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## **A Road To Nowhere: Empty Politics in Action**

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# A Road To Nowhere

Empty Politics in Action

Thesis MA Philosophical Perspectives on Politics and the Economy

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## Introduction: From Arendt to Anarchy

In her work *On Revolution*, political philosopher Hannah Arendt prominently laments the ‘lost treasure’ of the revolutionary tradition. With this term, she primarily describes the council-based form of direct democracy which emerged in several modern political revolutions. From the Paris Commune of the 1790s to the Russian soviets of 1917, these federated councils established themselves in a seemingly spontaneous and independent fashion across a diverse set of socio-historical contexts.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with her general appreciation of the public sphere, Arendt considers these disparate developments to have been the most valuable part of each of their respective revolutions. It is therefore a great shame that none of these institutions managed to solidify their existence; in every revolution which produced a rudimentary council democracy, this flame was ultimately snuffed out by the parallel establishment of a party-based representative government. Lenin betrayed the soviets, just as Robespierre had turned against the people of Paris. Thus, even if these councils emerge so persistently, their eventual demise seems just as inexorable.

To Arendt, the historical fragility of these revolutionary democracies is surely a tragedy, and one which demands further explanation. At first, she points to a great paradox which befalls all political revolutions. Whereas the process of founding a new political order is an open and exhilarating experience, its aim seems to be the enclosure of creativity through the establishment of stable and permanent institutions.<sup>2</sup> Using the American Revolution as her example, Arendt observes an awareness of this paradox in some of the Founding Fathers—Jefferson in particular. Here we find the origin for one of the latter’s famous quotes, his saying that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants”. Only by a periodic renewal of the state might its long-term ossifying be staved off. Arendt herself interprets this issue in a more positive sense, claiming that the ‘public freedom’ of revolutionary renewal has a value independent of creation alone.<sup>3</sup> It is in the democracy of the councils that she sees a way to resolve this paradox, to reconcile public freedom with the long-term need for stable government. Yet this begs the question: if councils embody the purpose of political revolution, then why don’t they last?

Here, Arendt turns her attention to the great enemy of public freedom, this being the system of central state rule which generally triumphed in the aforementioned revolutions. Time and time again, the institutions of party and parliament came to hinder the burgeoning of council democracy, even if its leaders initially praised this popular manifestation. According to Arendt, this inherent incompatibility may be explained in several ways. First, within the context of the revolutionary struggle for power, the participatory nature of the councils left little room for the influence of state bureaucrats or party representatives. This bottom-up structure clashed with the top-down management of statesmen, who saw in it a rival base of power. For this reason, figures like Lenin and Robespierre seemed to make a complete 180 in their appreciation of the councils as soon as they attained actual state power.<sup>4</sup> Now, and not a moment before, these formations became an obstacle to their rule.

However, Arendt also indicates a different, more profound incompatibility between the democracies of party and council. Instead of their mutual hostility, she points to a basic dissonance in the conception of government which pervades these respective systems.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (1963; London: Penguin Books, 1990), 266.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 232.

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 255.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 240-241.

Whereas those who took part in the councils saw this participation as an inherent part of a democratic society, the leaders of the revolutionary parties considered the role of the state to be primarily one of administration, of technocratic rule in the interest of the people's welfare.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, the actual self-government of the people was superfluous at best. This is why those who ruled in order to 'safeguard the revolution' often became its ultimate executioners.

So far, the history sketched by Arendt reads like a tragedy, an institutional variation on the idea that a revolution 'devours its own children'. Still, the strength of a tragedy depends greatly on the initial virtue of its protagonist; thus, what can be said of the value of Arendt's lost treasure? In my own estimation, the laudable concept of public freedom is compromised by Arendt's peculiar degree of moderation. To put it somewhat bluntly, she seems unwilling to extend the scope of her treasured councils beyond an aristocratic conception of polite public debate. This is most clearly revealed in her utter distaste for socialist worker's democracy, which she describes as a 'dismal failure'.<sup>6</sup> Her prime objection here seems to be that economic matters are governed by the principle of necessity, which she sees as antithetical to the priorities of public freedom. In general, Arendt disdains those affairs which deal with material welfare; these are private or administrative concerns, and have no place in the political process.

It is this stringent definition of the political realm which most diminishes the potential of public freedom. The paradox it generates within Arendt's own work is quite stark: how could someone who on the one hand so laments the abdication of public politics to bureaucratic managerialism, simultaneously claim that a lack of administrative delegation proved the fundamental flaw of the revolutionary councils?<sup>7</sup> At its core, Arendt's belief in participatory democracy seems contingent on its strict limitation, both in terms of political purview and prospective constituency. The latter is made clear by her emphasis on the personal virtue of those who would make up these councils; only those few who can transcend their 'private happiness' would be inclined to take part of them.<sup>8</sup> Supposedly, this is an elite which justifies itself, since any exclusions from it would be voluntary in nature. If the disinterested wish to be free from politics, that should be their right.

Taken together, Arendt's work is evidently marked by a certain aristocratic tendency. From this perspective, her framing of historical events is revealed as the product of a particular bias. For example, her claim that the councils of revolutions past were primarily guided by political rather than social or economic concerns is patently inaccurate. Within the Russian context in particular, the soviets its revolution produced were commonly founded by peasants, workers, and soldiers, whose very interests indicate the inseparability of political and economic issues.<sup>9</sup> To introduce such a distinction to this history seems odd and anachronistic, especially when the industrial democracy these same laborers pursued is taken to be an entirely separate enterprise. Those who made these historical attempts at public freedom clearly did not agree with Arendt's conception of it; she is therefore wrong to impose her vision upon them.

With all this said, it is not as if *On Revolution* is entirely without merit. For all its flaws, Arendt's idea of public freedom is still indicative of a real trend in historical

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<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 273.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 274.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 273.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 279.

<sup>9</sup> E.J Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (1973; London: Phoenix, 1994), 207.

revolutions. The council democracies she extols really existed, if not in her ideal form. Thus, it might be worthwhile to look at this phenomenon anew, and consider those aspects which are either ignored or denied in Arendt's account.

Here is where the notion of anarchy enters the picture. While she may not acknowledge this inspiration, Arendt's understanding of revolutions shares much with that of the historical anarchists. Much like them, she fervently opposes the re-entrenchment of state power in the wake of revolutionary upheaval, and takes the concurrent emergence of council democracy to have been a lost alternative to this path. In claiming this, she would do well to remember that many historical councils were either organized by or gave rise to fanatically anarchistic movements. Arendt's aristocratic conception of council democracy is the exception rather than the rule; most of its proponents would not consider this system to be just another mode of government. Instead, they take it to the maximal expression of their opposition of rulership, thus representing the truest attempt at stateless, classless organization that the world has yet known. That is what anarchy means to begin with.

Based on their historical embedding alone, the anarchist reading of revolutionary councilism seems a lot more accurate than Arendt's idiosyncratic interpretation. Still, I believe she gets at something important in her conception of 'public freedom', something which is yet lacking in the anarchist account. While 'anarchy' as a concept comes closest to describing this kind of revolutionary spontaneity, its definition is also marked by dependence and insubstantiality. Any mode of politics which defines itself in an oppositional fashion is essentially dependent upon whatever it opposes; anarchy is no exception to this, as it can only be understood in reference to rulership. By contrast, Arendt's 'public freedom' is something which could stand on its own in principle. Its revolutionary establishment need not make reference to whatever it abolishes. In philosophical terms, this could be said to represent an inversion from negative to positive freedom, with all the benefits this implies. Whereas an oppositional framing can only lead one to the absence of oppression, an emphasis on the substance of freedom can lead in countless different directions, towards a full enabling of our self-actualization. This is what public freedom' has to offer.

