

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein (ed), *Social Sciences for an Other Politics: Women Theorizing Without Parachutes*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN: 978-3-319-47775-6 (cloth); ISBN: 978-3-319-47776-3 (ebook)

In a time of social, political, economic and environmental change there is a pressing need for new ways of thinking/being/doing/researching that address the prefigurative nature of politics. In *Social Sciences for an Other Politics: Women Theorizing Without Parachutes*, Ana Cecilia Dinerstein has brought together a collection of radical feminist thinkers who have chosen to share stories of hopeful worlds that affirm life. According to Dinerstein, theory as-we-know-it cannot fully explain the types of radical subjects, social movements and politics that are emerging to confront and embody the possibility of thinking/being/doing/researching other. The book addresses what it means to practice radical geography in the here and now; exploring how we might be open to possibility, practice “experiential critique” (p.3) and develop a language from “concrete praxis” (p.2).

This ambitious book is an edited collection of ten short chapters written by women scholar-activists who demonstrate the power of prefigurative politics grown from “concrete praxis” and an exploration of possibility. Dinerstein opens the book in Part I, “Epistemological Openings”, by arguing for a new “radical subject” that is “*at once* prefigurative, decolonial, ethical, plural, communal and democratic” (p.4). The critical theory advocated by the book is hopeful and open to possibility. In introducing each chapter we are provided with an overview of the breadth of theorising that moves beyond conventional approaches and leads the editor to claim they are theorizing “without parachutes” or the safety of conventional theory.

A key example of this thinking is provided in Chapter 2, “Learning Hope: An Epistemology of Possibility for Advanced Capitalist Society”, where Sarah Amsler asks how we learn hope and what learning hope enables. In this chapter Amsler draws on the work of critical theorists such as Ernst Bloch to explore movements of hope in times of hopelessness. Amsler reveals how in learning hope there is also a process of unlearning that decolonises and challenges ways of approaching theories of radical

change and direct action. Hopelessness, writes Amsler, is a consequence of our inability to imagine alternative realities. By focusing on the politics of educational systems in England, Amsler demonstrates how hope can be learnt, drawing on three methods from Bloch to reveal how the “not”, “not-yet” and “nothing” can be distinguished; how concrete utopias can be recognised and reproduced; and how diverse anti-hegemonic scales and forms of revolution can be identified. Amsler locates the sites of hope in many places: in experiments of doing education differently; in feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration that can help us learn other ways of being/doing and thinking; and in the seeds of resistance waiting to germinate on the ground of inaction.

By far one of the most daring chapters of this book is Chapter 3, “Decolonising Critique: From Prophetic Negation to Prefigurative Affirmation” by Sara Motta. In it Motta faces the negativity and violence evident in the work of Slavoj Žižek in order to propose an alternative practice of critique, one that embraces the “storyteller” as opposed to the “Prophet”. Motta argues that theorists like Žižek adopt the “figure of the prophet”, which is based on the “logics of coloniality”, and reproduces the “coloniality of knowing-subjectivity” (p.36), therefore ignoring the voices of colonised peoples, particularly women of colour. In response, Motta artfully draws on the figure of the storyteller to reveal how narratives can be used in theorising to decolonise “knowing-subjectivity” and embrace multiplicity. By approaching critique as a storyteller, “collective and critical readings of the world” (p.42) are conducted through dialogue revealing its prefigurative possibility. This chapter is daring not just because Motta confronts negative critique, but because she does so with an emotional, nurturing, collective ethics of love embodied in the figure of the storyteller. Thus, by evoking the storyteller, Motta reclaims the practice of critique with an affirmative embrace.

In Chapter 4, “Denaturalising Society: Concrete Utopia and the Prefigurative Critique of Political Economy”, we see a surprising re-reading of Marx’s critique of political economy. In this chapter, Dinerstein reveals how the work of Marx can assist us in engaging with the “concrete” nature of utopia in the here and now, a task that is

vital for scholars wishing to engage with prefiguration. Drawing on Ernst Bloch, Dinerstein explores how a hopeful reading of Marx can help us “understand indigenous struggles for self-determination” (p.57), arguing that concrete utopias will grow and be enunciated in the face of capital. Indeed, engagement with abstract utopia and waiting for the revolution has only led us to fantasise about how we could be living (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

In Part II, the focus of the discussion shifts to the theme of “The (Re)production of Life”. We move from an engagement with hope and prefiguration, to an exploration of other ways of approaching gender and development, commons and *natureculture*. In Chapter 5, “Transgressing Gender and Development: Rethinking Economy Beyond ‘Smart Economics’”, Suzanne Bergeron provides a different reading of the mainstream gender initiatives of international development organisations. Whilst acknowledging the critiques of these programs as neoliberal and capitalist, Bergeron reads them for difference (Gibson-Graham, 2006), revealing the multiple ways people are practicing economy in an era of “smart economics”. Bergeron shows how those who advocate and critique the “smart economics” approach to gender reproduce the dominance of capitalism. Instead, an approach that sees beyond the dominance of capitalism is presented as an alternative that enables the “recognition of care, solidarity and economic diversity [that] might provide ways for imagining and doing development otherwise” (p.74). By being open to diversity and possibility, the hopeful stories of care and subversion can be seen.

The importance of the concept of *natureculture* in an age of climate change is explored by Francesca Zunino Harper in Chapter 7, “Talking about Nature: Ecolinguistics and the *Natureculture* Paradigm”. Harper argues that the concept of *natureculture* provides a way for us to holistically approach how we think about and conduct research into “social, cultural and environmental complexity” (p.93). According to Harper, in order to challenge and rethink the binary between social and environmental problems, the concept of *natureculture* produces an alternative paradigm that is counterhegemonic and assists us in transforming society from below.

