

Andy Blunden. April 2026

Part VI. Making a Difference

## 1. Activism and Utopia

This chapter is addressed to those who are prepared to dedicate their lives to give people a say in the world beyond the limits imposed by modern capitalism. I address those whom I have referred to as ‘world-historical’ activists, that is, those whose aims and ideals transcend the bounds of a social system in which wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few billionaires while the very conditions for human life are being destroyed in pursuit of profit.

I share these aims, as do millions of others – more than you’d think. However, adherents of two important approaches to ‘world-historical’ activism have disregarded the limits of foreseeable consequences of our actions. Hegel and Anthony Giddens have both drawn our attention to this. Sometimes my criticisms may be overly sharp. This no doubt reflects my having spent about 15 years of my own life in pursuit of the dead-end road of building the revolutionary party. By nature, I think I have more sympathy with the advocates of ‘prefigurative politics’, but I have also learnt that if prefigurative politics is to be taken seriously, it must also be *successful* politics.

Hegel believed that it was wrong to follow one’s conscience to the point of civil disobedience, because such actions ignored the wisdom embodied in the existing norms and customs. One of the positive lessons which came out of the twentieth century however was that, on the contrary, civil disobedience has proved to be one of most powerful elements of the struggle for a better world.

The anarchist doctrine of ‘prefigurative politics’ advises its adherents to act here and now *as if* the socialist utopia were already realised. But ‘prefigurative politics’ is not limited to pursuit of socialist utopias, and has deeply penetrated even grassroots local organising. It was first described by Jo Freeman in 1970 as antipathy to formal organisation of any kind, widespread in the emerging Women’s Liberation Movement at the time, and I will cite research that demonstrates that it is alive and well and doing damage today. But it is the anarchists who offer the most considered doctrine of prefigurative politics, so I will use Benjamin Franks as the voice of prefigurative politics.

### Prefigurative Politics

Benjamin Franks draws extensively on Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue ethics, which makes it particularly suitable as a protagonist. Franks proposes that:

anarchism ... and its distinguishing characteristic of adherence to *prefigurative* tactics ... is best considered as a social virtue theory compatible with the format developed by MacIntyre.

Franks, 2010, p. 156

So we have common ground.

As I have argued above, for an action to be judged in relation to the ideal which motivates it, the action must be at least one small step towards achievement of that aim, or avoids a step backwards.

Such a judgment presupposes some *social theory* by means of which an action may be judged, *if successful*, as an ‘internal good’, namely, as a step towards the Socialist utopia.

I can say with certainty at this moment that we are not going to witness the triumph of Socialism as the outcome of any action taken today. However, some step in that direction would mark the success of an action, and social change activities are always aimed at achieving some outcome consistent with their ideal. A social change activity which is *not* aimed at taking some small step towards achieving the ideal which motivates it, may be a game or a fantasy, but it is not social change activism, whether world-historical or local.

It is the argument about what is or is not a step towards Socialism that constitutes the tradition to which anarchists and socialists belong. Franks’ answer to this problem is the notion of *prefiguration*.

A virtue is a character trait that promotes the achievement of the goods that constitute the defining telos of the practice. MacIntyre does say, however, that the definition of virtues ‘does not entail or imply that practices as actually carried through at particular times and places do not stand in need of moral criticism’ (p. 187). Indeed, it is by means of the moral criticisms which take place through the interaction between practices within a tradition, ‘as components of a shared unifying narrative’, (p. 155) that practices are judged. Every practice has a telos, by definition (an aimless practice is a contradiction in terms), but a telos which is forever under revision. The virtue of a practice is guaranteed only by reference to the tradition of which it is a part, but ultimately, as Aristotle put it, on the basis that ‘the good life for man is spent seeking the good life for man’ (MacIntyre, p. 204).

The rejection of Consequentialism in favour of virtue ethics does not mean that a person should be indifferent to the consequences of their action. Franks seems to be suggesting this when he says, with reference to prefigurative methods: ‘the employment of such methods is not justified consequentially’. On the contrary, a person is morally responsible for the foreseen consequences of their action and, in the case of reckless action, unforeseeable consequences as well. An aimless action is not only madness, it is a contradiction in terms.

Further, the rejection of Deontology does not mean that there are no rules to which people ought to consider in deciding how to act. On the contrary, every tradition of activism, through its experience, formulates rules that should be considered in deciding how to act. But *which* rule should one obey when two or more rules are in conflict, and mandate different actions? That is the problem.

Reflecting against abstract and implausible criteria while carrying out elaborate hypothetical calculations is not how people make decisions. This is all the more true when the aim is the achievement of socialist society at some indefinite time in the future.

To make sound decisions, we depend on the judgment of people in command of the relevant virtues and well-informed. *There is no rulebook* for this. But participation and leadership in popular, progressive campaigns is the best possible context for acquiring such virtues.

## Anarchism and Virtue Ethics

Franks repeatedly emphasises that ‘practical anarchism’ rejects Consequentialism:

Anarchist prefigurative methods are identifiable as they are the types of practices that would collectively build up to create their anti-hierarchical version of the flourishing society. However, the employment of such methods is not justified consequentially. Anarchists, for instance, employ anti-hierarchical forms of social interaction (for instance, in their formal methods of organisation) not because they will bring about their ends more quickly than centralised authoritarian political structures, but because they produce the very forms of social relationship, albeit in miniature, that they hope to achieve in the longer term.

op. cit., p. 146

The qualification ‘more quickly’ is beside the point. The argument about the merits of anarchist practices is not over how *quickly* Socialism can be attained, but how it can be attained at all. If Franks is saying anything, it is that the employment of anti-hierarchical methods can bring about Socialism and the employment of hierarchical structures and delegation *cannot*.