That said, it is not as if we should entirely embrace Arendt's framework after all. Just as anarchy suffers the defect of negative dependence, so is public freedom hindered by its own positive prerequisites. Put simply, the existence of a 'public' realm presupposes some kind of state society, as it takes a central authority to distinguish the public from either the private or the administrative. While Arendt herself would not be troubled by this suggestion, it cannot accord with a truly creative revolutionary freedom. If certain matters are already taken off the table—as alluded to in Arendt's dismissal of economic democracy—then no council could be sustained indefinitely. Any non-public social questions would just assert themselves by different means. Thus, instead of representing the true unleashing of revolutionary creativity, Arendt's freedom is merely sanctioned and circumscribed.

As it is, we seem to be looking for the best of both worlds. On the one hand, we must preserve the unrelenting drive of anarchy, a freedom which will not rest until all authority has been dismantled. On the other hand, this dismantling should produce something akin to public freedom, a constructive vision of how deliberation promotes our self-sought aims. In total, therefore, what we require is a conceptual framework which could encompass both the destitution of unjust authorities and their directly democratic replacement. This would be a levelling force which, by the same breath, establishes the norms of the new. Not only would such a model adequately represent the anarchist-councilist tendencies of many historical

revolutions, but it could stand on its own as a general procedure of anarchistic societies, as echoed in their real examples.

It is in this context that I would turn to the unusual source of Classical Chinese philosophy, and specifically to the school known as Daoism. While far removed from the Western revolutionary context, Daoism still emerged in an environment of general social turmoil, and so it shares a thorough skepticism of government with modern political anarchism. Furthermore, Daoist philosophy focuses on creating an intuitive understanding of real yet ineffable concepts of (social) change, including its most central concept of *Dao*. In considering these aspects, I've found that my pursuit of revolutionary freedom can be readily adapted to Daoist terminology. In particular, I would identify my project with the free-flowing Daoist potency known as 'emptiness'. As such, I have come to refer to this concept as 'political emptiness', with those actions and institutions that are meant to realize it thereby being forms of 'empty politics'.

In the next two sections, I will explain the meaning of emptiness within the Daoist tradition, and indicate its resonance with my own political project. This will help me to motivate my choice of Daoism as a primary point of inspiration, and will show how its concepts might fit within a contemporary political-philosophical context. Broadly speaking, this work begins by considering how Daoism arose within its own historical environment, and how its own political attitudes were derived from this. In order to translate these notions to my present quandary, I will move through an intermediary step of abstraction, where the most important philosophical aspects of Daoist emptiness might be distilled. Two key concepts which will result from this process are non-dualism and anti-essentialism, which together suggest an ontology of continuous radical change. This conception will form the basis of my 'empty' theory of social revolution, the development of which will make up the rest of this thesis.

At the start of this greater exploration of empty politics, I will explain its operation through the use of a three-part structure, thus lending a more systematic understanding to this otherwise elusive concept. Its specific elements will be referred to as 'annihilation', 'openness', and 'creativity', all of which contribute to the process of emptiness both individually and in their combination. This tripartite structure will then carry me into the next three chapters, which will address more conventional matters of political philosophy. In each of them, I will discuss a domain that might be meaningfully enriched by the application of empty politics. At the same time, these chapters will also further elucidate the meaning of political emptiness itself, as its practical nuances are revealed in the process.

In their setup, the three 'application' chapters could be regarded as a procedural analysis of empty political action as it moves through several phases. In the first chapter, which deals with political utopianism, we will consider the way that new social forms are imagined and projected out into the future, thus taking the shape of hopeful aspirations. Then, in the second chapter on constituent power, we will note how bottom-up social forces are organized in order to put these utopian forms into practice. Finally, the third chapter will present a potent method by which such organizations might bring the future into the present: the prefigurative mode of politics.

All in all, this thesis will provide a thorough introduction to the concept of political emptiness, embedding it within the existing literature so as to found its intuitions and indicate its total merit. Though many of its aspects will remain unstudied by the time of my conclusion, I still hope to show that this positive conception of revolutionary freedom can be of great value in directing and inspiring our modern political discourse.

## Daoism: The Source of Emptiness

As noted in the introduction, the Chinese philosophy of Daoism is at the source of my conception of political emptiness. With its origins in the Warring States Period of pre-Imperial China, one might reasonably doubt its contemporary relevance. Nevertheless, I will endeavor to show that some of its primary notions can be easily and usefully adapted to a modern political environment. To do so, I will begin by introducing these notions, and showing how they were politically applied within their own context.

Much as one might expect, the central focus of Daoism is on the concept of *Dao*, variously translated as either ‘Way’ or the more active ‘way-making’.<sup>10</sup> Though inherently elusive, this Way may be described as both a natural phenomenon and a specific mode of personal conduct. By perfecting the Way, certain virtuous ‘sages’ promote the harmonious functioning of everything, and thereby lead the ‘common people’ toward a state of peaceful and spontaneous contentment. Of course, in the present context, the most important aspect of the Way is its relation to emptiness. To explain this connection, I shall now turn to some actual Daoist philosophical texts.

While there are many primary texts in the Daoist tradition, perhaps the most important one is the *Dao De Jing*, also known as the *Laozi* in reference to its purported author. Within the *Dao De Jing*, several references are made to either emptiness or nothingness in relation to the *Dao*. Not only is the Way said to be ‘empty’ by nature, but this is also supposed to be the cause of its inexhaustible efficacy.<sup>11</sup> To understand how such immense power might be attributed to nothingness, one can turn to chapter 11 of the *Dao De Jing*. Its brevity allows me to quote it in full:

“The thirty spokes converge at one hub,  
But the utility of the cart is a function of the nothingness inside the hub.  
We throw clay to shape a pot,  
But the utility of the clay pot is a function of the nothingness inside it.  
We bored out doors and windows to make a dwelling,  
But the utility of the dwelling is a function of the nothingness inside it.  
Thus it might be something that provides the value,  
But it is nothing that provides the utility.”<sup>12</sup>

As we can readily see, this passage explains the basic significance of emptiness as a matter of receptivity. A clay pot is useful to us because it can be emptied and refilled; a pot filled with hardened cement would surely be rendered useless. Thus, what matters most about a receptacle is ironically the nothingness inside it. To be clear, instead of denoting the literal absence of substance, the term ‘emptiness’ here stands for the ability and willingness to change, adapt, and make way for others. Such openness allows for dynamic, spontaneous, and—above all—noncoercive conduct, which are key features of a free and sustainable society. This kind of attitude is therefore centered in both the Daoist conception of sagely conduct, that infamous and elusive *Dao*, as well as in my understanding of empty politics.

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<sup>10</sup> Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 91.



Thus, even as the latter concept will be further defined in what's to come, this open and free-flowing phenomenon will continue to be at its foundation.

In-between this attitude of receptivity and the immediate political concerns of Daoism, there is an important practical category known as the *wu*-forms. This term describes the various ways in which an empty disposition might shape the actions and beliefs of a Daoist practitioner. One key example of this would be the principle of *wu wei*. While often rendered as 'non-action', it is better understood as a truncated version of the phrase *wei wu wei*—'action without action'. This term is meant to generate an impression of non-coercive and effortless practice. Freed from the strain and force that we might normally associate with philosophies of action, the concept of *wu wei* proposes a more harmonious kind of acting in and on the world. That this notion would have some important political implications should not surprise us.

