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The end of alternative organising (just as we were getting to know it)? A conjunctural analysis of the prefiguration terrain

Matthew Wilson

School of Management, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

ABSTRACT

The last fifteen years have seen a rise in interest in alternative organising within CMS. Although this work covers a diverse world of organisational forms, this academic interest is commonly connected to the prefigurative turn in social movements. Yet the momentum of such movements has recently stalled, and academics and activists are increasingly rejecting prefiguration. This shift in the radical imaginary is hugely important, but CMS scholars appear to have overlooked it. Here, I argue that CMS has too often followed a case-study approach, and that as a discipline it should pay closer attention to the wider landscape of radical praxis. I suggestStuart Hall'' use of conjunctural analysis is useful for understanding alternative organisations and their possible futures. I offer my own conjunctural perspective on the state of prefiguration, and suggest some ways in which we might develop work which can help inform debates about the future direction of radical politics.

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Introduction

> It is hard to know, sometimes, just which conjuncture one is in. (Hall 1990, 59)
> Are we witnessing the end of horizontalism? (Nunes 2021, 16)

In the last two decades, there has been a considerable growth in interest in alternative forms of organising within critical management studies (CMS) (Cheney et al. 2014; Langmead 2017; Parker and Parker 2017; Phillips and Jeanes 2018). This research has tended to explore case studies of *individual organisations or projects* – cooperatives, ecological banks, community growing schemes, etc. – which in some way function against or outside the norms of capitalist society (Gibson-Graham 2006a). These projects are often called prefigurative, a term used to denote a broad political strategy focused on building in the present elements of the future world we might like to see (Schiller-Merkens 2024). As important as such work is, in the following article I argue that CMS has focused too heavily on these *organisation-level* analyses; as a result, it has overlooked questions about the broader political cultures which influence these organisations, leading to significant gaps in our understanding. I suggest that to better understand and help alternative organisations, we need to develop a clearer picture of these wider cultures with which they are always – explicitly or otherwise – connected. Whilst widening our analytic scope could take many theoretical and methodological paths, I introduce the idea of *conjunctural analysis* as an especially productive approach. Looking at the broader political terrain through a conjunctural lens, I argue that CMS scholars have failed to pay attention to recent changes within the sphere of radical politics and social movements –

CONTACT Matthew Wilson matthew.wilson@swansea.ac.uk

changes which, I argue, will have a considerable impact on the world of alternative organising. In this paper, I highlight and discuss this specific change in radical political culture, but in doing so, the paper ultimately asks how CMS might engage with shifts in wider political cultures through the development of its own conjunctural analyses.

It is well known that prefigurative social movements such as Occupy! were influential for the development of related fields of alternative organisational praxis, and for academic research into that praxis (Gibson-Graham 2006b, viii; Pickles 2012, 544). Yet since the collapse of the Occupy! movement, and the related 'movement of the squares', prefigurative *social movements* (though by no means all prefigurative *praxis*) have all but disappeared; crucially, prefiguration itself has come under sustained critique from many thinkers and activists on the left – many of whom once looked favourably upon it (Srnicek and Williams 2016). Although by no means absolute, there has been a significant shift in the radical imaginary, which is likely to have a far-reaching impact on the form and scope of alternative organising. Despite the importance of this shift, I believe CMS scholars have been too slow to acknowledge and engage with it (Wilson 2024a). In a recent article, Simone Schiller-Merkens, for example, states that '[p]refiguration is widespread in progressive, left-wing movements' (2024, 5), whilst Martin Parker suggests prefiguration is 'a fashionable term in social movements and amongst academic commentators' (2023, 901). Importantly, the views of these academics are far from isolated and are, in fact, indicative of a culture within CMS which has failed to keep abreast of changes on the ground. I will argue here that prefiguration is not nearly as widespread or as fashionable as it was fifteen years ago. Such changes to the broader political imaginary of radical politics will have far-reaching, though often difficult to identify, impacts on the world of alternative organising. We therefore urgently need to develop a much better understanding of these political cultures and how they shape and influence those alternative organisations. I will also suggest there is a role now to be played in helping push back against this recent shift in radical politics, making a renewed case for prefigurative and alternative organising. Ultimately, I argue we should be pushing at our disciplinary boundaries and engaging in what I suggest is a central political debate about the future of left organising.

It is important to be clear at this stage that my argument is about the *cultures* of radical organising – their imaginaries (Citton 2025) and common-senses (Crehan 2011; Wilson 2014); none of these cultures are simple or homogenous, even within a single organisation, let alone a social movement or the broad world of radical politics. However, this should not dissuade us from considering the extent to which certain ideas can be especially influential within certain political cultures at certain times. Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, I suggest that CMS research would benefit from adopting a *conjunctural* perspective in order to hold the nuance, complexity, and diversity of these cultures whilst also spotting and exploring certain trends and possible directions of travel. Doing so in relation to the present radical imaginary leads us to acknowledge and consider the decline of prefigurative social movements and of prefiguration as an influential political concept.

Thinking conjuncturally was, for Hall, a way to examine any element of the social world, but always doing so by asking how our subject was connected to or separated from, influenced, strengthened or weakened by, the wider social context within which it is embedded. Informed by Gramsci's hegemonic thinking (Gregg 2006; Hall 2017), Hall argued that the social world was always assembled of many different fields – economic and political powers, traditional and radical cultures, institutions, the media, and so on – and that at any one moment, certain fields would *condense*, or come together, to form a particular conjuncture. Conjunctures, or conjunctural moments, may be durable and far-reaching, or unstable and limited in scope. What mattered for Hall was that we always keep an eye on such conjunctural formations to understand their impact now and to consider the directions in which a present conjuncture might be moving (Hall 2018). I argue here that the prefigurative turn constituted one such conjuncture within the radical imaginary, but one which is now in a process of change, with an unknown future ahead. As such, I argue that CMS research would benefit from considering alternative/prefigurative praxis with a conjunctural perspective in mind, and that at least some of our work should move from a 'case-study' approach to one more integrated with the wider terrains of radical social movements and their respective imaginaries.

To demonstrate both the general ideas of conjunctural thinking and the specifics of the current radical conjuncture, I offer my own conjunctural analysis in the latter half of the paper. Like much conjunctural work, the analysis offered here is broad and speculative (Grossberg 2019); it considers a complex and ongoing transformation of the political imaginary and considers how this transformation *may* come to impact the dispersed practices of alternative organising. In other words, this paper should be understood principally as a call to pay attention to this shifting political dynamic rather than as a fully-formed assessment of that shift.