What is the theoretical basis for Franks’ claim?

Franks says that prefigurative practices will ‘collectively build up to create their anti-hierarchical version of the flourishing society ... albeit in miniature’. This is not an ethical argument; it is a *social theory*, namely, the theory that by creating a better world ‘in miniature’, a transformation of the entire world may eventually be achieved by ‘contamination’, to use the term coined by Maeckelbergh (2009), herself a prominent advocate of prefigurative politics. The general assembly (as in Occupy Wall Street), it seems, can ‘build up’ to a larger and larger meeting until the entire world is drawn into its anti-hierarchical structure. And all this without the use of delegates or representatives, which anarchists say are inherently hierarchical.

Further, conceived as a social formation, Socialism is not a condition of society that can co-exist with vast differences in wealth, power and education. Socialism ‘in miniature’ is a fantasy.

Franks does not promote the use of the word ‘contamination’ but he does say that the practice of the virtues is ‘generative’, that is, that practice of the virtues promotes the further formation of virtuous character. It is more reasonable to suppose that virtuous practices will serve to generate further such practices. This is, in general, a fair argument.

However, we have not seen evidence of this in growing numbers of anarchists in the world. It is true that prefigurative politics has proliferated, but it is marginalised, and it is likely to remain so. If this is to happen by some kind of moral education, then we need a theory about why this should happen. It is not automatic.

Although embedded in an exposition of MacIntyre’s virtue ethics, the proposal for prefigurative politics is in fact *not an ethical argument* at all, but an expression of a questionable social theory, that of *contamination* – force of example.

But let us look more closely. Franks argues that prefigurative politics is adopted *not for consequential reasons*. Suppose a non-hierarchical structure is adopted for a campaign and as a consequence of this structure, let us say, an important decision is not made in a timely manner, and the campaign fails (the forest is burned, the refugees remain in detention, the houses are demolished or whatever). The argument would be that still it was right to adopt the non-hierarchical structure, despite it being the *cause* of the failure of the campaign, because the virtuous character of the practice will generate further experimentation with prefigurative politics. I grant that activists *enjoy* this kind of activity in the same way as people enjoy cosplay, but like cosplay, it has an inherently limited base. Granted, external goods such as enjoyment are one element of organising.

There definitely are circumstances in which it would be correct to eschew a tactic despite the fact that it may be the only way to produce the desired outcome. But in general, it is fair to say that the process of contamination is unlikely to be effective in spreading non-hierarchical structures if they consistently lead to the failure of campaigns.

Also, to employ a method without seeking to justify it consequentially *in order to* achieve Socialism by means of ‘contamination’ would be a performative contradiction. Unless members of the campaign have come along for cosplay it can be presumed that they joined *in order to* achieve some finite demand – to stop the demolition of a building, or the construction of a chemical dump. To introduce a hidden agenda is *deceit*, inconsistent with the Socialist objective.

The impact of prefigurative politics on grassroots activism in Manchester – a city with a proud history of socialist political struggle – has been recorded by Hooshlari (in press):

Taken together, these findings support the argument that organisational fragility in grassroots activism is not incidental but structurally produced. Specifically, fragility emerges through the interaction of: (1) horizontal organising practices that displace and obscure power rather than eliminate it; (2) weak mechanisms for transmitting organisational memory and experience; (3) limited strategic clarity and the absence of pathways for building power; (4) capacity constraints rooted in precarious and individualised conditions under neoliberalism; and (5) an affective climate of urgency, crisis and emotional strain that undermines continuity. These factors do not operate independently but reinforce one another, producing a cycle of formation, exhaustion and dissolution that prevents the accumulation of durable organisational capacity over time.

As Jo Freeman noted 56 years ago:

As long as the women's liberation movement stays dedicated to a form of organisation which stresses small, inactive discussion groups among friends, the worst problems of unstructuredness will not be felt. But this style of organization has its limits; it is politically inefficacious, exclusive, and discriminatory against those women who are not or cannot be tied into the friendship networks.

Those who do not fit into what already exists because of class, race, occupation, education, parental or marital status, personality, etc., will inevitably be discouraged from trying to participate. Those who do fit in will develop vested interests in maintaining things as they are.

Freeman, 1970

The question which confronts the activist is whether the need to achieve the proximate aim(s) of the campaign is *genuinely* in conflict with the need for a 'horizontalist' organisation. Suppose a group of workers are engaged in a campaign for a wage increase and a union delegate is able to convince the boss to grant the increase by spending a day on the golf course with him and making a secret deal. I would say that such a means is corrupt and not justified by the end because of its negative impact on union organisation, loss of trust, and so on.

Consensus is not the only way of resolving differences in a campaign and protracted debates are *not* always the best means of resolving differences. Knowing the best way to resolve differences in a campaign requires the exercise of phronesis. A capacity that is acquired through long experience in organising and willingness to learn from experience and eschew dogma, and to know when to adopt one means of overcoming differences and when to adopt another.

The point is that the consequences of, or example, adopting a certain structure *are* significant in deciding whether to use it, but it takes judgment. One ought to know the proximate outcome of a decision one makes – for example, that the adoption of a 'horizontalist' structure for a campaign would lead to failure of the campaign, and this has to be taken into account and *weighed*. Successive failure of campaigns organised by prefigurative politics would *not* be generative of that practice, or likely any participation at all.