For an initial impression of how *wu wei* might apply politically, we can turn again to the poetic passages of the *Dao De Jing*. Even in its ancient context, a distinct attitude towards rulership and government can be discerned. A clear example of this is found at the end of chapter 57:

“Hence in the words of the sages:  
We do things noncoercively  
And the common people develop along their own lines  
We cherish equilibrium  
And the common people order themselves;  
We are non-interfering in our governance  
And the common people prosper themselves;  
We are objectless in our desires  
And the common people are of themselves like unworked wood.”<sup>13</sup>

From this excerpt, one can discern two aspects of the Daoist perspective on governance: there is the noncoercive approach of the ruler on the one hand, which then enables the natural spontaneity of the ruled on the other. The latter are compared to unworked wood, not because their material potential might yet be utilized towards various ends—like that of a clay pot—but rather because they are able to develop themselves outside of the state's interference. This reading is supported by the numerous Daoist anecdotes which attribute the health and endurance of a given organism (often a tree) to their lack of external utility.<sup>14</sup> Such creatures do not lack the 'nothingness' I mentioned earlier, but they do not allow this untapped power to be used to their own detriment. In a way, one could consider these parables to be a call for personal ungovernability. Of course, the chapter quoted above is directed at a ruler rather than their subjects, and here the sages' advice is rather more simple: if you want to be a good ruler, rule as little as possible.

Given its significant skepticism towards rulership, it is little surprise that the *Dao De Jing* has been taken up by several modern anarchists, with science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin perhaps the most prominent among them. While claiming Daoism to be capital-A Anarchist is certainly anachronistic, its attitude towards government does share several

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<sup>13</sup> Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 166.

<sup>14</sup> See for example A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (1981; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), 72-73.

subtleties with this political philosophy. One of its stronger rejections of rulership is expressed in the opening lines of chapter 29:

“If someone wants to rule the world, and goes about trying to do so,  
I foresee that they will simply not succeed.  
The world is a sacred vessel,  
And is not something that can be ruled.  
Those who would rule it ruin it;  
Those who would control it lose it.”<sup>15</sup>

So far, it seems clear that a Daoist form of politics would preclude any attempt at overt and intrusive government, anything that would only the world’s natural and noncoercive spontaneity. Yet this creates a significant paradox in the way its points are articulated. While the *Dao De Jing* and other foundational Daoist texts imply much about the power of the ungovernable, as well as the ability of the common people to organize themselves, many of their passages still take a ruler’s perspective, as if no alternative to their role might be imagined. Here is where the Daoist texts diverge sharply from modern anarchist orthodoxy, which would eliminate the function of rulership altogether. Though the *Dao De Jing* never approaches the egalitarianism of even the Tillers, a contemporaneous philosophical school which mostly levelled the status of ruler and ruled, it still promotes a certain inversion of the traditional relation between these two. This is indicated by chapter 66:

“What enables the rivers and seas to be king over all the valleys  
Is that they are good at staying lower than them.  
It is this that enables them to be the king of all the valleys.

This is the reason that the sages in wanting to stand above the common people  
Must put themselves below them in what they have to say;  
In wanting to stand before the common people  
They must put themselves behind them in their personal concerns.  
Hence, they dwell above them yet the people do not find them a heavy burden,  
They dwell in front of them yet the people do not find that they block the way.  
The entire world delights in promoting them, and never tires of doing so.”<sup>16</sup>

As may be read here, the sages are clearly not equal to the common people. However, because their kind of guidance or leadership of the common people puts the needs of others before their own, their ‘superiority’ is a benevolent rather than a domineering quality. Above all, it is clear that a sage who would lord their status over others would not last long.

That said, it is not the case that sagely conduct is inherently self-sacrificing. Not only do many Daoist texts emphasize the preservation of one’s personal power, but the sages’ benevolence towards others is itself empowering. In a more modern mindset, one might compare this to the communist ethos, where the free distribution of goods and services benefits all involved. This parallel is at its strongest in the *Dao De Jing*’s final chapter, which also concludes this section:

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<sup>15</sup> Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 122.

<sup>16</sup> Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 181.

“The sages do not accumulate things.  
Yet the more they have done for others,  
The more they have gained for themselves;  
The more they have given to others,  
The more they have gotten themselves.

Thus, the way of *tian* [Heaven] is to benefit without harming;  
The way of the sages is to do without contending.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 204.

## Emptiness: A Revolutionary Ontology

In the previous section, I established the basic political credentials of Daoist philosophy. While Daoism is clearly founded in an anti-authoritarian ethos, it's still not entirely compatible with some of the fundamental tenets of revolutionary anarchism. To realize this compatibility, it is important that we discover those aspects of Daoism which might make a unique and worthwhile contribution to our already established notion of 'empty' revolution. Some indication of this connection may already be gleaned from the concept of the wu-forms, which hints at a praxis of effortless and spontaneous action. Even so, I believe a true grasp of Daoism's importance requires further contemplation, focusing on those key parts of its philosophy which found its intuitions about change without coercion. This analysis, then, is what the present section will center.

If I had to distill the ontological progression of Daoist philosophy, I would resolve on two important and intertwined concepts: anti-essentialism on the one hand, and non-dualism on the other. The influence of both of these notions can be recognized quite clearly in one of the most famous anecdotes in the Daoist canon, this being the so-called "butterfly dream" of the *Zhuangzi*. Named after its elusive author, the *Zhuangzi* is one of the central texts of Classical Daoism, with its importance in codifying Daoist thought arguably being as great as that of the *Dao De Jing*. In one of its many imaginative passages, the *Zhuangzi* relates the author's mysterious relation to waking life. After Zhuangzi dreams that he is butterfly, he finds himself unable to determine his ultimate identity upon awakening. Is he the man Zhuangzi, who just dreamed that he was a butterfly? Or is he rather the butterfly, caught up in the momentary illusion that he is Zhuangzi? In the end, he resolves that he is both and neither, describing this as an example of 'the transformation of things'.<sup>18</sup>

With this latter concept, we can open up an understanding of both anti-essentialism and non-dualism. The first of these concepts is represented by Zhuangzi's refusal to definitively identify himself as either the butterfly or the man—or as anything else, for that matter. What is rejected here is not the sequence of experiences which defines our life, but rather the idea that any part of this process is more essential or self-like than any other, and must therefore be maintained at all cost. This focus on authenticity or essence is a bad measure of our experience, which is always already in a state of flux. What matters instead is that this flux can go on, and that we do not harm ourselves or others by trying to impose our conceptual schema upon it.

From this conclusion flows the second concept of non-dualism. As a natural extension of anti-essentialist philosophy, non-dualism supposes that the absence of essence applies to entities as well as identities. Just as no part of us is more 'essential' than any other, neither can our distinctness be located in the self as a whole. The bounded collection of elements which we would define as a 'self' is as susceptible to flux as its elements themselves are. With essences being the source of our definitions, their non-existence marks a radical shift in our conception of being.

According to the logic of non-dualism, the distinctness of different beings is ultimately illusory, since we cannot appeal to any essential difference between them. At the same time, however, they are also not exactly the same, for this would lead us to identify some essence that unites them. What we find instead is a world of mutually entailing and co-existent phenomena, the kind of tapestry of causality which the Buddhists call 'dependent origination'.