My argument is not to suggest CMS ceases to consider alternative organisations as such; rather, I suggest that bringing a conjunctural perspective to CMS would provide a valuable lens through which we might better understand the expanding 'library of alternative[s]' (Parker and Parker 2017) which many scholars are developing. As well as helping us better understand alternative organisations, conjunctural thinking also looks to the future, not only to predict but also, ideally, actively shape it. Following this performative feature of conjunctural analyses, and connecting it to the recent wave of performativity within CMS (Shanahan 2024) I argue that the current radical conjuncture is one which is in need of a new imaginary capable of holding different left traditions in a more productive relationship. Adopting a conjunctural approach within CMS opens up space for us to consider the micro- and macro-levels on which such imaginaries are performatively constructed, and provides the understanding needed for our own performative work to connect with other radical and progressive communities. I, therefore, suggest that we might consider not only how we help individual alternative organisations and networks (Leca and Barin Cruz 2021) but also how we might insert ourselves into contemporary political debates and 'explicitly and intentionally create new atmospheres and processes to "convoke" *the radical imagination*' (Khasnabish and Haiven 2015, 18, my emphasis). I consider in the Discussion a number of avenues for further research which might either adopt, or simply be more informed by, a conjunctural-level analysis.

I first turn to a review of work within CMS on alternative organising and performativity. I then provide an overview of conjunctural thinking, before setting out my own conjunctural analysis of the radical political terrain. In the final section, I consider some of the ramifications that the current radical landscape has for alternative organising and how we might help (re)construct a radical alternative imaginary.

The current terrain of CMS[1]

Alternative organising

CMS scholars have often asked how we can make our work politically useful (Contu, 2018). One increasingly common answer is to move beyond critiquing those forms of management and organisation we reject, and to explore 'alternative organisations' with which we have some political affinity. Yet it wasn't so long ago that Valerie Fournier complained that 'if one looks at the field of organisation studies specifically, one may be forgiven for thinking that there aren't many alternatives to capitalist corporations' (Fournier 2002, 189). The picture today is vastly improved, and the 'library of alternative case studies' which Parker and Parker called on CMS scholars to create (2017, 1382) is increasingly well-stocked (Husted 2020).

In the second edition of their seminal *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)*, printed ten years after it first appeared in 1996, J.K Gibson-Graham (2006b) acknowledge this academic trend towards studying alternative organising (which occurred in many academic disciplines at the same time). Importantly for the arguments I want to make here, in the updated Introduction, they note that

> [o]ne of the spurs of academic interest in economic alternatives and experiments is arguably the new political imaginary that has emerged from the World Social Forum and the performatively designated 'movement of movements'. (2006b, viii)

In short, this rise of prefiguratively-oriented social movements and forms of praxis, most famously articulated by Occupy! (Taylor 2013), helped popularise this 'new political imaginary', which held that the building of new, democratic organisational forms and practices – commonly referred to as prefiguration – could constitute a viable strategy for radical political action; these social movements were hugely important for the growth of prefigurative praxis, and have also 'been a crucial stimulus' (Pickles 2012, 544) for the growing scholarly interest in it (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012, 5).

Within CMS, this interest has spread out to examine all manner of alternative organisations from a diverse range of methodological and theoretical perspectives, and it is impossible to do justice to this diversity here; however, I want to draw attention to one especially common feature of this work, which is the almost exclusive focus on individual organisations as the site of research. In a much cited paper, Parker and Parker note that it 'seems to us that the most obvious way to engage with larger scale forms of social change […] is through the documentation and elaboration of alternative organizations' (2017, 1375). It would seem that most CMS scholars concur, with work on alternative organising overwhelmingly pursued at the micro-level (see, for example, De Coster and Zanoni 2023; King and Land 2018; Vidaillet and Bousalham 2020). Such work is a necessary corrective to the failure to consider alternative organisation(s) which Fournier highlighted (2002). However, there is an important question now as to whether we need to do more than examine these organisations as isolated spaces of research and begin examining in greater detail the wider contexts which inform their praxis.

As the editors of a Management special issue argue, whilst the focus on alternative *organisations* has been welcomed, the 'broader discussion outside the boundaries of the 'organizational forms' that alternatives may take and the consequences of these has received very little attention' (Barin Cruz, Aquino Alves, and Delbridge 2017, 325). As well as focusing on particular organisations, we need to consider '[t]he relations and connections that those "alternative organizational forms" establish' (Barin Cruz, Aquino Alves, and Delbridge 2017, 325). In particular, they note the importance of 'highlight[ing] how forms of cooperative organization are extremely dependent on a strong articulation with social movements' (Barin Cruz, Aquino Alves, and Delbridge 2017, 330). Yet, as Parker notes, 'academics interested in management and organization have [unsurprisingly] tended to concentrate on questions of management and organization' (2017, 418); as a result, CMS has in large part failed to ask broader questions about 'ecosystem changes' (2017, 418). Although studying organisations *and* the wider contexts within which they function are by no means mutually exclusive, I would argue that the dominant position within CMS has been to think about *organisation* by studying *an* organisation (or a small number of connected organisations); crucially, such thinking has neglected the 'ecosystems' within which they exist.

Of course, few would disagree that 'the need to adapt […] activities to […] *political context[s]* is a vital component of a viable prefigurative strategy' (Esper et al. 2017, 688 my emphasis; Learmonth et al. 2016, 252). And most work on alternative organising acknowledges its relation to those 'dominant social norms' (Reedy, King, and Coupland 2016, 1568) which are a well-acknowledged problem for prefigurative praxis (Cornforth 1995; Diamantopoulos 2012; Langmead 2017; Reinecke 2018). As De Coster and Zanoni note, 'many grassroots organizations struggle to stay true to their own values and practices and to remain in existence, due to the multiple pressures they undergo to align with the institutions constituting society around them' (De Coster and Zanoni 2023, 940). Likewise, Just et. al. note that 'alternative always stands in relation to a dominant order, against which it is defined' (Just, De Cock, and Schaefer 2021, 92). Yet such recognitions of a wider context consistently overlook the question as to how alternatives are also defined by other social terrains, including other spheres of alternative or radical praxis themselves. The wider context, in other words, appears to be exclusively, if implicitly, understood in terms of neoliberal hegemony; but what about the context of the wider radical imaginary? To date, CMS has had all too little to say about this.