But the tradition of which you are a part and the self-concept of that tradition, which includes its social theory, provide the concepts, rules and inferences that will also guide you in making a decision. Deciding whether to let the campaign fail in the interests of, for example, preserving relationships within the campaign or being able to learn from a failure, is a problem which a tradition of practice has to confront. To adopt virtue ethics is not to turn a blind eye to the proximate consequences of one's actions and certainly not to ignore the wisdom accumulated by the anti-capitalist movement over the past two hundred years. encoded in the founding principles of the First International and the socialist and anarchist literature produced by the movement since. *It is to know how to apply it.*

Making virtue ethics the basis for an approach to social change activism means cultivating the capacity for ethical judgment, phronesis, among the activists and building organisations which are themselves virtuous, and not captive to rigid dogmas and procedural imperatives, including those of prefigurative politics.

The remote future

You ought to know the proximate outcome of your decisions, and an organisation bears moral responsibility for those outcomes and other unintended outcomes insofar as they were foreseeable. But socialist society is never such an outcome. By any reasonable judgment, socialist society is

generations into the future. No course of action can be judged in consequentialist terms on the basis that its outcome will be socialist society.

An action has effects; these effects combine with the totality of conditions at the time and the responses of all the actors to produce new conditions, which in turn produce new outcomes. One can never know the ultimate consequences of one's action.

However, history is intelligible and the socialist and anarchist traditions have built up a body of social theory over the past two hundred years which provides rules of conduct and some capacity to analyse conditions and estimate the consequences of different conditions and events. There will always be room for argument about how this struggle may unfold. What Ethics can provide, however, is that which social theory cannot: guidance on how to work together when we do not agree about the efficacy of this or that decision. It is here that politics based on ethical sensibilities comes into play.

### Ethics and Utopia

If prefigurative politics is to be justified, it has to be on the basis of virtue ethics, but this does *not* imply that any given organisational structure is validated *irrespective of consequences*. 'Socialist society' – the utopian vision we share of a future world after the overthrow of capital – is not a 'consequence'. This is because it is impossible in principle to predict the arrival of such a society generations into the future, as a result of not just *our* actions, but those of *everyone else*. 'Consequences' are the proximate and foreseeable outcomes of decisions made and it is these for which we must take moral responsibility.

*'Socialist society' is a rendering of the ethics of socialism into utopian form.*

It is our *socialist ethics* which determine our actions along with the social theory which we have acquired through the practices of the anti-capitalist tradition. Our socialist ethics must be, as Franks argues, virtue ethics, which means we pay attention to the moral education of our activists so that they can exercise wise judgment in the struggle for justice and freedom. There are many differences in matters of social theory within our movement, despite the fact that we share a common vision of Socialism. But there is surely reason to believe that we could share an ethic.

From where does a socialist ethic arise? Not by transplanting a utopian vision of socialist society into the present, 'in miniature'. No. It is rather the other way around: the utopian vision of socialist society is a projection of our (somewhat) shared socialist ethic on to a future world. This socialist ethic exists and develops precisely in and through the practices in which we all *collaborate* (cooperating and conflicting). We work through our differences, make our mistakes and share our successes and failures, together. If Maeckelbergh's idea of 'reciprocal contamination' means anything it must mean the negotiation and internalisation of shared ethics in the course of collaborating in common projects. If this is the case, then it would be very helpful to elaborate this socialist ethics.

This is a very important and concrete task, because as Franks notes, there will never come a time when all conflicts have been resolved. To moderate the differences *within* the anti-capitalist movement is the most attractive way to

develop the ethics of socialist society in which an even wider range of aspirations will coexist.

The posing of socialist society as an *end* is misconceived. It is not a question of bringing means and ends into conformity. Any attempt to do so can only lead to a barren utopianism by subordinating our means, today's organising practices, to a utopian world in which the socialist ethic has been universalised. In fact, when I do this, what is actually happening is that:

I begin with my ethics acquired in the here and now;

I then project them on to a future society in which everyone shares this ethos, and

I then deduce the ethics with which I actually began, but now with the illusory justification that it prefigures socialist society.

No, the socialist ethic must be justified in terms of the exigencies of organising here and now. 'Socialist society' has no determinate content other than the generalisation of the socialist ethic. But the socialist ethic is not something for the future: it is now. The means of our activity, including the consciousness of our fellow activists, are in fact elements of the capitalist society of which we are a part and which is the very object which we are trying to change. This is where the relation of means and ends is located, in the subjectivity of the social strata which are thrown into opposition by the development of capitalism itself.

The social structures in which the socialist ethic might be universalised must remain obscure for some time. Franks claims (p. 141) that anarchism lacks 'determinate ends' and this must be true for all of us in this tradition.

But it is unclear what Franks refers to when he counterposes this indeterminate end to 'our goals'. His definition of prefiguration as 'tactics [which] encapsulate the values desired in [our] preferred goals', comes close to what I am arguing. But virtues are not goals and what are the 'values' which have been introduced here? If we are introducing an axiology into MacIntyre's virtue ethics, rather than the deontology of which 'values' are usually a part, this needs to be explained. 'Goal' is usually used to denote proximate aims, in contrast to more remote 'ends' which Franks 'hopes to achieve in the end' by means of prefiguration (p. 146). I do not find this argument coherent.

### The Revolutionary Party

It is widely accepted that an essential premise of Marx's theory is that Socialism must have a party as its vehicle. I do not accept this claim. To explain why, I will briefly review the historical record, beginning with Marx's engagement with 'revolutionary parties', then the present-day political terrain on the Left in my own country, Australia, and the theory of party building by its contemporary advocates. In the next chapter, I will suggest an alternative approach in light of the present-day labour process.