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<sup>18</sup> A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 61.

Within the realm of Daoism, we may recognize this non-duality in the symbolism of the yin and yang, where a part of the one is found in the other. As an expression of the inexorable flux of being, it can also be found in the *Dao De Jing* itself:

“Crimped then whole,  
Warped then true,  
Hollow then full,  
Worn then new,  
Modest then satisfied,  
Demanding then bewildered.”<sup>19</sup>

This short passage can be taken as one of many Daoist expressions of the ‘transformation of things’. In the context of non-duality, what matters here is that seemingly opposite tendencies naturally succeed one another, both taking part in a mutually entailing process where the distinctions between them dissolve. It is worth mentioning that this conception does not just apply to previously assumed dualities: the boundary we might mark between any combination of random entities is affected by it. The contrast between white and black is equally as non-dual as that between white and yellow, yellow and colorlessness, or colorlessness and the concept of Tuesday. Whatever entities we suppose, we will eventually discover their necessary interrelation.

With all this in mind, it is worth turning back to the original Daoist conception of emptiness, and see how it might be augmented by a firmer foundation in anti-essentialist thought. For example, in light of its stress on non-duality, we might find it odd that Daoism seems somewhat biased in typifying its central concepts. By referring to the Dao as ‘empty’, does it not implicitly disparage the other side of the fullness-emptiness dichotomy? What must be remembered here is that—as the first chapter of the *Dao De Jing* puts it—“the real Dao is not the Dao that can be put into words”. Any term that might be used to describe it is therefore wholly conventional, and does not reflect any final judgment on the Dao’s inherent nature. This is all in keeping with the basic tenets of anti-essentialism. In rhetorical terms, we might suppose that the use of ‘emptiness’ as a term is meant to combat the way in which a ‘fullness’ of being is often equated to the realization of one’s essence. My own appeal to emptiness of a similarly rhetorical nature. If I were to be especially rigorous in my description of political emptiness, I would just as easily refer to it as a form of fullness, full emptiness, or empty fullness. What matters is that the term represents a manifest receptivity, an adaptive attitude which is guided by the primordial creativity on which all being is founded. What we call this tendency is ultimately irrelevant.

In emphasizing the anti-essentialist nature of Daoism, its notions of change and spontaneity are also strengthened. The key insight here is that coercion itself is a result of essentialist attachments, of the forceful implementation of our will over that of others. Such violent attitudes can be said to result from a frustration at the ambiguity and flux which Daoism sees as inherent to nature. Indeed, it is for this reason that change and coercion should be taken as antithetical notions. Spontaneity, in turn, becomes the natural outgrowth of an undetermined mode of change. Even where we are free to pursue our own noncoercive designs, a certain spontaneity resides in the emergence of these designs themselves. This is

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<sup>19</sup> Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 110.

how emptiness reconciles itself with our intentionality, whether on a personal basis or on the social level of participatory planning.

With this emphasis on the noncoercive and spontaneous aspects of change under emptiness, the political implications of the latter begin to grow increasingly radical, and easily surpass the bounds of classical Daoism. If our account is to remain consistent, however, this path should be followed to its logical conclusion. In this new tradition, any authoritarian attempt at societal transformation must be discarded as just another attempt at ideological essentialism, at the installation of another static social order. A proper social revolution follows the course of emptiness, trusting in the spontaneous emergence of popular self-government in the absence of centralized rule. This is not to say that empty societies are opposed to organization as such; any examples of the latter would merely need to accord with the precepts of free and voluntary association.

Overall, the full development of emptiness as a political ideal would require the annihilation of existing power structures, the opening of free and deliberative proceedings, and the creation of institutions which could sustain such general anarchy. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of process that I plan to lay out in the following section, where the abstract philosophy of emptiness takes a more practical, but still principled shape. Even as this line of thought increasingly escapes its Daoist origins, though, we should remember the anti-essentialist non-dualism on which it is founded. Much like the Dao itself, empty politics are not something that can be determined absolutely. Thus, however useful this elaboration might prove, an epistemic humility must always be at its forefront.

## **Annihilation, Openness, Creativity: The Principles of Emptiness**

In the last chapter, I noted how political emptiness is essentially marked by its commitment to anti-essentialism. Irony aside, this means that any particular structuring of it must be regarded as an illusory imposition. No set or sequence of elements could survive under the strain of non-dualism, which breaks down any such distinctions. At present, this leaves me at something of an impasse. Do I push forward, knowing that anything I might suppose is inherently inaccurate? Or do I cease to say anything, and choose to let the ineffable be? Here I am guided by the great philosophies that have inspired me. Whether Buddhist, Daoist, or Anarchist, the main theorists of this creed did not let their commitment to the ultimately unimaginable steer them away from the immediate concern of liberation. As long as suffering demands action, and action demands communication, some compromises must be made. The key here is to maintain that any structure or process is a matter of convention, not a source of final truth. In the context of empty politics, this means that anything I claim from here on out should be taken with a non-essential grain of salt. Useful as my observations might be, their use is a mere expedient. With all this in mind, let us move on.

Insofar as the presence and process of empty politics can be broken down into discrete components, a triple division has proven to be the most intuitive. Echoing my earlier concerns, none of these three parts should be taken as entirely separate from one another. In any particular operation of political emptiness, all are likely to be present. As to which element is dominant at any given time, this is mostly a matter of perspective. Even their relative sequence is somewhat indeterminable. While the succession I start from in the following is the easiest one to grasp, it is hardly the only way that these elements can interact. Caveats such as these should be kept in mind as we proceed into the breakdown ahead.

In laying out the three-part division of political emptiness, I begin with the principle of annihilation. Within the revolutionary context I have taken as my baseline, the phase of annihilation corresponds to the violent repudiation of the old order. Sometimes—as in the storming of the Bastille by the Parisian mob—this annihilation will literally break the old institutions down brick by brick. Just as often, however, this process is more symbolic in nature. Flags will be burned, debts will be annulled, and any former rules of etiquette will go utterly ignored. The resulting environment is one of radical freedom, and can be found throughout the annals of revolutionary history. From the Paris Commune to Anarchist Manchuria, what we find is a free association of free people. The absence of a strong central authority leads such people to try out alternative social arrangements, from the simplest interpersonal conventions to the more complex issues of politics and economics. But before such a state of statelessness can come about, the phase of annihilation is indispensable.

In this context, it is important to note that annihilation encompasses far more activities than revolutionary violence alone, and that many examples of the latter are not themselves annihilative. What matters is that existing systems of domination are made ineffective, usually by dismantling the mechanism of their enforcement. While violence can play a part in this dismantling, it is hardly the only method of annihilation. Often enough, the elimination of state control relies on simple legal changes. Sometimes it even happens through the mere passage of time. As an example of the latter, consider how in many countries, the copyright of any work of art is set to expire automatically. Once it passes a certain age, it is expelled into the public domain, and thus free to be used for any derivative activity. To be clear, the annihilation of copyright does not consist of the state merely allowing us to exchange this information; rather, its authority over these works becomes entirely absent. It is a wholly

negative space, which is nevertheless experienced at substantial. This makes it a great example of emptiness in action.