Of particular concern is the extent to which CMS work is being undertaken under the increasingly problematic assumption that the world of prefigurative and alternative organising is alive and well – that it is only those 'dominant social norms' we need to worry about when we consider the implications of wider contexts. As we have seen, claims are still being made that prefiguration remains central to the

radical imaginary – a claim which sits comfortably within the present common-sense of CMS, but which raises concerns about how connected CMS scholars are to the present political landscape. If we want to be truly engaged, it is time for CMS to acknowledge that the common sense within our discipline that prefiguration is still fashionable or widespread within social movements needs to be updated. Fortunately, I want to argue that acknowledging this gives our work more, not less, relevance. Although we can, and should, respond to this in diverse ways, I suggest that CMS scholars can help *perform* a radical political imaginary more conducive to prefigurative and alternative praxis.

Performativity

One response to the question of how we engage with alternative organising has been to pursue a strategy of performativity, helping alternative organisations bring their postcapitalist values into existence (Barin Cruz, Aquino Alves, and Delbridge 2017; Just, De Cock, and Schaefer 2021; Parker and Parker 2017; Shanahan 2024). Thinking performatively has helped encourage scholars to move away from critique and towards an active support for political organisers who share a commitment to moving beyond capitalism. As with work on alternative organising, CMS approaches to performativity have been diverse in terms of methodology and focus (Cabantous et al. 2016; King and Land 2018; Learmonth et al. 2016; Leca and Barin Cruz 2021; Spicer, Alvesson, and Kärreman 2016), but they have all fundamentally attempted to critically engage with 'the process of social reproduction and the gaps within that process that open space for social change' (Shanahan 2024, 12). However, we cannot fully understand, let alone influence, these processes of '*social* reproduction' without a clear understanding of the social contexts within which alternative organisations function. A few scholars have acknowledged this; as Leca et al. note, thinking performatively must take 'into account the context in which actors undertake a critical performative project' (2021, 904). Likewise, for Esper et al., even when our research is primarily conducted on the level of individual organisations, we must keep in mind their 'connections to broader social and political dynamics' (Esper et al. 2017, 675).

De Coster and Zanoni also stress the need for performative activism to pay keen attention to the discourses within which it is practised. They note that 'a subject's emergence is always regulated by institutional frames – or 'terms of appearance' – that make the subject 'legible' in the eyes of others in specific ways' (De Coster and Zanoni 2023, 942). Yet once again they do not consider recent shifts in the radical imaginary (as I have argued is the norm within CMS, they conduct their research through an analysis of one individual organisation), and focus on the extent to which 'neoliberal capitalism' (ibid.) impacts prefigurative praxis: they therefore fail to ask how what is 'legible' or acceptable for those trying to change the world is shaped not only by neoliberalism but also by a radical imaginary which is becoming increasingly sceptical about the value of prefigurative and alternative organising. Whilst this paper fails to acknowledge these important changes within radical politics, it does make mention of prefigurative politics' 'incompatibility with contentious [what I will call *vertical*] politics' (942), whilst also calling for a reconciliation between the two. This is a welcome step in the right direction, and in the Discussion section, I suggest we think more explicitly about how we can help perform a new political imaginary which might help with this reconciliation. But for such a project to be successful, we need a much deeper understanding of the current divide within the left which is in need of being reconciled: what are the reasons for the seeming 'incompatibility' which De Coster and Zanoni refer to, and what might reconciliation look like in practical and theoretical terms? We also need a clearer understanding of how political traditions are at times divided, at others reconciled; in other words, we need to better understand the process of conjunctural formations and the role they play in guiding political praxis.

Conjunctural analysis: subjects, theories, and methods

Having outlined the gaps within CMS and stressed the need for research that integrates examples of alternative organising within a broader political terrain, I now present an overview of conjunctural

analysis, with a particular emphasis on its adoption by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Hall's work, I believe, offers a powerful framework through which we can begin to reappraise the political cultures of alternative organising. Encompassing both theory and methodology, conjunctural analysis suggests a certain way of looking at the world and a certain way of thinking about and engaging with what we see. That way of looking at the world is principally through the twin notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony (Carroll 2007; Gramsci 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In short, a hegemony is

> the process by which a ruling class makes its domination appear natural by installing the presuppositions of its own worldview as the common sense of society as a whole. (Fraser 2019, 9–10)

Conjunctural analyses constitute attempts to understand the ever-shifting hegemonic composition(s) of our times, or, just as importantly, the parallel compositions of any potential counter-hegemonic movements. Such analyses therefore provide 'a systematic way to map shifts in the political landscape'(Gregg 2006, 56). A conjuncture, or conjunctural moment, is constituted by a certain coming together – an 'articulation', for Laclau and Mouffe (2001) or 'condensing', for Hall (1990) – of multiple elements or social forces – discursive, institutional, economic, cultural, legal, material – at times in major and other times minor ways. A hegemonic bloc is a form of conjuncture, but not all conjunctures become established hegemonies. The task of analysing conjunctural moments is necessarily iterative, working back and forth between different elements of a particular time and place; it asks, repeatedly, what is relevant, what must be included in this diagnosis, but does so recognising that this is an on-going process, and one which we must conduct 'without the solace of closure' (Hall 2018, 229).

Indeed, conjunctures are contingent and shifting, and so any analysis of them must be equally flexible, open-ended, speculative, and, ideally, performative; conjunctural analyses are intended not merely to describe a particular social context but also, in doing so, to influence its future direction. Whilst analysing the conjunctural terrains of *established* hegemonic blocs is of obvious importance, Hall's most incisive and important work was developed in his analyses of *emerging* conjunctural formations; he was amongst the first to understand the extent to which Margaret Thatcher was ushering in a new era of right-wing populism which deviated considerably from previous iterations of capitalism (Hall 1990). As I shall argue below, it is this willingness to speculate on the future direction of political and social terrains which gives conjunctural analysis its vital political edge. Equally important were Hall's analyses of the left's failure to develop a viable counter-hegemonic conjuncture; whilst such work is still understood as constituting a conjunctural form of analysis, it in fact often addresses what we might call *disjunctures* (Highmore 2020), where political positions and social forces which might share a common enemy – such as capitalism – nonetheless fail to form into a sufficiently coherent bloc through which to challenge it.

A further feature of Hall's work, and conjunctural analysis more broadly, is the insistence on 'using whatever conceptual tools are necessary' (Gilbert 2008, 7), alongside a refusal to 'worship' theory (Grossberg 2019). Our use of conjunctural analysis should never be reducible to Hall's approach (or anyone else's), but must be seen as a lived and changeable application of ideas. Equally, it must be remembered that there are no fundamental or absolute features which can be said to constitute a conjuncture; rather, it is a conceptual tool through which to analyse the constant making and remaking of the social order.