The history of the revolutionary party

Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) for the Communist League. But there was no 'Communist Party'. In the mid-19th century, '*party*' meant a political tendency, even if unorganised' (Draper, 1978). The Communist League, founded in 1847, was a small organisation whose

constitution was modelled on those of 18th-century secret societies such as the Freemasons and the political *sociétés* (usually translated as ‘clubs’) of the French revolutionary period. Despite the threat of state repression, Marx and Engels worked to turn the League into a more suitable vehicle for a modern political movement. The ‘Communist Party’ of the *Manifesto*, on the other hand, was understood more in the way we understand ‘the Left’ today, rather than an organisation with a membership list. Marx intervened in the revolutions of 1848 by printing and distributing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* daily, financially supported by shareholders, with the aid of an editorial board and informal supporters acting as distributors.

In the UK, the Whigs and Tories were more like parties in the modern sense, but they oriented exclusively toward parliamentary representation, without any active branches with real internal lives. The Reform Act of 1832 had failed to extend the franchise to the overwhelming majority of the population, whose only avenue for political activity was to attend hustings and sign petitions. *The People’s Charter* was published in 1838 calling for universal suffrage, and in 1840 the National Charter Association (NCA) was launched, borrowing its structure from the Methodist Church. However, its vibrant internal democratic activity was made illegal and brutally suppressed. By the time of the Communist League, the NCA was in decline. The third great petition had been rejected by Parliament and the British bourgeoisie blocked any possibility for political organisation or parliamentary participation by the working class. But Marx and Engels looked to the NCA as a model so far as possible, given the threat of state repression.

By the 1860s, the franchise was being gradually expanded in Britain. Trade unions were increasingly tolerated, now preferred by employers to employees organising secretly and open to radical influence. The International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA, or First International) was founded in 1864, mainly by the London Trades Council, and was the first mass working-class organisation that Marx was part of creating. Under Marx’s leadership, the IWMA was based on the principles of solidarity and the self-emancipation of the working class, and was very loose in its attitude to membership. Organically embedded in the industrial working class of Europe, it was not involved in elections and did not foment revolutionary activity, being chiefly involved in industrial activity and education. The IWMA played next to no role in the Paris Commune and declined in the 1870s. This did not stop Marx and Engels working like Trojans: studying, writing, publishing, and occasionally lecturing.

In the decades following Marx’s death in 1883, large masses of unskilled workers (i.e., workers outside the apprenticeship system) formed trade unions, and in Europe and later Britain, workers swelled the ranks of the parliamentary parties which formed the Second International. The largest, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), originated in the Gotha Congress of 1875, when Ferdinand Lassalle’s General German Workers’ Association and August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht’s Social Democratic Workers’ Party merged. Marx maintained a comradely but critical attitude to the new social democratic parties until his death in 1883.

Neither Marx nor Engels were ever a member of a revolutionary party.

In Russia in 1905, workers formed soviets, a new and distinct kind of working-class organisation. Members of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) participated alongside the politically active section of the Russian working class, while also maintaining a presence in the Duma after 1905.

Colonial and early 20th-century Australia had several small Marxist groups. The largest, the Victorian Socialist Party, founded in 1906, was active in the trade unions, founded the local branch of the IWW, worked inside the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and was popular among the working class of Melbourne. But it was still a very small group.

### Working class organisation

At this point, the predominant form of political organisation in the workers' movement internationally was large formations that were organic parts of the class itself, in which various political factions participated. But the soviets and the labour and social-democratic parties existed independently of the Marxists; they were not the creation of Marxists.

Under Tsarist rule, the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP could have no illusions in the parliamentary road, but universal suffrage was established by the February Revolution of 1917, and the Bolsheviks seized the opportunity. In the aftermath of the October Revolution, they took power on behalf of the soviets and founded the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, later the USSR. Notwithstanding the centrality of the soviets, it *was* the Bolshevik *Party* which led the Revolution at the head of the soviets, an achievement formalised by the change of name to the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks).

But within the particular circumstances of the Russian Revolution there is a universal element. The Soviets were founded in 1905, independently of the Bolsheviks and it was the Soviets that were the vehicle for the victory of the working class.

In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912 as a political party. The South African Communist Party (SACP) participated as a leading element within the ANC but they never controlled it. It was the ANC which was the vehicle by which the anti-apartheid movement took state power, restoring the Republic of South Africa more or less to the model of liberal democracy. In both cases, these Marxists were following Marx's example in his participation in the IWMA.

Subsequently, the Third, or Communist, International (Comintern) set up communist parties internationally, in the image of the Russian Communist Party. But the Comintern could not will into existence the soviets that had made the Russian Revolution. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was founded in 1920, and the small Marxist groups which had been active before then, withered away, leaving the leadership of the workers' movement to the overlapping membership of the trade unions, the ALP, and the CPA. This formation largely remained in place, as in many other countries, until the 1960s.

### Making Revolution

Most of the parties which made revolutions during the period when the Comintern was interested in making revolutions were subordinate organs of the

Comintern. What made the Chinese Revolution of 1949 was not a political party, but an army of peasants led by intellectuals and workers loyal to the Comintern. The leaders of the Red Army were recruited in the cities and sent to the countryside, where they were aided by the Soviet Union.

The revolution in Yugoslavia was likewise made by a partisan army, albeit in this case with unhelpful interference from the Comintern. Otherwise, all the regime changes in Eastern Europe were the result of the military conquests of the Soviet army. Subsequent revolutions in Africa and Latin America were made by guerrilla armies, not political parties, mostly with material aid from either China or the Soviet Union, as rival quasi-colonial powers.

The Cuban model, in part inspired by the Chinese Revolution, generated many emulators. Castro and Guevara did not trust the urban working class or the Cuban Communist Party. Instead, they went into the countryside, sustaining themselves with the support of the peasants, until marching back into Havana at the head of an army and seizing power in 1959.

