means to be a state, conceptual prefiguration recalibrates which practices, systems and forms are to count as state ones. In other words, conceptual prefiguration does not idealise an already framed or cut-out state. Instead, it combines present-day concerns and values with readings of other times and spaces in order to rethink and reengage with the here and how. But, the question remains, what does this *do*? Beyond troubling existing understandings, beyond unsettling naturalised common-sense notions of what states are like, to what extent can conceptual prefiguration, with its reimagined ideas of what it means to be a state, *affect* social and political practice?

This is a large, important question, which I cannot do justice to here, not least because it requires far more research. Certainly, writers have explored the contested character and consequences of what gets treated as a state part (e.g., Cooper 2016b; Mitchell 1991); and a growing body of work on activist, official, and wider public state imaginaries has considered why conceptions of the state matter; how they affect actions, and the decisions people and organisations make (e.g., Brissetts 2015; Fuglerud 2004; Gill 2010; Navaro-Yashin 2002;

Yang 2005). For the most part, however, accounts focus on *non*-prefigurative state imaginaries. To the extent they address progressive politics, their focus, as in Nick Gill's (2010) work, is on how different *critical* perceptions of the state inform activist organisations' strategic choices. In Britain, *prefigurative* state thinking has largely occurred elsewhere, on the neoliberal right (e.g., Ridley 1988). The last three decades have witnessed extensive reimagining and re-actualisation of the "proper" or "right-course" state as right-wing politicians, officials and academics rethink and refashion what it could mean (and be) to be a state in ways that foregrounded private commercial involvement, inter-state investment competition, market practices, and financial rule (Cerny 1997). Undoubtedly, reimagining the state as a corporate entity, attuned to market competition and private wealth accumulation, is not alone enough to make it so; reimagining needs regulatory, economic and policy reforms as well. However, in neoliberalism's political expansion, reimagining the state and making a new imaginary hegemonic proved crucial to this process – inspiring, legitimating and rationalising material and policy shifts, as well as expectations in what states should and could do. Michael Parkinson (1989: 422) claims the imposition of radical political change on British local government, crushing possibilities for municipal socialism, was *ideologically* driven – grounded in conscious political choices. But this should not negate experimentation's role – how practicing other kinds of stateness (putting new meanings of what the state is and could be into practice) came to inform and shape what statehood would come to mean. If the state is a concept that can be drawn in multiple ways, neoliberal political projects not only redefined the state but reassembled, practically *and imaginatively*, those elements deemed part of it.

Conclusion

In recent years, debate about political government in post-industrial states has questioned many certainties, including commitment to liberal norms of democratic state-based rule. In several academic quarters, analytical and normative paradigms have shifted from state to governance in order to recognise and affirm plurality and inclusive horizontal relations. But the general purpose or functionally split intersecting governance structures, that Hooghe and Marks (2003) for instance describe, are not necessarily progressive alternatives to the nation-state. In some cases they may appear to co-exist comfortably with it; in other cases, they offer a corporatist, less democratic means of providing public goods, where fragmentation attenuates more holistic and expansive forms of public responsibility. In his discussion of governance-beyond-the-state, Swyngedouw (2005) explores several of its deficits in terms of

representation, accountability and legitimacy. Complementing his critique, this discussion has suggested progressive politics in the north could benefit also from a different turn, one that holds onto the concept of statehood while prefiguratively reimagining what gathers in its name. This makes it possible to recognise micro, shadow, guerrilla, embryonic, dying, local, national, regional, and supranational states as political governing formations, reflecting back the social relations that constitute them while also able to act on these relations in ways that may transform or maintain them.

But what can imagining ourselves dwelling in a world of diversely formed, overlapping, multi-scaled states contribute to progressive politics? Recognising micro, guerrilla and regional states as states may undercut the grandeur and assumed (or defended) sovereignty of the nation-state but simply extending the category of statehood to differently scaled, bounded forms of institutionalised diversity alone does not significantly advance a progressive understanding of what statehood could entail. This discussion has therefore explored one imaginary of a progressive "better state" inspired by 1980s British municipal radicalism. With all its tensions and failings, BMR provides a productive ground from which to think about what statehood (or political governance formations) could entail; how we might imagine states taking shape in plural overlapping networks that foreground public responsibility, social justice, embeddedness, participation, stewardship, activism and creativity. [18] Allowing this imaginary to surface in prefigurative conceptions of the state provides a contrast to the qualities conventionally associated with nation-states, of coercion, patriotism, territory, protection of dominant interests and the abandonment of those deemed to "drain" resources. It is also an imaginary of the state which resonates with political initiatives far beyond 1980s British municipal government. These include the "popular unity" city councils elected in Spain in 2015,[19] the "right to the city" movements which express urban imaginaries at odds with neoliberalism (Portaliou 2007), and the sanctuary city movements to protect undocumented migrants.