As such, the methodologies used for conjunctural analyses depend on the kind of conjunctural moment we are exploring and the kinds of data we might need to answer our particular questions. In their conjunctural work, Little and Winch code and analyse over ten million words to explore the conjunctural moment constituted by the new patriarchal ideologies of Silicon Valley (Little and Winch 2021). Elsewhere, Elaine Gan takes her cue from 'a single grain of rice', arguing that to 'follow [it] is to wander through complex tangles of lifeways, histories, and geographies' (2017, 87). Hall himself analysed an endless array of cultural artefacts – political speeches, the press and mainstream media, academic theory and popular culture, amongst many other things – to explore and explain the conjunctural terrains which interested him.

The real contribution which Hall's work can make to CMS is the analytical scope integral to any piece of conjunctural analysis, regardless of its particular subject. Conjunctural analysis is about including the wider context, even when analysing the particular. As Gilbert notes, Hall 'understood this approach as steering a course between the two extremes of […] overly abstract speculation [or] an excessive particularism' (Gilbert 2019, 5). However, Hall

> was careful not to imply that all – or even most – [intellectual work] should be seeking to map an entire 'totality' of social relations at a given moment. But he did insist on the crucial importance of the question 'what does this have to do with everything else?' when examining any phenomenon, however minute. (Gilbert 2019, 5)

Likewise, I am not suggesting that CMS abandon its research into individual organisations, but that it does so with a keener awareness of the wider contexts within which they operate. In the following section, I present a conjunctural analysis of the terrains of contemporary radical politics. I argue that a significant shift has taken place in recent years, with the radical imaginary increasingly moving away from the kinds of prefigurative discourses which inspired much of the current interest in alternative organising. What I have to say in this regard is not especially contentious, and has been recognised and discussed in other disciplines (Blakeley 2020; Wilson 2023); yet it has been almost entirely overlooked within CMS. To develop my own conjunctural perspective, I draw on a range of academic and activist sources, as well as my own long-standing engagement with both previous prefigurative social movements and contemporary alternative organising. Given that the aim of this paper is to introduce conjunctural analysis as well as offer an example of such an analysis, what follows is necessarily brief and focuses on a broad terrain of radical left politics to demonstrate how the radical imaginary is shifting away from prefiguration. Future research could help develop multiple conjunctural perspectives pertinent to specific areas of alternative organising.

The current conjuncture: the prefigurative turn …

There is broad agreement that the 1990s saw something of a prefigurative turn in the political landscape, a turn which led to a new 'common-sense' (Crehan 2011; Wilson 2014) within the radical left, characterised by prefigurative and horizontal – as opposed to electoral and vertical – forms of organising (Maeckelbergh 2009; Srnicek and Williams 2016). For a while, it seemed to many that the politics of the hierarchical political party and the state had been abandoned in favour of more direct forms of political activism (Graeber 2002; Holloway 2010). To understand this prefigurative turn, it helps to briefly consider the complex and often fraught history of radical politics more broadly.

A (very) brief history of prefiguration

Of course, the ideas and practices now commonly associated with the prefigurative turn had all been seen before (Rothschild-Whitt 1979). In fact, this movement between prefigurative and electoral common-senses mirrors 'some of the key debates within the left that have characterized the twentieth-century' (Bailey 2021, 180). The history of the left is one of an ever-present internal debate, at times stepping over into outright conflict. In 1872, the first Congress of the International Workingmen's Association (often known as the First International) was held at Geneva, and the decisions taken there helped define the common sense of socialism for generations. The relationship between anarchists and Marxists was already souring, but here they came to a head, with the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin famously being expelled. Well understood as a 'decisive moment in the acrimonious schism […] between Anarchism and Marxism' (White and Williams 2012, 1629), there is much more to this event, and what it represents, than simple disagreements in political theory. Whilst the victory of Marx was indeed in important respects decisive, shaping leftist discourse in ways which successfully marginalised the prefigurative and horizontal visions which were being articulated by anarchists, the debates settled institutionally at the First International have never gone away.

The events of 1968 are commonly alluded to as a key turning point in this narrative, but leftist history is scattered with moments where the vertical (often authoritarian) articulations of Marxist communism came head-to-head with the horizontal, prefigurative visions commonly associated with anarchism: the crushing of the Makhnovites and of the Krondstadt uprising, the betrayal of the Spanish (and International) anarchists during the Spanish civil war, and the invasion of Hungary in 1956 are just some of the more well-known examples of this divisive and bitter conflict (Katsiaficas 1997; Kempton 2007; Schmidt and van der Watt 2009). This history continues to shape the present intellectually (Parker 2023, 903) but it also has an equally though often overlooked emotional dimension. Whilst it might be a stretch to say the anarchists occupying Wall Street felt the pain of their political ancestors, it is by no means hyperbole to talk, as Rodrigo Nunes does, of a deep organisational 'trauma' within the left (Nunes 2021) – a trauma which Stuart Christie captures wonderfully in his account of fist-fights between working-class Glaswegians of the 1960s arising as a direct result of disagreements about the Soviet response to the civil war in Spain more than two decades before – disagreements which had created 'a political sore which would never heal' (Christie 2005, 48).

If the partial crushing of horizontalism – intellectually and physically – has left its scars, there is a happier history which is also worth briefly recalling. The existence of such conflicts points to a radical landscape from which the horizontal left was never fully erased, and in which, in fact, it was at times able to flourish: put simply, the fractious debates and occasionally bloody episodes noted above happened because there was something the authoritarian left felt compelled to silence. Indeed, there is a long, diverse and vibrant history of left struggle which foregrounded many of the political and organisational concerns which contemporary commentators have all-too-commonly – and incorrectly – framed as 'new' (Grubacic and Graeber 2004). The Provos of Amsterdam, the Autonomen of Germany, the wave of democratic and cultural activism that swept Europe and the States (and elsewhere) in the 60s and 70s (Katsiaficas 1997; Ross 2024), the feminist, civil rights and anti-war movements, radical environmental movements, and, of course, a cooperative movement that began before the First International and which continues to inspire millions today.

All this, and much more, can in differing ways be connected to the contemporary position of horizontal and prefigurative politics. And all of it, in its way, shapes not simply the rational and analytical ideas of the horizontal left, but also its common sense, its culture, and its affective sense of itself as *a movement*. As such, it has very real bearings on what I will suggest below is the current disjuncture within the left and the call by a growing number to reject prefiguration and return to a more verticalist common sense (Srnicek and Williams 2016).