Cuba is probably the best example of the road to Socialism which begins in the jungle. The Sandinistas, led by Daniel Ortega enjoyed for a while the adulation enjoyed by Guevara. Anastasio Somoza had ruled Nicaragua under a regime of torture until 1979 when Daniel Ortega, leader of the Sandinistas, hijacked a plane with the Somoza's entire cabinet on board. The population welcomed him, but now, decades later, Ortega rules Nicaragua with a regime of torture more brutal than Somoza's.

The experience of the CPA was not significantly different from that of Communist Parties in other countries in which 'liberal capitalism' ruled. At the end of the Second World War, in which the Soviet Union was an ally of Australia against Nazi Germany and bearing the brunt of the fighting, the CPA had a high profile. Its membership was estimated to be 22,000 in a population of 7.5 million, and it led a large faction in the trade unions, holding 8 of the 18 seats on the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) General Council. It could indeed be said that the CPA was the organic leadership of the Australian working class, even though its policies were controlled day-by-day from Moscow. But only once in its 70-year history was a member of the CPA elected to Parliament at state or federal level (Fred Paterson, member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 1944–50). Australian workers have been happy to have communists leading their trade unions, but not in charge of the government.

The CPA wound itself up in 1989, and launched the New Left Party, that lived only long enough to wind itself up 1992. By this time, the CPA resembled a quaint association of old people.

Today, the Left in Australia somewhat resembles the Left its condition prior to the October Revolution, differing only in the number of small Left groups that compete for the larger population of non-ALP socialists.

This is the sense in which I say that the 20th century turned out to be a mistake.

Apart from October 1917, political parties have not made revolutions. Revolutions have been made by armies of one kind or another. Political parties have been part of opinion formation and the political education of the masses, but they have not actually made a socialist revolution. Parties are governments-in-waiting. Whether the road to power lies through a parliamentary election or a

military conquest or by some other route, that will determine the kind of ‘party’ required. Parties may be a factor in opinion formation, but generally the job of opinion formation is the work of *social movements*.

Where states have been created by victorious armies, the resulting product has generally been unattractive to anyone who wanted a reasonable standard of living, a voice in political life, and social peace. Granted, many have avoided the worst features of neoliberal capitalism, but they did so at the expense of social and economic development and the normal kind of freedoms enjoyed in the capitalist world. Granted too, that the suffering of people in such ‘socialist’ regimes was in great measure imposed on them by the United States and their allies.

But I have to give something to prefigurative politics here. Jesus said (Matthew 26:52): ‘all who take up the sword will perish by the sword’. We can coin a variation on this aphorism: ‘all who liberate by the sword will rule by the sword’.

The political landscape in Australia today

If you live in a country like Australia where universal suffrage is in place and is implemented fairly, then you should know that changing government policy is not achieved by changing the government. First of all you must change the opinions of the voters, even if governments do persist in doing things which their voters hate. The general rule is: don’t try to persuade the politicians, persuade the voters.

Generally speaking, however, the class that controls civil society controls government, and this is more true than the converse, i.e., controlling government does not necessarily bring with it control of public opinion, even though governments hold many powerful levers to that end, and can still determine activity in civil society in the face of public hostility.

Capital has at its disposal vast means for the control of public opinion. Capitalists own the means of communication and largely determine the content of all public communication through ownership of industry, property, and money. They shape the ‘common sense’ of the working population by controlling the experiences people have in their working life as employees, and by means of the laws of economics, which are but the ideal form of the bourgeoisie and saturate the cultural atmosphere with advertisements and all kinds of diversion.

This may well be true even some time *after* the socialist revolution.

The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* states that ‘the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, *to win the battle of democracy*’.

This first step remains before us.

The central factor today is the nature of the modern labour process. The working class of today is no longer the serried ranks of blue-collar workers who lived in vast urban concentrations serving the Fordist factories. Solidarity was a condition of life for these people. Today’s workers, especially in the private sector, are highly differentiated and individualised by the nature of their work and employment conditions. Knowledge workers form a substantial sector of the working class and manufacturing and mining make up a shrinking section of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries.

This is not simply a negative. This is a working class that *could* run the economy without the organising power of capital or its representatives. But they do not move as a mass, and they do politics differently.

We know all the advantages the bourgeoisie has in ‘the battle of democracy,’ but the working people also have advantages, above all the advantage of numbers. Whatever the barriers to winning the battle of democracy, these are the same barriers which bar the way to social revolution. They are lower barriers, however, because it takes a greater commitment to actually launch a civil war than it takes to vote for a party advocating Socialism. But there is no way of bypassing public opinion.

A social revolution cannot be made without the support of the overwhelming majority of the politically active population.

### Building the revolutionary party

Not every socialist is concerned with changing government or government policy. Taking the long view, some socialists work to bring about socialism at some future time, and in their view governments have little to contribute to that aim. They claim that Socialism can only arrive via socialist revolution because the capitalists will only relinquish their property in the face of overwhelming force. While the government formally has the capacity to expropriate property, the enormous power of capital, in the world economy and domestically, militates against this. In the 125 years of universal suffrage in Australia, elected governments have not had the power or the will to expropriate capital.

In the wake of the Second World War, Clement Attlee’s Labour government in the UK (1945–51) carried out extensive nationalisation of industry when political and economic conditions made it possible and arguably necessary. But they never took measures to expropriate capital or disarm the military, and the post-war period unfolded in the UK as in other ‘liberal capitalist’ countries, albeit with an exemplary National Health Service.

Revolutionary socialists argue, however, that the leadership of the revolution and the readiness of the working class for revolution must be prepared in advance. Preparation for a violent revolution has little to do with improving life here and now. Thus the dichotomy: reform or revolution.