Harper positions natureculture as part of hope movements and “as part of the art of organising hope”, or for hope (p. 101).

The theme of making visible continues in Chapter 6, “Producing the Common and Reproducing Life: Keys Towards Rethinking *the Political*” by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Lucia Linsalata and Mina Lorena Navarro Trujillo. In this chapter, the authors question how wealth and social life can be produced outside of capitalism. They draw on the work of Silvia Federici to explore the meaning of “the political”, explaining that it is:

the capacity of human beings to impress a more or less stable and unique shape to our sociality; to mould our social organisation, giving form, content and meaning to all kinds of social relations of interdependence or work and enjoyment; these relations are what allow the reproduction of our existence. (p.81)

According to Aguilar and colleagues, capital homogenises life, which is subsumed to make profit. They argue that by focusing on “the common” we can see beyond and destabilise the dominance of capitalism. They explore how the common is collectively produced in a way that reproduces life through interdependence, cooperation and what I would term “mutual aid”. They argue that life cannot be contained by capital; rather, the common collectively reproduces life. Through focusing on the common we are able to recognise the possibility for social transformation (p.90).

The final section of this book presents three chapters on the theme of “Social Movements and Prefigurative Politics”. In Chapter 8, “The Prefigurative Is Political: On Politics Beyond ‘The State’”, Emily Brissette draws on the example of Occupy Wall Street to explore the transformative possibilities of prefigurative politics. Brissette begins by providing setting the scene of Occupy Wall Street, outlining conventional approaches to defining social movements and the state. Brissette argues that these understandings of the state and social movements restrict how we might recognise the prefigurative potential of Occupy and other transformative social

movements that do not neatly fit conventional social movement theories. Instead, an alternative definition is proposed that has a broader definition of politics that encapsulates and make space for the prefigurative by recognising it as political. Brissette argues that the “prefigurative could be seen as the heart of politics” (p.115) that presents a concrete vision for life in the here and now. Prefigurative politics are where social movements are constituted beyond the state and they “instantiate faith in the possibility of a transformed world and embody the courage to (en)act otherwise” (p.117).

Continuing with the theme of social movements and prefigurative politics, Marianne Maeckelbergh challenges conventional understandings of prefigurative politics in Chapter 9, “The Prefigurative Turn: The Time and Place of Social Movement Practice”. Maeckelbergh argues that prefiguration is a complex process, and that it is difficult to determine when it is complete in order to deem particular movements successful due to the “conflation of ends and means” (p.123). The false binary created between instrumental/strategic action and prefigurative politics is problematic as Maeckelbergh shows in the examples of movements in Greece, Spain and the US (Oakland, California, and Occupy Wall Street). Maeckelbergh reveals the connections between prefiguration and instrumental change arguing that prefigurative politics are temporal, experimental and embodied. The spaces of prefiguration are multiple spaces of action, inaction, protest and planning which are difficult to separate from instrumental political practice (p.124). Maeckelbergh addresses the complexity of determining when a movement has succeeded in replacing the “existing political and economic order” (p.131), and therefore asks, how long should we wait?

In the final chapter of the book, “Rethinking Social Movements with Societies in Movement”, Marina Sitrin argues that we are in need of a new ways of theorising social movements that take into consideration what is happening on the ground. Social movements have expanded beyond conventional definitions in terms of their “consistency of form, politics, scope and scale” (p.136). Sitrin contends that the focus on “protest frameworks” and “contentious politics” needs to be expanded in order to address the horizontal and prefigurative elements of social movements. Drawing on

ethnographic observations of movements in Spain, Mexico (the Zapatistas) and Argentina, Sitrin suggests approaching social movements as “societies in movement” due to the way these movements relate to state and government, which is often different from that prescribed by social movement theory. Sitrin reiterates that social movements do not necessarily begin by being “anti” something or petitioning government in expected ways. Sitrin closes the book by arguing for us to listen to the people in movement, and “with them create new ways of thinking about, and reflecting upon what is taking place” (p. 147).

At the close of the book I was left feeling hopeful as I was encouraged to see and value the diversity of movements and voices working to change our world through spectacular protest and “small acts” (Horton and Kraftl, 2009). Throughout the book I was encouraged to recognise the prefigurative and think differently about politics and utopia as something that is in process in the here and now of the everyday—akin to the concept of “everyday utopias” developed by Davina Cooper (2013) and the diverse economies project led by J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008). Yet I am left yearning for something that draws together the diverse contributions and hints at where the next hopeful worlds may be made visible. Perhaps it is because we have been gifted a suite of ways to think differently about current and past social movements that I question where these other politics might lead us next. This daring book will therefore be of significant interest to the readers of *Antipode* who are enmeshed in the worlds of social movements and concrete utopias as writers, thinkers and practitioners.

References

- Cooper D (2013) *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*.
Durham: Duke University Press
- Gibson-Graham J K (2006) *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press

Gibson-Graham J K (2008) Diverse economies: Performative practices for “other worlds”. *Progress in Human Geography* 32(5):613-632

Horton J and Kraftl P (2009) Small acts, kind words and “not too much fuss”: Implicit activism. *Emotion, Space and Society* 2(1):14-23

Miriam Williams

Department of Geography and Planning

Macquarie University

miriam.williams@mq.edu.au

August 2017