The prefigurative turn

What happened in the 1990s and 2000s, then, was not in itself new; but it was a well-recognised process of, to use Hall's terminology, 'condensing', as these practices came to be explicitly understood and framed through the discourse of prefiguration, and as elements of *a diverse but coherent social movement*. Indeed, we might say a *prefigurative conjuncture* had emerged, as ideas borrowed from anarchism, feminism, DIY counter-cultures, the coop movement, poststructuralism and radical environmentalism (to name just some of the influences) were condensed into a new wave of political theory and action. This praxis took many forms, but was brought to the world's attention with the Battle of Seattle and the subsequent emergence of the 'movement of movements'. Growing and diversifying over the next decade or so, the prefigurative conjuncture culminated in the global Occupy! movement and the broader movement of the squares (Taylor 2013). The effects of this emerging conjuncture quickly spread beyond the social movements which helped develop and promote its earliest formations into a growing world of alternative organising (Gibson-Graham, 2003), although the ways in which these prefigurative social movements and the micro-practices of alternative organising connect in practice remain a considerably under-explored question (Kokkinidis 2015; Schiller-Merkens 2024; Wilson 2024a). Gibson-Graham, however, were clear that the

prefigurative trend within social movements played a crucial role in the growth of interest in alternative organising by the intellectual/academic world (Gibson-Graham 2006b, xii). Whilst by no means all academic work on alternative organising explicitly connects to the prefigurative turn, it is impossible to conceive of this growing academic interest without this shift in the political landscape (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021, 644). But then, over the course of just a few short years – roughly, between 2012 and 2015 – something happened within the prefigurative conjuncture; once coherent and 'condensed', it started to unravel and evaporate.

… and the electoral (re)turn

Since the demise of the Occupy! movement more than a decade ago, social movements have taken on a more complex and diverse character, with considerably less, and at times no emphasis on prefiguration. Indeed, there are good reasons to consider that prefiguration no longer holds the same degree of influence over the radical imaginary (in social movements and in wider discourse) that it once did. In short, it is less popular in practical terms and increasingly subjected to critique from otherwise 'friendly' quarters. Having dominated the radical landscape for a quarter of a century, the prefigurative turn is being challenged by influential leftist intellectuals, with concerns expressed about the extent to which these prefigurative movements, rather than building something which can stand against capitalism, have simply ushered in a culture of ineffectual, at times post-political, retreat.

It is increasingly common to find support for the view that

> it is prefiguration as such that does not work: the failure of Occupy and similar mobilizations in bringing about significant results shows the enduring value of robust, traditional organizations and of a direct engagement with political institutions. (Pellizzoni 2021, 4)

Negatively evoking Gibson-Graham's consistent calls 'to imagine and inhabit a world of economic possibility' (Gibson-Graham 2006a, ix), Dean bemoans the 'fetishization of the local' which, absent 'political power', offers 'just possibilities without possibility' (Dean 2015, 333). Not only are such localised strategies increasingly deemed ineffective (Sharzer 2012), but some now argue they are actually helping the neoliberal hegemony they hoped to oppose. For Dean, '[t]he Left has mimicked and repeated in its politics the fragmentation, localization, and pluralization crucial to neoliberalism's dismantling of the welfare state' (2015, 334). Such critics conclude that alternative praxis is far too vulnerable to 'neoliberal strategies of mobilising the creative energies, organisational capacities and situated problem-solving of alternative milieus for its own purposes' (Blühdorn and Deflorian 2021, 8; see also De Coster and Zanoni 2023 for an interesting and rare discussion of this within CMS). Within the fabrics of radical social movements and their related political imaginary (Citton 2025) there are multiple signs that 'we are now witnessing a growing current of disillusionment with the prefigurative approach' (Shanahan 2024, 2), which is being challenged, if not entirely replaced, by an 'electoral turn' (Gerbaudo 2017; Swann 2020, 145). As David Bailey notes:

> In the past decade we have seen a rapid shift in left circles – especially among those in the Global North-west – between what might be considered opposed left strategies. At the risk of caricaturing this shift, what started in 2011 with a commitment to 'change the world without taking power' had by 2015 moved into a plan for state focused left populism. (Bailey 2021, 175)

Since Occupy!, we have witnessed a number of developments which together help constitute this shift, with the creation of political parties out of the spaces opened up by social movements – most notably with Syriza and Podemos (de Nadal 2021; García Agustín and Briziarelli 2018; Ordóñez, Feenstra, and Franks 2018) – and various attempts to radicalise existing political parties – as we saw with Corbyn and Sanders in the UK and US, respectively (Blakeley 2020; Husted, Du Plessis, and Dahlman 2025; Worth 2019). As the climate crisis deepens, as the global economy continues to flounder, as war rages on in the usual – and in previously unimaginable – territories, and as

Trump's second-term looks to be even more brutal and destructive than the first, people are increasingly impatient for change. With such impatience comes a renewed interest in demands for the full force of the state to be used to tackle these and countless other crises (Gindin 2020). Conversely, there is a growing unwillingness to consider prefigurative praxis as being capable of providing an adequate response (Dean 2015; Srnicek and Williams 2016). What is important about such criticisms is that they are influencing social movements and political organising; crucially for CMS scholars, as I discuss below, we must also assume a wider impact, seeping out into the cultures of alternative organising.

What now, what next?

The electoral turn, however, has been far from definitive, with 'the rapid move between different positions suggest[ing] a fundamental uncertainty regarding the question of which route is most efficacious' (Bailey 2021, 179). Clearly, there are still a great many practices – cooperatives, grassroots growing projects, free universities, and many more examples we might cite – which are fundamentally prefigurative in their approach. The influence of prefiguration can still be witnessed in recent social movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter, which lean on ideas of horizontal organising and direct democracy rather than operating according to more hierarchical logics. But from a conjunctural perspective, this is to be expected. Indeed, anticipating that 'durable residues' will stick from one conjuncture to the next (Boggs 1995:x), it is all but inevitable that social movements which emerged in the 2010s would adopt certain features of those movements which preceded them; new conjunctural formations rarely emerge out of nowhere. Yet there are some fundamental differences between recent social movements and those of the late 19s90s and 2000s. For these older movements, prefiguration wasn't simply part of their organisational character; it was intrinsic to their political analysis and strategy (Maeckelbergh 2011). Prefiguration was central to the imaginary and common sense of the time. This is not the case with more recent movements, which apply prefiguration more as an ad hoc organisational approach than a guiding political philosophy. To the extent that these movements were influenced by their immediate predecessors, it is entirely possible – I would argue very likely – that this influence will begin to wane if the wider radical common-sense continues to shift in a more vertical direction. The question then becomes, what does – or might – this mean for the future of alternative organising?