As Marx noted in *The Civil War in France* (1871): ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes’. This is true.

Today, the preparation for a future revolution is conceived of in terms of the size and influence of a revolutionary party which grows from a presently existing embryo and will seize power on behalf of the working class, having transformed itself into the organic leadership of the working class. One of the 20-odd little revolutionary parties will stand out from the crowd and lead the revolution.

As a result, the explicitly political landscape is inhabited by three types of animal: (1) political parties, or governments-in-waiting oriented towards winning elections and implementing their program through the state apparatus; (2) revolutionary groups propagating the conception of socialist revolution and preparing the general staff of a future revolutionary army; (3) social movements working at changing public opinion on specific issues with the aim of forcing

governments to act on these issues by convincing the voters. Social movements are frequently active in dealing with the issue themselves, uninterested in becoming a government either by voting or by revolution. Although there are hybrids such as the trade unions, which are institutionalized social movements, these tasks are more or less mutually exclusive, and the organizations are generally clear about their *raison d'être*.

No one today seriously repeats the slogan 'After them, us' by which German Communists in the 1930s expressed the belief that life would be so terrible under the Nazis that people would vote for the Communist Party of Germany. Beyond this, there is such a thing as what Nancy Fraser (2003) calls 'non-reformist reforms' — that is, measures which can win widespread support on their own merit here and now, but at the same time actually improve the self-confidence, unity, and fighting capacity of the working class. The British NHS is a prime example of such a reform. The abolition of all anti-union laws and the guarantee of access to the best possible quality of education and health services improve the prospects for a successful and lasting social revolution, even though they militate against the *immediate stimulus* to endure the civil war which will ultimately be needed to defend these conditions.

It is generally the *taking away* of some benefit, rather than a long-held desire for that benefit, which stimulates people into political action. Some benefits, like a good public health system, are *extremely* difficult to take away. In any case, any advocate of Socialism, whether or not they believe that social revolution is necessary to achieve it, is duty-bound to work for such reforms. Not all reforms have this character. For example, measures which aim to foster small business and self-employment may improve life under capitalism for some, but they complicate the road to Socialism. Even then, socialists are obliged by the duty of solidarity to support any person seeking to pull themselves up.

The *Slackbastard* blog (2025) enumerates 20 groups dedicated to preparing for social revolution in Australia, even before he gets to the 'see also'. The largest and evidently 'most successful' of these is the latest iteration of Tony Cliff's tendency, now known as Socialist Alternative (SAIt), which split from the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO) in 1995. SAIt makes it clear that socialist revolution is unlikely to break out in Australia:

It is much more likely that revolution will wash onto our shores only after major revolutionary waves appear in other parts of the world and global capitalism is beginning to falter, throwing our own society into turmoil — making existing problems worse, exposing new ones, while inspiring people to do something about them by following the lead of people overseas. . . . When it does, the question will not be, 'Can it happen here?' The question will be, 'How can we win?' The answer to that will depend to a large degree on how many people have already been trained as activists and know how to organise people, how many people have studied other revolutions and their dynamics and can apply the lessons learned by millions of people in previous attempts to change the world, how many people understand the ways different social classes mobilise to defend their interests. In short, it will depend on how

organised our side is.  
Hillier, 2022

The above verges on the self-evident. If there were a revolution originating in Australia, it would likely be crushed by international capital. A successful revolution would likely arise only as a part of an enormous social crisis originating outside Australia's borders. But this tells us nothing to justify the project of revolutionary groups who build their party on the assumption that it is *they* who are preparing the general staff for the future social revolution, and not one of the other revolutionary socialist parties. I'll return to this, but they are right when they say, 'In short, it will depend on how organised our side is'.

This is the *raison d'être* of SAlt: to train activists and organise in preparation for the revolutionary upsurge that could follow a revolutionary crisis overseas. This is an interesting variant of the former DSP's *raison d'être*, whose aim was to lend aid to revolutions overseas.

The project of SAlt is to become a Bolshevik Party. Young people can be inspired by this project, and willingly devote themselves to the party. But SAlt are far less committed to the success of the projects in which they participate alongside other people.

SAlt originates from a group expelled from the ISO in 1995. Contrary to the ISO, whose practice consistently exhibited this lack of interest in the goals of any campaign it participated in, SAlt claims to practice 'a combination of arguing principled socialist politics and involving ourselves wholeheartedly in the campaigns that emerged' (Armstrong, 2022). The following excerpts are taken from an authoritative reflection of the historical origins of SAlt by Mick Armstrong, written in 2010:

[Because of the deteriorating combativity of the workers' movement,] new recruits, if they are to remain actively involved and be confident to recruit other people, have to be politically convinced through serious discussion, political branch meetings and reading groups, combined with well thought-out interventions into whatever struggles and debates that arise. ... for a socialist group of a few hundred to operate successfully it needs to understand that it is nowhere near to being a mass party that can lead any significant layer of workers in struggle. Instead it has to be clear that it is reliant on its ideas to influence relatively small numbers of people. ... With over 100 student activists we have by far the largest base of any left group on the university campuses and at the same time we have gradually built up a layer of members who are activists in a range of trade unions ... We were even more right to resist the fantasy that in the space of a few short years a couple of hundred socialists could by an act of will and organisational quick fixes decisively break out and achieve a mass working-class following. With the ISO defunct, the challenge facing us in Socialist Alternative is to take the next step forward and begin to lay the basis for a serious current in the working class based on the politics of international socialism.