The aforementioned distinction between license versus absence can be said to correspond to that between legalization and decriminalization, a difference which is of great importance in the realm of drug use and sex work. As some of its advocates argue, mere legalization of these industries is marked by a host of restrictions and exceptions, and so makes them complicated rather than liberated. By contrast, decriminalization removes the entire motive for enforcement, thereby freeing sex workers and drug users from the harassment of cops or bureaucrats. Herein lies the true function of annihilation.

So far, the strategies associated with annihilation have mostly followed the traditional spectrum of reform and revolution, two prominent modes of effecting social change. Even when combined, however, they hardly comprise the entirety of what this part of political emptiness has to offer. One important tactic which has been left out so far is the creation of parallel institutions. At many points in history, the effective breakdown of the existing social order has come, not through its direct transformation from within or without, but rather through its replacement by new and parallel institutions. For example, the creation of a robust social welfare system is often correlated with a decline in popular religiosity, as the state assumes certain economic duties that were formerly taken up by religious institutions. While such developments frequently occur unintentionally, a more radical and deliberate example exists in the form of prefigurative politics, which I will discuss in a later chapter. The key insight here is that even great powers like theocracy and monarchy were once dismantled through the gradual erosion of authority. While moments of reform and revolution mark the high point of such developments, they are usually preceded by a longer period of steady subversion.

Finally, the principle of annihilation also operates outside of the strictly material aspects of social change, affecting us in similar ways on a cultural and intellectual level. Every social order is sustained through ideological work, and so the annihilative force of empty politics must operate in this domain as well. Taking up a new set of ideas generally requires one to have disproven the old ones, or else feel quite skeptical towards them. To create this attitude is a delicate task however, as it must be kept from eliciting a general sense of nihilism and distrust. The goal here is to inculcate an anti-dogmatic openness, producing a mind which is more receptive to new ideological frameworks. Such open-mindedness carries an inherent instability with it, likely as it is to be co-opted by any manner of false certainties. Far too often, this mental process develops in a more subconscious and insidious fashion, priming an entire populace for the introduction of harsh and harmful doctrines. Thus, while the annihilative element is a necessary method for stripping us of our prejudices, we need more than annihilation if this receptive state is to be preserved. Let us therefore proceed to the other principles of emptiness.

As alluded to previously, the second element of political emptiness is the principle of openness. It is at once the most expansive segment of empty politics, while also being impossible to enclose through definition. In a way, it represents the most essential component of this anti-essentialist philosophy: the need for a sustainable yet stateless kind of political freedom. It may be recognized in the powerful egalitarianism of many revolutionary environments. These are spaces where participation, autonomy, and non-coercion are all pursued to their greatest possible extent. Of course, the revolutionary situation is but one of its many contexts, and the instability associated with such upheaval is exactly the attribute I mean to avoid in crafting the concept of emptiness.



The first major interpretation of openness takes the form of a distinct disorienting phase within processes of social change. As indicated above, its most notorious incarnation is found in times of revolution, a chaotic ferment in which new modes of social organization can thrive. In this sense, openness merely describes a moment of immense sociopolitical potential, where even the most stable institutions consider themselves provisional. Within the great sagas of revolutionary history, we might recognize these environments of openness as the ephemeral intermediates between one regime and another; its most famous example would be that tumultuous period between February and October of 1917, when Russia had overthrown the tsar but not yet empowered the Bolsheviks<sup>20</sup>. While the benefit of hindsight might lead us to ignore this liminal period, sure as we are of its ultimate collapse, we should not underestimate the uncertainty that was felt at the time. If anything, it is precisely this phase which emphasizes the inherent contingency of history: could not a million things have gone different in these perilous eight months? To refer to these situations as ‘open’ is almost an understatement.

That said, the present conception of openness describes only its most accidental and unorganized occurrences. Much like a natural fission reactor, the open historical situation is something which can appear spontaneously, but is far more useful when established deliberately. This kind of decoupling is essential, as it indicates that the worthwhile aspects of revolutionary chaos—those moments of respite which allow for liberating ideas and practices to come to the fore—need not be associated with the fear and brutality which such disruption also entails. The frequent conflation of anarchy with mere disorder and violence may be partly owed to this implicit connection. In any case, it is important to establish that openness is hardly ever the result of accident alone. Instead, there are concrete methods by which it can be founded and maintained, and those organizations which embody openness often played a vital role in the major world revolutions. Here one could think of the democratic soldiers’ and workers’ councils (or ‘soviets’ in Russian) which made up the initial basis of Bolshevik power. Without the autonomous power of organs like the Petrograd Soviet, the revolution of October would have been utterly impossible. However, to relitigate these past events is to be lost in vanished fortunes. Far more than a distant and passive opportunity, openness should be seen as an immediate and active reality.

In its deliberate configuration, the principle of openness appropriately centers the concept of deliberation. Between annihilation and creativity lies a space of reflection, consideration, and discussion in general. The metaphor of openness here applies quite literally to the freedom of the forum and the meeting-place; it represents the antithesis of anything which happens ‘behind closed doors’. While such open proceedings may not lack any protocol altogether, the main focus is still on trying to create a powerful, foundational, and considerate social environment; in fact, it often takes a careful amount of organization to ensure that informal modes of domination do not assert themselves under such circumstances. As long as anarchy is guaranteed, the actual procedure of these democratic spaces can take many different forms, from idle discussion to rigorous consensus building to the spectacle of agonistic pluralism. The pursuit of such direct interactions is what really matters.

Again, it should be emphasized that these anarchic structures are not the product of sheer spontaneity. Though the councils of revolution always seem to emerge *ex nihilo*, the intuitions which found them are anything but arbitrary. Instead, they are based in a variety of

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<sup>20</sup> As Russia still used its ‘Old Style’ calendar in 1917, most tend to know this period as that between the revolutions of ‘February’ and ‘October’, though they actually occurred in March and November respectively.

learned practices. In a workplace context, we might suppose that many employees often already operate by the principles of self-management, at least when the boss is around. In civil and political organizations, there is the inspiration of relevant revolutionary predecessors. In general, traditions of collective deliberation run deep in many cultures: particularly non-state societies have a significant degree of experience with these kinds of open institutions, and their overall history could go back to the dawn of our species.<sup>21</sup> The importance of this basic autonomy should not be underestimated.

Between the chaos and the councils, a third interpretation of openness soon comes to the fore. Any proper assembly should make sure to include the greatest possible variety of perspectives among its participants. To fail to do so is to court exclusion and marginalization, the very antitheses of openness. However, beyond avoiding this basic injustice, there are also more positive reasons for organizing in an inclusive and diverse fashion. From an epistemic standpoint, we should consider the wisdom of crowds: every additional person can bring a whole new set of ideas and suggestions based on their unique experiences. More specifically, the interests of a community cannot be adequately represented by any single member thereof, however competent or benevolent they might be.<sup>22</sup> As such, it is vital to involve its various factions as directly as possible.

Naturally, there is at least one necessary limit to this maximizing of diversity, one which derives from the need for self-preservation. As argued so famously by Karl Popper, any society which tolerates intolerance is bound to undermine its own liberties. Thus, the dissolution of diversity or deliberation more broadly should not be an acceptable perspective, and the safety of one part of the community should not be inherently threatened by another. In short, the maximization of openness should be bounded by the minimization of harm. Only then can this principle be meaningful.