Discussion: the current conjuncture – beyond and between the vertical and horizontal, the party and the prefigurative

In this final section, I discuss two broad themes which I suggest are worthy of our attention and which follow from the insights offered above. Firstly, I consider the impact that the present conjuncture has – and might come to have – on spaces of alternative organising; drawing on the work of Marc Schneiberg, I suggest that even when conducting research at the level of individual organisations, scholars can still consider the broader conjunctural terrain and its potential impacts on their subject. Secondly, I consider the ongoing debates between horizontal and vertical traditions, and argue that CMS is well-placed to not simply observe but performatively intervene in them, helping shape a radical imaginary which might help in the development of a new and more stable radical conjuncture.

The present conjuncture and its impact on alternative organising

> [C]o-operative movements do not stand alone. They tend to rise and fall with the ebb and tide of their extended social movement families. (Diamantopoulos 2012, 207)

Much has been said about the context of alternative organising in relation to the current hegemony – about the ways in which organisations such as cooperatives are forced to compete with capitalist

firms (Cheney et al. 2014; Cornforth 1995), or how the cultures and common-senses which predominate in capitalism impact on the subject positions of alternative organisers (Gibson-Graham 2006a; Rothschild-Whitt 1979). Passing references to the relationship between alternative organising and social movements are also commonplace. Yet remarkably little work has explicitly explored the question of how alternative organising has been shaped by those social movements or their broader counter-cultural contexts.

It should be obvious, however, that a shift from a prefigurative to electoral common-sense within the radical imaginary could have any number of consequences for alternative organising (Develtere 1992). Whilst it is impossible to know the full impact of this contemporary conjuncture on prefigurative praxis, work which explores historical relationships between alternative organisations and social movements offers a sense of what we might expect. Assessing the diffusion of organisational forms and ideas in the US in the early twentieth century in an implicitly conjunctural-level analysis, Schneiberg examines the ways in which the proliferation of cooperatives was connected to wider social movements (Schneiberg 2013; Schneiberg, King, and Smith 2008). Schneiberg provides a large amount of empirical evidence to demonstrate the extent to which 'movements [develop] political conditions for the diffusion of new organizational practices' (Schneiberg 2013, 673; see also Carrol 2010) by acting as 'bridges' and 'amplifiers' (Schneiberg 2013, 663) of cooperative ideas. Pointing to the 'conjunction of anti-corporate movements, corporate counter-mobilization, and the spread of cooperatives' (663), he argues:

> Anti-corporate forces support alternatives in various ways. They mobilize to block hostile legislation, weaken corporate combination, and secure enabling laws or regulations for new practices or forms of enterprise [… they] mobilize as political-cultural forces outside the state, engaging in framing contests, protests, and public debates to legitimate alternatives [and] they mobilize coalitions in markets to support alternatives and new enterprises by conducting their own boycotts against corporations, creating certification schemes that validate new practices, and organizing networks to support novel organizations. (658)

Schneiberg sets out to prove empirically what conjunctural theorists such as Hall would always assume to be a distinct possibility, if not an outright inevitability; that is, that different social forces at times 'condense', sharing and 'amplifying' each other's ideas and creating some form of unity – a new *conjuncture* – which becomes more than the sum of its parts (Hall 1990; Schneiberg 2013, 673). By looking back at a specific period in history, Schneiberg is able to map out the shifting conjunctural terrains of the time and assess the consequences this had for individual cooperatives and the wider cooperative movement. Whilst Schneiberg's work benefits from the possibility of historical analysis, his approach mirrors that of Hall's work in its efforts to understand complex conjunctural relationships.

Below, I briefly sketch out some of what I consider the key concerns and questions we, and the world of alternative organising, currently face. Following Hall's approach of speculative and performative enquiry, my aim here is not to present empirical certainty, but to demonstrate the need for further research which addresses these, and many other, pressing issues. Whilst we cannot assess the historical legacy of this conjunctural shift yet – and should not, politically speaking, wait until we can – we can still apply a methodological reasoning similar to that of Schneiberg. Of course, Schneiberg's work shows the *positive* correlations between alternative organisations (cooperatives) and social movements; the same form and scope of analysis within the present conjuncture, which I have argued is increasingly hostile to prefiguration, may well present us with a more troubling picture.

Discursive impacts of the present conjuncture

In their pioneering work to challenge dominant conceptualisations of capitalism within the vertical left imaginary, Gibson-Graham argued that 'the performative effect of [capitalo-centric] representations was to dampen and discourage non-capitalist initiatives, since power was assumed to be concentrated in capitalism and to be largely absent from other forms of economy' (Gibson-Graham 2008, 615).

> In the vicinity of such representations, those who might be interested in non-capitalist economic projects pulled back from ambitions of widespread success – their dreams seemed unrealizable, at least in our lifetimes. Thus capitalism was strengthened, its dominance performed, as an effect of its representations. (Ibid.)

In demonstrating the existence – and potential – of other, non-capitalist practices, Gibson-Graham's work helped produce a more optimistic reading of these practices, which in turn helped inspire still greater engagement with them. Yet as Gibson-Graham themselves acknowledge, it was not until the prefigurative turn within social movement activism that their work began to resonate with a broader audience of academics, organisers and practitioners (Gibson-Graham 2006b, viii). As the radical imaginary shifts away from horizontal and prefigurative logics, back, however tentatively, towards more vertical positions, it is at least reasonable – and wise – to consider the possibilities of this process going into reverse. If alternative organising always walks a tight-rope between the dominant discourses of capitalism and more progressive positions (Shanahan 2024; Wilson 2014; Wright 2010), the considerable (if not absolute) disappearance of political cultures which promote prefigurative strategies is liable to leave alternative organising increasingly out in the (capitalist) cold. There is, in other words, a performative implication (Butler 2010; Callon 2010) of declaring alternative organising an inherently flawed political project; the more radicals accept the arguments against prefiguration, the less they will engage in such practices, and the less they engage, the more ineffectual such practices will inevitably be, as they become increasingly populated by less radical voices. Similarly, radicals who remain committed to such organising will be more disconnected from other progressive discourses and cultures, making their job of pushing more critical perspectives even harder.

Put simply, without an ongoing connection to social movements and the radical imaginary, the political culture of alternative organising is likely to become increasingly less efficacious and less radical (Develtere 1992; Diamantopoulos 2012; Huckfield 2021). Whilst no individual academic can counter this alone, thinking conjuncturally encourages us to think about our work on alternative organising with a view to considering what those alternative organisations might need under such conditions. How might our work help individual spaces of alternative organising connect more, for example? Or how might we use our research to find the most inspiring examples of such praxis, to help counter those feelings of disillusionment which are very likely to arise if wider progressive movements dismiss such practices? However we might answer such questions, we need to be mindful of not only the discursive but also the material and infrastructural impacts of the present conjuncture.