*ibid.*

Even more than in 2010, SAlt is the largest of the groups on the Left in Australia, but there is not the slightest sign of them 'breaking out' with a mass working-class following. They have some members who have retained their membership after leaving university and are now in trade unions.

Via its electoral vehicle, the Victorian Socialists, SAlt has not won a single local government position, although in 2022 it did win 4% of votes and retain its deposit in *one* region with a progressive, largely blue-collar and immigrant population. Their state-wide level of support in Victoria has been around 1% in general elections and went as high as 2% in some local government elections. The Victorian Socialists election platforms are firmly within the bounds of 'reformism', and are addressed to the present-day consciousness of the most politically active sections of the population, broadly drawn from the same menu of policies as is offered by the Australian Greens, not socialist revolution.

Judged by active membership numbers and election results, SAlt is dwarfed by the Greens, who get about 12.5% of the vote nationally and hold 33 lower house seats at state, one federal seat (although it was once as high as four), and over 100 local government seats. If SAlt gets much less support than the Greens, it is *not* because they are too radical. The programs of the two parties are very similar. It is something else. For one, the voters take the Greens' platform at face value, whereas most voters will know that the Victorian Socialists are putting forward a social-democratic program, *not* the program of their component parts, such as SAlt. Given the limited impact that SAlt has on the consciousness of the wider population, it is fair to suppose that the vote they get is mainly a response to the word 'socialist' on the ballot paper. I do not think that the standing of the word 'socialist' in Australia has fallen to the level suggested by the vote for the Victorian Socialists however.

Armstrong's critique of SAlt's predecessor, the ISO, hinges mainly on the ISO's inability to take the temperature of the working class and its disorienting of the membership with hyperactivism on the basis of delusions of the approaching 'break out'. Recognising that a revolutionary crisis was not itself going to sustain the revolutionary consciousness of their members, Armstrong advises more attention to the education of members in socialist ideas, as opposed to over-ambitious and invariably disappointing activism. However, Armstrong defends the ISO against the charge that 'the idea that selling a socialist paper, arguing for socialist ways to build a campaign, and recruiting activists were sectarian 'raiding' — the classic red-baiting phrase of reformists' (*ibid.*).

I suspect that SAlt continues these practices because even in criticising the practice of the ISO, Armstrong retains the same metrics of success. Countless times in the past, I have been involved in a campaign alongside other workers when a group of young 'socialists' from the ISO or some other 'revolutionary group' turn up with copies of their paper under their arm and possibly carrying banners or placards bearing the party's logo. Workers always politely welcome the offers of support, but it is generally obvious to all that these young fishers are here to recruit, sell papers, and in one way or another increase the size and influence of their group, with little commitment to the actual aims of the campaign.

In his historical review, Armstrong repeatedly refers to membership numbers and paper sales as metrics of the success or otherwise of the group (as have I in

the above comments). This is consistent with SALT's self-conception that it is building the general staff of a future Bolshevik Party, but is at odds with the idea that the role of the group is to advance the struggle for Socialism as it is here and now – that is, the socialist ethic. For the revolutionary socialist, the idea that a person may resign the party, but nonetheless, go on to be a good fighter for socialism is a contradiction in terms.

In his historical review, Armstrong makes no single reference to a *campaign success* which SALT can claim as its achievement. 'Participation' in campaigns is a *technique* which is subordinate to the objective of swelling the ranks of the party. The metrics of success are membership numbers, attendance at party events, and sales of party publications, not the success of the campaign.

Any businessperson or public servant should know that the company's mission statement plays little role in the behaviour of employees compared to its KPIs and the remuneration structure attached to the KPIs. Membership numbers and paper sales take the place of KPIs and remuneration in the party.

The aim of SALT is to build SALT. This is literally self-serving. This commitment is a negative with respect to the campaigns and organisations in which SALT intervenes. Armstrong writes,

Student union officers have to be won to revolutionary politics, be subject to the discipline of the organisation and publicly identify as socialists — selling *Socialist Alternative* magazine and so on.

*ibid.*

To the contrary, in 1929 Trotsky wrote:

In the trade unions, the Communists, of course, submit to the discipline of the party, no matter what posts they occupy. This does not exclude but *presupposes their submission to trade union discipline*. In other words, *the party does not impose upon them any line of conduct that contradicts the state of mind or the opinions of the majority of the members of trade unions.*

1929

So, when SALT recruits a genuine fighter in some campaign or union, Armstrong tells us that the first task is to weaken their sensitivity to the state of mind of the people who they were formerly struggling side-by-side with, and any impulse to align with the workers, and ultimately to transform themselves into a party member dedicated to the KPIs of SALT.

SALT are doubtless correct that social revolution will come to Australia as part of a worldwide crisis and that the prospects of socialism in Australia will depend, on one hand, on events beyond our control and outside our own borders, and, on the other hand, on the readiness of the working class in Australia to take state power and abolish capital. However, the very last thing the Australian working class will need at *that* crucial moment is a party which bases itself on the claim that it has inherited the right to lead the revolution and take state power 'on behalf of the working class,' while continuing to orient itself to measures of its own power and influence rather than of the progress in the strength and self-confidence of the workers' movement. Whatever policy such a 'revolutionary' government implemented (were it to hold state power), the move from universal suffrage in a parliamentary system to rule by a small party

constituting itself as the leadership of a class with which it has little actual organic connection, is socially and politically a significant regression. This would be true even if SAIt did 'break out' into a million-strong party.

A revolutionary party that could not win a majority in a fair election based on universal suffrage is unlikely to win the active leadership of the vast majority of the working people in a period of turbulence such as would be the likely context of a socialist revolution. Further, to make a socialist revolution requires not just the support but the *active participation* of the vast majority of the working population. The seizure of state power by one party as the leadership of just one class in society, and not the vast majority, would inevitably lead to a tyranny, as it has in the past.