The fourth form of openness is a notion of inherent incompleteness. It exists to qualify our every organization, to point out that none of them are perfect examples of emptiness. To consider any particular social arrangement to be final is the height of hubris, and can only lead one to stymie any further innovation or critique. Those who despair at the endlessness of this pursuit should instead rejoice, for the same infinity which ensures imperfection also allows for novelty. Unlike the totalized schemas of many political doctrines, the openness of emptiness means that there must always be room for change and improvement, including the revision of emptiness itself. Even if its minimal definitions are more likely to last, to chain emptiness to a particular context, concept, or even language is to secure its demise. Much like the ancient Dao, the truest form of emptiness is ultimately fluid, if not ineffable.

Speaking of fluidity, the fifth and final conception of openness relates to the territorial domain of empty politics, something which is as indefinite as the rest of it. Unlike the state-enforced confines of other political ideologies, those which adhere to the principles of emptiness could never be ruled by the arbitrary boundaries of nationhood. The emptied community exists in a state of material flux, with its total population, land, and resources being determined by immediate needs or greater pursuits. Here I take my primary inspiration from anarchist theories of sovereignty, which explicitly reject the violent territoriality of state border regimes. ‘Occupancy and use’ is their alternative principle, and one can readily see how generalizing this notion would lead to the creation of a radically different political order.

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<sup>21</sup> This observation forms one of the main arguments of David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> This argument is further developed in the section on prefigurative politics, itself based on Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 99.

At last we come to the third major element of emptiness, this being the principle of creativity. Among the other elements associated with emptiness, this one may initially appear dissonant; active creation seems incompatible with the annihilation of the given and the opening of new interactions. However, to think of emptiness the mere storage of political potential is to misread it, for even the ancient Daoists believed in putting their Power to work. Let us recall that *wuwei* is simply the abbreviated form of *wei wu wei*; action is allowable, just as long as it flows from the Dao. Similarly, the cycle of political activity which emptiness circumscribes should be anything but immobile. The promotion of noncoercion and the elimination of suffering ought not keep us from acting in the world altogether, for that would make us victims of circumstance. Instead, we should preserve our creativity in a manner which accords with emptiness itself.

The first and perhaps most vital aspect of empty creativity is its emphasis on immediacy. The process of empty social creation should flow directly from its participants, unmediated by such overarching authorities as party or state. It is through the intercession of such institutions that political ideals are abstracted from the people they're meant to serve. Instead, they should be the product of direct and collective interactions. Indeed, directness is the paramount feature of this kind of creativity, as only a constant grounding in contemporary circumstances can keep empty structures from losing their way. Thus, any social arrangement must be taken as temporary, and every organization must declare itself provisional. Of course, even this commitment to radical transience will run up against the inherent incompleteness of structured emptiness, and so the true force of annihilation is sure to crop up eventually. When our creations have been inevitably corrupted, we should desist from their maintenance and simply try again.

Another important aspect to creative emptiness is revealed in its relation to annihilation and openness. In its most obvious form, creativity is the end result of these elements. As annihilation enables openness, openness in turn spurs on the creation of new social structures, all in the hopes that a freer world might be established. And yet, as mentioned before, the ultimate obsolescence of these creations will guarantee the cycle's renewal. Taken together, this is the most conventional framing of the process of political emptiness, and the one I have generally relied on so far. However, this process does not encompass all of their potential interactions.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the three-part division of political emptiness is at least partly arbitrary. In practice, we'll find that many of our political actions could not be neatly attributed to any one of these categories. That which annihilates can also open, that which opens can also create, and so on. The same arbitrariness also applies to their supposed sequence, which can start from openness or creativity just as easily as it does from annihilation. It is this observation which lends a renewed power to the principle of creativity, which otherwise might seem like an unfortunate appendix to the freedom of openness. Instead, it is exactly our imagination and organization which paves the way for political emptiness. A prominent example of this is the prefigurative mode of politics, where the creation of new and parallel institutions prepares the liberation to come. Though this theory will be further addressed in a later chapter, it yet remains as a shining representation of the power of empty creativity, and the way that the principles of emptiness entail one another.

In this context of interaction, one may wonder whether the process of empty politics could ever be said to end. This gets at a fundamental question of political emptiness, and Daoist metaphysics more broadly. From one point of view, the stochastic uncertainty of reality is such that no particular organization could ever account for it, thus ensuring the

perpetual renewal of the empty political process. From a more teleological perspective, however, it might be supposed that our non-action could increasingly lead to a kind of ‘non-organization’, a collective practice which flows along with the disruptions of life. Were this to be realized, the distinctions within empty politics would become increasingly meaningless, as annihilation, openness, and creativity would all be contained within our every movement. Indeed, the category of emptiness itself would then become an impediment, sustaining the impression of an essence where there isn’t one. In this impossibly perfect era, to speak of emptiness, anarchy, or society would be both meaningless and counterproductive. At the same time, though, to declare such an age before its time would be perilous, for this would reify the very structures we’re hoping to transcend. While the perfection of emptiness is something worth aiming for, we can know nothing about it until its presence is an absolute certainty. Real emptiness is not the emptiness that can be put into words.

With this resolved, we now have a basic impression of the constituent parts of political emptiness, along with some understanding of their myriad interactions. To know them further requires a more specific set of analyses, which I shall set out in the upcoming chapters. By applying the concept of emptiness to various domains of political activity, both the area of application and emptiness itself will be clarified and augmented. There is only so much abstract reasoning that can point to the meaning of emptiness; the rest must be found in its real operation.

The first of these domains of application will be the realm of utopian thought, where political emptiness shall help to distinguish its varying tendencies and discern a better kind of utopia from a morass of petty tyrannies. Thence onwards, the next chapter will face the politics of implementation rather than imagination, asking how emptiness relates to the notion of constituent power. Could it perhaps resolve that famous paradox of revolution, where the people by their own power create the regime which oppresses them? Here, the cyclicity of the three principles will prove quite useful in particular. Finally, one of the more practical modes of emptiness will be considered, this being the realm of prefigurative politics. Using a comprehensive guide to this burgeoning field of study, I will indicate how the assumptions which underlie prefiguration are key examples of emptiness in action. Furthermore, these prefigurative methods of organization will be contrasted to the state socialist strategies of yesteryear, thus providing a pragmatic and ethical argument for notions which might otherwise seem quite abstract and unpracticable. All in all, the next three chapters are set up as distinct case studies in political philosophy, embedding emptiness in their contexts so as to further enhance our understanding and appreciation of this elusive yet powerful principle.

## Utopia: The Open Imagination

In almost any enterprise that deals with the concept of utopia, it is necessary to at least survey the vast amount of scholarship that exists on this matter. Here is a concept fraught with controversy, knowing numerous contradictory accounts of a source material that goes back centuries. If one is to maintain any coherence amid this torrent of theories, it is therefore vital to establish a definitional baseline, to find a common start to one's analysis. Thus, as I begin to connect political emptiness to the domain of utopianism, I must settle on my own source of understanding.

It is along these lines that I would introduce the work of Fredric Jameson. By way of *Archaeologies of the Future*, his analysis of utopian theory, I would take my own first steps into this chaotic field. My reason for choosing this source is a rather simple one: it provides a thorough and contemporary look at both utopian theory and the material which informs it. Furthermore, Jameson's emphasis on the political aspects of utopia (as opposed to its literary forms) meshes well with my own priorities. In general, I have been surprised by the acuity of some of his observations, and he derives strong philosophical conclusions from what might otherwise be a mere cultural critique. From my own political-philosophical perspective, this makes him a good source to engage with.