Material impacts of the present conjuncture

A shifting political conjuncture inevitably entails a change not only in how people think about social change but also in terms of movement infrastructure. Prefigurative social movements were crucial in the development of 'a burgeoning cultural infrastructure of conferences, books, websites, blogs, films, and other media to support and spread' ideas about alternative forms of organising (Gibson-Graham 2008, 614). Social centres, for example, have long been acknowledged as providing vital spaces within which new cultures of prefigurative praxis were able to emerge (Carlsson 2008; Chatterton and Pusey 2020). As Margaret Kohn notes, such 'spaces facilitate change by creating a distinctive place to develop new identities and practices' (Kohn 2003, 4). They were vital spaces where prefigurative ideas could be 'amplified' (Schneiberg 2013) and 'condensed' (Hall 1990). But in the absence of prefigurative social movements, the infrastructure provided by them will also decrease, if not disappear entirely. A decline in material infrastructure, influenced by a shift in the radical common-sense, will also iteratively reinforce that intellectual shift, as a new generation of activists becomes increasingly less likely to be introduced to prefigurative ideas. The social centre where I first learnt about the more radical workers' cooperative movement, for example, no longer exists. Of course, we can now easily access such information on the internet, but this isn't how culture works; we need to know about the existence of such things before we search for them online, and we need to be motivated somehow to explore them (Citton 2025). The slow disappearance of these cultural gateways into prefigurative and alternative organising, alongside a radical common-sense increasingly hostile to such thinking, ought to be of very real concern.

Whilst existing research at times touches on some of the issues raised above (De Coster and Zanoni 2023; Firth 2024), I suggest we need to be more explicitly addressing these questions. We might ask, for example, whether organisations whose members are, or were, connected to prefigurative social movements have different normative and practical understandings of democracy to those of organisations without such links. Likewise, we might consider whether the presence of a social centre or other tangible features of social movement praxis within a given location has an impact on the creation of more durable alternative organisations such as worker cooperatives. Though empirically challenging, we might even attempt to discover whether the latest generation of political activists are aware of or interested in alternative organising. Such research could help us better understand the complex relationships between social movements, political imaginaries, and alternative organising. But I have also argued that we can already see troubling signs of a move away from prefigurative and alternative approaches to social change. There is also, then, a need to proactively defend these horizontal politics; below, I suggest CMS is well-placed to intervene in this debate.

CMS and the future of political organising

So far, I have argued that radical politics is in a state of flux, unsure of how or where to advance. Whilst the left is well-known for being perpetually divided, certain positions tend to be more dominant than others at certain times, forming particular conjunctures. These conjunctures help produce (and in turn reproduce) what Gramsci called *common*-senses – assemblages or patchworks of ideas and positions which are often taken-for-granted and which constitute a general framework through which we think about the world, and through which we theorise ways to change it (Crehan, 2011). Whilst there has always been a considerable diversity within the left, in theory and in practice, such common-senses have provided something of an overarching framework and direction through which mass political movements have condensed and functioned. They influence whether activists are more likely to put their energy into party politics or direct action, whether they insist their groups organise using consensus or by representative democracy, whether they focus on single issues or think more systemically, and so on. At present, the common-senses of both *vertical* and *horizontal* traditions coexist within the broader radical imaginary, with one more dominant in some spaces, the other more so in others. At best, this means a fractured and fragmented world of progressive politics, which is unable to coalesce and unite against common adversaries. Diversity within radical politics is needed, but it also has its limits; even the 'movement of movements', so called to celebrate its commitment to a diversity of tactics (Kingsnorth 2003), was able to condense into a more or less coherent social movement with its own common sense (Gibson-Graham 2006a; Gilbert 2008; Wilson 2014). Scholars interested in alternative organising, however, ought to be concerned that any future condensing of the left could well occur in favour of a vertical politics which is ambivalent about, at times even hostile towards, prefigurative ideals. But we now have an opportunity to help develop a new political imaginary around which a new common sense can be built. Indeed, where we go from here, how the left progresses – in a more vertical direction, a more horizontal one, or somehow, both – is, I would suggest, one of the most fundamental questions facing anyone concerned with radically reshaping the world today (Firth 2024; Kioupkiolis 2019; Nunes 2021).

If the left is, as I suggest, at something of a fork in the road, then a clear and explicit engagement with this debate from critical theorists, and especially those interested in defending and promoting alternative forms of organising, is of obvious value. Whilst the interest in alternative organising was influenced by the growth of prefigurative and horizontal social movements, it is, ironically, the shift back to a more vertical common-sense which now gives such work an added relevance and importance; if we want to be performative with our work, if we want our words to mean something, this debate offers CMS scholars an ideal stage on which to perform.

The present *disjuncture* presents a set of problems and possibilities for anyone hoping to see our world move beyond the capitalist hegemony: these problems and possibilities are, as we have seen, by no means entirely new or unique, but they must be understood from the perspective of the

current conjunctural context. Under such conditions, the left needs to find a way to reconcile the vertical and the horizontal and to advance a new, radically non-capitalist political vision. What is required is a way to think through the present impasse with a view to developing a new political/organisational culture which is responsive to the present moment (De Coster and Zanoni 2023; Wilson 2024a; Wright 2010). Thinking conjuncturally, we need to be asking 'how various alternative economic discourses align with and differ from each other concerning their modes and strategies of transformation' (Kommandeur et al. 2025, 2).

Part of the work now needed is to challenge the often lazy representations of alternative organising, which caricatures prefiguration as uniformly opposed to larger strategic projects (see Srnicek and Williams 2016 for an example). We might start simply by demonstrating the extent to which horizontal and prefigurative praxis is, in fact, often deeply committed to strategic visions of social change (Kioupkiolis 2019). Another strand must also engage with those vertical critiques, acknowledging and responding to their at times legitimate concerns about the possibility of prefiguratively building a new world in a fundamentally hostile terrain, and considering ways in which horizontal and alternative forms of organising might respond to these concerns (Parker 2023; Shanahan 2024; Wilson 2014, 2023). The question of how we scale up spaces of alternative organising, for example, is key to the development of a viable prefigurative politics, but one which has not yet received sufficient attention (Colombo, Bailey, and Gomes 2024).