Conceptual prefiguration has its limitations. Like other forms of prefigurative practice, it may over-read the political agency available to think and act effectively against the status quo, under-estimating the preconditions and temporal specificity political changes require (including the conditions that enable thinking to take a different shape). But because the scope of political agency is both uncertain and emergent, prefiguration tacitly treats the risk of over-reading as less problematic than the reverse, which is to assume such agency's absence. Whether nationally-scaled states (let alone global ones) could ever adequately

resemble radical municipal governments may prove unlikely (although the relentless municipalisation of nation-states may make this more credible). Yet, as new kinds of political governance formations emerge, including at global and regional scale, radical politics needs to engage with the fantasy of what stateness could and should entail. With neoliberal politics reiimagining "good" states as corporations within a market-place, reimagining "better" states through a radical municipal lens - reversing the expectation that if Brighton & Hove becomes a state it should look like a nation-state - seems no less valuable.

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[2] For a related account of prefigurative theory, see Davies (2017).

[3] For a related utopian methodology, see Levitas's (2013) Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IROS), which combines an archaeological, architectural and ontological mode. Levitas addresses the normative images and visions embedded within existing social and political projects; the challenge of imagining and forging better ways of living and organising; and the transformation of human desires, identities and interests from imagining ourselves and society otherwise.

[4] Other writers treat the state as a concept with little or no value; for reasons of space this line of argument is not explored further here.

[5] For useful historical accounts of the conceptual development of the European state, see for instance Meadowcroft (1995); Skinner (1989).

[6] On twentieth century pluralist state thinking, intent on recognising, supporting and developing diverse forms of associational authority and life, see Morefield (2005); also Laski (1919); Hirst (1989).

[7] Bibi van der Zee, "The People's Republic of Brighton and Hove: Britain's latest breakaway nation", 12 May 2015: http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/shortcuts/2015/may/12/britains-latest-breakaway-nation-peoples-republic-brighton-hove.

[8] David Blunkett quoted in Gyford et al., (1989: 329).

[9] Elsewhere, I have argued for an approach to state form that incorporates the encounters, policies, constituencies, and values that gather around its governance – this includes the fleeting as well as more durable, the dissident as well as the dominant (Cooper 2016b).

[10] For a detailed discussion of the municipal left's growth and collapse, see Lansley et al., (1989).

[11] For instance, see the refusal to process council tenants' "right to buy" applications (Ascher 1983).

[12] E.g., the Positive Images campaign in Haringey, which campaigned to stop the council backtracking on its gay positive educational policy (Cooper 1994).

[13] For BMR, extra-territorial politics proved largely symbolic: flags flown in solidarity, twinning initiatives, letters of support, renamed streets, and municipal visits. But some actions also had a more practical or economic dimension, such as using procurement powers to purchase goods, e.g., Nicaraguan coffee, or withdrawing municipal grounds from non-compliant bodies, such as the Leicester rugby club, after the club allowed several members to play in South Africa during apartheid (see *Wheeler* v. *Leicester City Council* [1985] AC 1054). During this period, courts routinely struck down municipal attempts to use contracting, purchasing, and land ownership powers as strategic political resources (see Cooper 1999; Oliver 1988).

[14] Recent work on territory is extensive; for some interesting accounts, see Blomley (2015); Brenner and Elden (2009); Elden (2010); and Painter (2010).

[15] The refusal to capitalise territory, to focus on well-being rather than commercial (or other) value, contrasts with local government practice in other contexts where councils are expected to compete to optimise investment opportunities, and to attract business. While misleading to suggest no competition existed among BMR councils for investment, their explicit orientation was to managing and meeting needs rather than supporting commercial growth.

[16] BMR illustrates how "open borders" do not necessarily produce service withdrawal from inhabitants (as neoliberal "no borders" politics suggests) but can lead to forms of responsibility that extend outwards from residing migrants to migration-producing conditions (such as war, economic colonialism, and persecution) to wider forms of geopolitical support (see also Darling 2009; Massey 2007). Doreen Massey (2007: 194-195), importantly, emphasises the importance of "richer places", such as London, recognising their responsibility for the detrimental effects of their actions in other places.

[17] On "bordering practices" as working to forge, sustain and reform borders, see Parker and Adler-Nissen (2012).

[18] See also Fung and Wright (2003) for a useful discussion of "empowered participatory governance".

[19] Dick Nichols, "Spain: 'Popular unity' councils sworn in amid huge enthusiasm", *Green Left Weekly* 20 June 2015, https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/59290; see also Kioupkiolis (2016).