I would begin my analysis of utopia through Jameson at the same place he does, by considering which phenomena one should include in this nebulous concept. In his opening chapter, Jameson lays out two distinct lines of understanding utopia, a dichotomy in how this topic has been treated academically.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, there is the historical collection of texts, programs, and communities which have at some time been described as 'utopian'. In this context, the term refers to the intentional political nature of these efforts, which either imagined or seriously tried to establish a superior kind of society. The other meaning of utopia is far less deliberate altogether, and is particularly associated with the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch. Within his considerable work on this topic, utopia becomes an unconscious impulse within all future-oriented life and culture.<sup>24</sup> While Bloch reveals the effective omnipresence of this phenomenon through his vast analysis of various cultural and political domains, his framing also implicitly de-emphasizes those projects which belong to the first meaning of utopia. Should the deliberate nature of such examples not count for something? Thus, even if these perspectives on utopia are not entirely opposed, their differing emphases on the role of intentionality is one which any writing on utopia will have to resolve before proceeding.

In order to surmount this present dilemma, I believe it worthwhile to reconsider my central concerns, to ask what I intend to achieve by placing empty politics within a utopian context. If I am to connect my project to either of these two interpretations of utopia, I should measure political emptiness against the key difference between them: intentionality. At first glance, it seems like the subconscious Blochian reading is the one which corresponds most with what I've laid out so far. After all, the Daoist philosophy I take my primary inspiration from is also concerned with the operation of a vague yet pervasive force. Even if the utopianism of Bloch is more cynical in nature, potentially functioning as the false idealism of a capitalist cultural apparatus, this does not deny its possible operation as a form of political emptiness. Indeed, as long as we consider this mode of utopianism to be universal, then an

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<sup>23</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 2.

empty society would surely know its own variation on this impulse. In that sense, utopia is as inescapable as the Dao itself.

Nevertheless, this Blochian kind of utopia is not one I would pursue here, for the simple reason that it does not accord with my understanding of politics. Even if a future-oriented impulse could be said to exist universally, this tells us little about the way that a society ought to be organized. The value of intentional utopianism, and my conception of empty politics by extension, is that it embraces the deliberate nature of politics itself. While cultural influences can certainly be imbued with political meaning, their functioning resides in the hidden, the subconscious, the unquestioned. As such, they lack the immediate concern with conflict, deliberation, and organization which defines actual political enterprise. By contrast, the framing of utopia as an intentional effort is inherently concerned with the pursuit of politics, both in its literal content and in its literary position within a larger debate. Each new utopian project represents another thesis on the potential for a perfect society, and most of them exist in relation to their forebears, be that as a refinement or a repudiation. This dialectical process is one which befits the priorities of empty politics, particularly in affirming its principle of openness. Any large-scale deliberation on the organization of society will surely be marked by a kind of utopian striving, if only because it demands so much of our imagination. And so, because it deals so immediately with the intentional implementation of political emptiness, this is the kind of utopianism which I will address in the rest of this chapter.

However, by committing to this understanding of utopia, I am almost immediately faced with another major issue, an even greater obstacle implied by Jameson's analysis. In the same section where he discusses the major differences between deliberate utopianism and the Blochian approach, one of the factors he points to is the essential 'closure' of its imagined form.<sup>25</sup> If a literary or at least intentional utopia is to present its perfected society, it must do so by emphasizing the hermetic and self-sufficient nature of that vision. To do otherwise is to compromise the sense of totality and system which defines this type of imagination. Without the positing of a complete and completely other mode of social existence, there simply is no utopia.

If Jameson's approach to utopia is correct—and I will assume here that it is—then the closure of the utopian ideal must necessarily be preserved. But this poses a severe problem once the notion of empty politics enters the picture. While notions of annihilations and creativity are easily recognized in the utopian narrative, emptiness also includes the principle of openness. Yet where the empty structure emphasizes its own incompleteness, utopian design demands an isolated totality. Thus, unless either of these fields is significantly altered, it seems like the rich history of utopia will be essentially inaccessible to the imagination of political emptiness.

In my attempt to overcome this incompatibility, two general strategies come to mind. The first would be to affirm the previous conclusion: let's assume that utopia is indeed defined by a preoccupation with closure. One way to get around this issue would be to deny its relevance altogether. Perhaps there is a way by which even the enclosed utopia could be used in an empty fashion. An indirect example of this may be taken from the work of political theorist Marit Böker, specifically in her conception of the "Type III Realistic Utopia". This concept is coined as part of a wider discussion about the supposed authoritarianism of utopian imaginations, a feature which overlaps with its inherent closure. What Böker specifically

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<sup>25</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 5.

responds to is the idea that imagining a perfect society entails a claim to absolute moral authority, a vision which can justify its own coercive implementation.<sup>26</sup> In answering to this critique, she points out that the effective harm of a utopian imagination lies not in the singularity of its vision, but rather in its ability to stymie the critiques of its audience.<sup>27</sup> This is why the authoritarianism of a given utopia must be taken as separate from its realizability; the most realistic utopia can still be coercive in its implementation.

Putting aside the problem of practicability—a concern which drives the first two types of ‘realistic’ utopianism—Böker emphasizes the importance of a “meta-process of pluralistic utopian visioning”.<sup>28</sup> This is the aforementioned Type III, a mode of utopian imagination which takes its own context into account. Rather than limiting the specific contents of any utopia, we merely deny its total validity. The purported perfection of utopia is safely contained within its own text, whereas its actual moral and critical value is something which must be actively and discursively established.<sup>29</sup> Thus, we could say that the true problem of utopia is found in the quality of our meta-utopia, in the way we receive and deal with this genre of the social imagination. As long as the discourse is ordered correctly, we have nothing to fear from the tyrannies of its subject.

This idea of the pluralistic meta-utopia has some important consequences for how the enclosed utopia might still be incorporated into an empty political framework. If the effective authoritarianism of a given utopia is dependent on its critical environment, then it seems plausible that the same may be said of its inherent closure. Perhaps the lack of pluralism or incompleteness within this genre of imagination could be compensated by a greater emphasis on reception and critique, thereby embedding its closed narratives within a more open discourse. No matter how hermetic or benighted the individual utopia might still seem, at least this meta-fictional approach would allow us to amend or reshape them accordingly. In general, the dangers of enclosed utopianism would be defanged by the empty environment itself.

While this Bökerian answer somewhat resolves the problem of utopian closure, we are still left with the sense that utopianism itself is a poisoned well. Whatever useful insight we may dredge up from its depths, we should take care to remember that its waters aren’t potable. This rather sours the entire enterprise, and so it is worth asking whether the closed utopia might not be opened further.

For this, I would return to Jameson’s work on the matter, that which caused us so much trouble to begin with. In a later part of *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson reflects on the postmodern development of a new kind of utopian imagination, one which centers the conflicting multiplicity of visions along with the question of their overall desirability.<sup>30</sup> The aforementioned objections are here incorporated into the narrative itself, all to affirm or at least debate the continued merits of utopianism as such. This shift in utopian writing reflects a moment of profound postmodern reinvention, where the seeming obsolescence of utopia in the historical victory of global capitalism over state socialism eventually led to the renewed necessity of utopia in providing a formal ‘disruption’ of the neoliberal status quo.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Marit Böker, “The Concept of Realistic Utopia: Ideal Theory as Critique,” *Constellations* 24, no. 1 (October 2015): 90.