Equally, we might look to theories and practices which are already providing a bridge between these positions; conjunctural formations and the common-senses that develop alongside them form clear discursive *tendencies* within certain spaces, but their boundaries are porous, and there are always elements of cross-pollination. To consider the rift between the vertical and horizontal positions by no means suggests that they are unquestionably and irrevocably incompatible, or that talk of vertical and horizontal 'sides' denotes tidy boxes into which any one theorist or form of praxis can be easily deposited. Much less does it mean we must choose one side or the other. Somewhat paradoxically, it is through understanding these conjunctures and the ways in which they *tend* to dichotomise the reality of leftist praxis that we can better help a new conjuncture emerge which more explicitly condenses what are often understood as oppositional perspectives. The work of Erik Olin Wright, which attempts to articulate this overlap into a conjunctural position in its own right (Shanahan 2024; Wright 2010) is exemplary in this regard, but there are other theorists, and spaces of organising, which can also help us move in this direction (Firth 2024; Kioupkiolis 2019; Wilson 2024b). The current wave of 'new municipalism' (Agustín 2020), which brings together cooperatives and other community and grassroots organisers with unions and local government is a useful example of a political condensing which connects the vertical and horizontal. Further research could help shine a light on how successful such municipal projects are, what holds them together (or pulls them apart) and could offer ideas for integrating the vertical and horizontal in other political spaces.

There is also a need to rethink the now-standard understanding of prefiguration itself. As I have argued elsewhere (Wilson 2014), there has been a hugely damaging reconceptualisation of prefiguration in recent years, which has reduced it to a singular position combining both the building of a new world *and* a means-ends commensurability where we can only use political strategies which fully align with the end goals these strategies are aiming for (Yates 2015). Whilst in an ideal world we might like to see prefigurative praxis encompassing both positions, the former evidently does not logically – or politically – entail the latter: indeed, in practice, it very often does not. The cooperative movement is an enduring example of this, creating prefigurative organisations whilst also, for example, using more vertical political strategies such as lobbying governments for policy changes which will help them flourish (De Coster and Zanoni 2023). There is a great deal of work to be done to highlight the reality of such horizontal/vertical integration in practice, and to advance new framings of prefigurative and alternative organising which might help move towards a condensing of radical politics.

Precisely how we respond to this current conjuncture – or disjuncture – will vary greatly: we may seek to help produce new organisational perspectives from within prefigurative spaces, helping them respond to questions of scale, for example; or we may look to vertical spaces – political parties, unions, and so on – and consider how they might be democratised to meet the concerns of those who remain nervous about the return of an overly hierarchical left. In either case, we can consider the particular conjunctural formation without assuming it is unmoving or static; as I have stressed throughout, a fundamental role of understanding the present conjuncture is to help perform a new one. Indeed, the direction of travel now must be towards developing a political imaginary which is, in Nunes's words, 'neither vertical nor horizontal' (2021). Whatever the particular response, it should be clear that contemporary *political* debates within left and progressive circles are also very much *organisational* debates, and if the pivotal role played by organisational theory and practice in contemporary politics is evident, then so too should be the value of CMS playing a far more vocal role.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the 2019 General Election in the UK, in which the Labour Party was humiliatingly wiped out by a resurgent Tory Party, considerable effort was made in certain leftist circles to assess the current political terrain, to ask how that terrain had been constructed, and what it suggested for how it might change in the future. For those engaged in the world of vertical/electoral politics, such a context clearly calls for a careful analysis of the conjuncture – of the opportunities that it offers to the Left and the limits that still constrain us' (Chibber 2021, 4; Grayson and Little 2017; Worth 2019). Explicit efforts were made 'to make sense of the astonishing political moment in which we find ourselves' (Blakeley 2020, xii). Around the world, we can point to similar examples of leftist movements trying to make sense of the present conjuncture in relation to their chosen contexts and strategies. Except, somehow, when it comes to the worlds of prefiguration and alternative organising. Remarkably, after more than a decade since the demise of Occupy!, we have seen almost nothing in the way of a sustained attempt to reflect on what the present conjuncture means for those who still hope to build the new world in the shell of the old. Within CMS – and other disciplines, such as anarchist studies (Wilson 2023) – there has been almost no acknowledgement of these shifts, let alone a serious undertaking to consider them in-depth. In fact, we see continuing references to movements such as Occupy! as though they still very much exist, are influential, and have not come under the level of critique I have attempted to demonstrate.

This paper was not intended to provide the level of analysis that is so desperately needed. Rather, by offering a brief but, I believe important overview of the current conjuncture, I hope to make the case for its necessity, to have given something of a wake-up call. And, in highlighting the work of Hall and his conjunctural thinking, I hope to have provided some valuable tools with which this future research can be conducted.

We don't yet know where this conjunctural moment will lead, but we should know we cannot wait another twenty years until we start engaging with the conversations that are now percolating, and may soon be exploding, within the wider radical community. Crucially, as CMS scholars, we should no longer see our role as simply detailing these changes through more and more empirical case studies. We should be part of the wider political discussion. As Parker argues, those 'committed to prefigurative forms of organisation cannot evade some hard questions about strategy if they wish to address politics at scale' (Parker 2023, 902). We will be all the better at answering those questions if our 'romance' (Parker 2023) with prefiguration is tempered, not only in terms of our own relationship with it, but also with respect to the growing hostility which it encounters; we do not need to share that hostility, but we need to acknowledge and understand it. Paradoxically, to rescue elements of the prefigurative idea, we need to be more critical of how it has been commonly interpreted by its adherents, and more directly and explicitly engage with those who reject it outright (du Plessis and Husted 2024).

Thinking conjuncturally, we must be ever mindful that, as Schneiberg's historical analyses so clearly demonstrate (2013), the success of alternative forms of organising 'depends on a range of material, political, cultural and strategic circumstances' (Jonas 2016, 4) which are themselves fundamentally connected to a wider political arena. But whereas Schneiberg could survey these dynamics historically, we must be unafraid of offering contemporary analyses without the benefit of hindsight. Hall was well aware that 'we can see the broad contours of [conjunctural shifts] much more clearly in retrospect' (2018, 45), but he continually stressed that we cannot afford to wait for such clarity. If we fail to consider the present conjuncture in all its messy and shifting complexity, then we cannot engage in the sort of performative work needed to renew and refresh the prefigurative imaginary. Put simply, we need to engage now with a rapidly changing political culture, not in ten years when all the hard empirical data is in. Those of us – as academics and organisers – keen to see prefiguration continue to inform a radical political vision need to understand the threats it currently faces; if we don't, then we may, to paraphrase Gibson-Graham, be facing the end of alternative organising (just as we were getting to know it).

Note

1. One pressing question which, for reasons of space, I do not consider here is the future of CMS itself; as many are acutely aware, 'the conditions under which the conjunction between critical and management became possible' (Fournier and Grey 2000, 10), are now rapidly fading, and critical scholars face an uncertain future. Thinking conjuncturally about our own predicament, the future of CMS and of Higher Education would be of very real value (Burrell et al. 2024).

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