A century of trying to emulate the Bolsheviks has been as fruitless as Lenin (1920) indicated in his pamphlet on the 'infantile disorder'.

I agree, however, that a socialist revolution in Australia presupposes an enormous, worldwide social and economic crisis, a situation in which events are inclined to move very fast. It may well be that such a revolution will be in defiance of a parliamentary majority, but only because of the rapid pace of events, and *not* because the revolutionary socialists could not command a majority.

The conditions today

The working class in Australia today is no longer the industrial working class that Marx presupposed. The membership of the trade unions might at first glance seem to be a rational and objective estimate of what is meant by 'the working class', but union density is currently about 13% and the great majority of these union members are in state-funded occupations such as administration, education, and care. Sales and finance, in contrast, are very weakly unionised. Blue-collar tradespeople and operatives are numerically negligible, even though their social significance exceed their numbers. The Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union and Maritime Union of Australia notwithstanding, the majority of employees in the private sector are not union members.

Given a working population with this degree of objectively manifested social solidarity, Australia is not yet ready for social revolution. We communists have a long way to go to 'win the battle of democracy', until membership of the unions (or some new formation which might overtake our unions) is much larger across both the public and private sectors. To win such a battle also presupposes large and lively social movements and political groups such that the majority of the population is *actually engaged in the political process*. Achieving the support of the vast majority for a socialist revolution is generations away. Speculation *beyond* this is idle.

Just as parliamentary democracy is said to be the ideal state form for capitalism, the ideal state form for fostering of an anti-capitalist revolution is a parliamentary democracy supplemented by thoroughgoing democratic intervention in every aspect of social life to an extent that would make parliament redundant. Insofar as revolutionary socialists seek to prepare for a future social revolution, the best we can do is foster participation in economic, political, and social life by the largest possible number of people, using whatever

avenues are available to accustom people to take responsibility for running this or that area of public life where they live.

At the same time, it is necessary to support 'non-reformist reforms,' such as protecting and extending the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, cutting off the advertising revenue of the capitalist media, expanding education, ensuring the greatest possible level of participation in political life, and so on.

It is still not possible to justify such activity on the basis that they constitute small steps towards Socialism. But the promotion of wider participation in social and political life and 'non-reformist reforms' need not be justified on this basis because this kind of activity is part of the socialist ethos itself here and now.

Everything that I have said above in connection with 'prefigurative politics' is applicable to those who justify their activity on the basis that building the revolutionary party is the necessary step towards socialist revolution and therefore Socialism. The consequences of any action you take here and now to *build the party* is just as likely to serve the counter-revolution as to be a step towards Socialism. The road to Heaven is paved with good intentions.

As I remarked above, *there is* an element of truth in the concept of prefiguration. The *party ethos* has proved to be astoundingly enduring given the slim benefits it has brought to the socialist project. Generation after generation of young people, repulsed by the abominations of capitalism and inspired by the dream of universal solidarity, join a party. As we have seen, being a party member demands that you *distance* yourself from the concerns of the broader workers' movement and adopt the ethos of a disciple.

### Social Movements

The myriad activities that make up the modern world include one that is most important, not only for 'world-historical' activists, but for *anyone* who craves a say in how the world works.

Social movements cannot be summoned up from nowhere. They arise only where conditions are right. Invariably, however, they begin with a *transgression* of some kind, either refusal of social mores or customs, civil disobedience, or simple acts that arise from the problems of everyday life which push someone into unwilling or unwitting conflict with the state.

The 18th and 19th centuries gave us the anti-slavery movement, the first social movements of the modern world. The 20th century gave us the Peace Movement, the great Civil Rights Movement, the unstoppable Women's Liberation Movement, and ... they are now innumerable. None of these movements overthrew a government. But they *did* change the world.

This is not the place to give advice on how to build a social movement, any more than it is the place for advice on building a party. But the great movements of the twentieth century show us that activism can achieve social change. Taking account of this must be a precondition for any – Heaven help us! – more ambitious project.

Revolutionary socialists have a word for those who advocate for activism to be oriented towards social movements rather than parties – movementism. I add to what I have already said only by saying that the builders of revolutionary

parties should only *hope* that their parties transform themselves into social movements. Nothing would better mark the success of their project than that.

### Conclusion

There is a relative, though obvious, truth to the notion of ‘prefiguration’. Doing the right thing is generative, but what the ‘right thing to do’ is very much depends on the conditions at the time. Practices that lead to failure and disorganisation are generative only of more failure and disorganisation.

Practices that are successful here and now are not necessarily successful or appropriate in other times and places.

I have shown that the two main paradigms of ‘world-historical’ activism fail because they base their activity on remote aims beyond the horizon of what can be foreseen and judge their success by metrics that are self-serving.

In the next chapter I will outline very briefly how those of us who are motivated by ‘world-historical’ ideals can realise our ideals in the here and now in a way that is genuinely generative. The chapter will be brief, because I have already said everything that can be said outside the concrete situation to which you are responding. All that remains is to outline the conditions under which a person’s actions can really make a difference in the world.

Socialism has to be grasped as an *ethic*, in particular, as the ethic of solidarity. If someone is struggling, they deserve your support, and your support must be given, if at all, under *their* direction, not yours. Solidarity is good here and now, and it is generative. To determine the meaning of solidarity in any given circumstance requires phronesis. Solidarity has to be interpreted in the light of the principle that ‘the good life for man is spent seeking the good life for man’ and sometimes solidarity is simply out of reach.

Under what conditions will solidarity become the universal principle of social life? Hard to say at the moment.

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