<sup>27</sup> Idem

<sup>28</sup> Böker, “Realistic Utopia,” 94.

<sup>29</sup> Böker, “Realistic Utopia,” 95.

<sup>30</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 216.

<sup>31</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 231.

As part of this process, utopia's authors realized that the old totalitarian mold no longer had any relevance; no modern solution would fit this postmodern environment. In this new era of imagination, utopia has almost become meta-utopia, at least in the sense of founding itself in multiplicity and interaction. Insofar as a totalized system still exists in this genre, it merely functions to sustain the archipelago as a whole. To ensure that each part of it can survive, but also that none of its parts become harmful to its participants, the globality of migration and infrastructure are both essential components of this arrangement.<sup>32</sup> Along with these assurances of diversity, there is also the creation of an 'inner gap', an inherent incompleteness which produces an ever-shifting pattern of internal relationships.<sup>33</sup> This is just another way in which the utopian system is safeguarded from its totalizing tendencies.

Overall, the effected combination of multiplicity and incompleteness is remarkably similar to my own conception of openness. Indeed, I would argue this new model of utopia resolves the problem of closure by including openness within itself. It's a rather clever tactic, one which almost wholly eliminates the narrowminded authoritarianism of utopias past. As for whatever element of closure might remain, this can be easily disarmed by applying Böker's construction of the realistic meta-utopia. Taken together, this dual strategy resolves the potential incompatibility between political emptiness and the utopian imagination. With this, we can finally begin to ask a more important question: how do the concepts of emptiness and utopia augment one another?

Here we come to the final purpose of this discussion. However compatible utopia may be with the principles of emptiness, what matters is whether their mutual redefining itself has some use value. To some extent, I would argue that this usefulness has already been indicated: the very development of a new, more open utopian model seems to be guided by similar concerns as those that gave rise to empty politics. To apply emptiness to utopia, then, is to cement its commitment to pluralism and incompleteness, both within the text and outside of it. It makes explicit what has already been happening, and thereby allows us to be more conscious about the contemporary creation of utopias.

On the other hand, it is also worth asking how utopianism as such would fit within the larger project of empty politics; why pursue this form of social imagination as part of it? Again, we can point to some of our earlier observations. Recalling Jameson's analysis, it is clear that one of the major functions of utopian thinking is to serve as a 'disruption' of the existing bounds of political possibility. While the present utopian drive was caused by a postmodern state of neoliberal endlessness—something which seems increasingly irrelevant these days—there is still a great need for radical imaginations that can challenge the unconvincing narrative of mainstream climate adaptation. Whereas many powerful political voices yet pretend that the necessary changes can be effected through incremental reform, it is the climate utopians who are asserting the need for fundamental shifts in the capitalist world order. We live in one of those strange times where the most radical actors are also those with the greatest concern for realistic solutions. As such, utopian thought is more important than ever.

To summarize my position, I would say that utopianism is a clear expression of the dynamics of political emptiness, unifying the principles of annihilation, openness, and creativity into a single act of imagination. Within the greater struggle for empty politics, it serves as a means of disrupting, broadening, and inspiring our sense of what's politically

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<sup>32</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 219.

<sup>33</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 223.



possible, thus driving us onward towards actual political organization. This latter process is what I will center in the next two chapters, discussing how political emptiness manifests itself in the direct and active constitution of society. My first priority in this regard will be to establish an empty account of political power and change, of the way we might attempt to construct society anew. In particular, I will consider the twin concepts of constituent and destituent power, and how each of these relates to an established political order. As with the concept of utopia, this discussion will lead to a mutual recontextualization vis-à-vis the project of empty politics. In other words, as the question of societal constitution is refocused by the lens of political emptiness, so too will this refocusing reveal a new aspect to the overall ambitions of the empty political program.

## Constituent Power: The Cycle of Creativity

At its core, the topic of constituent power concerns a question of *becoming*: how do new political orders come into being? Since the creation of a truly novel society demands at least a partial break with the previous arrangement, we could imagine this process as exemplifying a fundamental creativity. It is this basic framing which allows for a significant resonance between the concept of constituent power and the framework of empty politics. As I will indicate in the following, we may recognize the ontology of political emptiness in the theories which surround constituent power. Such important similarities are found in its combination of cyclical process and immanent tendency, or else in the balancing act between descriptive use and normative power. Appropriately, the latter of these parallels also implies to the comparison of constituent power and empty politics itself; each is not merely an example of the other, but also helps to shape their confluence into a coherent whole. It is this interaction which I will endeavor to emphasize in particular. Before turning to their synthesis, however, constituent power should first be understood by its own terminology, apart from that of political emptiness.

Within its own domain, the nature of constituent power is inherently connected to the concept of constituted power. Together these forces make up the process by which state orders come to be established, justified, but also ultimately undone. If one regards the succession of state regimes and revolutionary upheavals as a kind of political-historical cycle, then the cadence of this cycle can be attributed to the interaction between constituent and constituted power. As their designations suggest, both of these terms are closely related to the rule and creation of constitutional law. Constituted power refers to those authorities which are sanctioned and instituted by a ruling constitution. By contrast, constituent power refers to those forces and agencies which are involved in changing a constitutional order itself, often by violently agitating for radical political change. In times of revolution, a constitutional regime is questioned and invalidated by those who claim constituent power, who then go on to constitute one which is more to their liking. This new constitution will become the basis of a new constituted power, which by itself cannot exclude the possibility of its own revolutionary invalidation. Thus a political-historical cycle is established.

As I've laid it out here, this is the most basic account of the relation between constituent and constituted power, of their emergence and their functioning. Only when we start to elaborate it further, do certain implicit problems arise. One such elaboration comes to us from the Italian Autonomist Marxist scholar Antonio Negri. In his account of the relationship between constituent and constituted power, Negri points to a distinction between the concepts of *Potentia* and *Potestas*. The former defines the power of a political movement, here understood as a real mass of people who effect their own social emancipation through radical democracy. The latter term describes precisely those elements which *Potentia* works against, the fortified authority of the 'powers that be'. In their entanglement, Negri naturally takes *Potentia* to be the primary force, just as he prioritizes constituent over constituted power. In this attitude, we may recognize the Daoist preference for emptiness as opposed to fullness, one being taken as the repudiation of the other. However, just as Daoism cannot be properly understood as merely a biased (non-)dualism, so does the relation between constituent and constituted power become incoherent when one is simplistically opposed to the other. In order to show this, Negri's position must be worked through more fully. By comparing its various aspects to those of empty politics, a core contradiction will be both revealed and transcended.

Within the present framing, Negri's idea of constituent power can be taken as a judgment on the relation between popular and institutional forces. His position in this is quite simple: "when [popular] strength is institutionalized, it is necessarily negated."<sup>34</sup> To lend this argument some social-scientific credit, I would turn to the work of American anthropologist James C. Scott, who has written extensively on the socio-historical aspects of state formation. In a discussion of popular movements in 20<sup>th</sup> century US history, Scott argues that their most effective forms were fundamentally incompatible with the ordinary channels of institutional politics. In other words, it was precisely because these movements were relatively diffuse and leaderless that they were able to win so many concessions.<sup>35</sup> In the ordinary course of subduing popular unrest, state institutions will generally seek out individuals and organizations which can meaningfully claim to represent the masses and their demands. By making the situation 'legible' through the purported authority of these figures, the episode of discontent is able to be resolved through conventional political mechanisms, trading popular concessions for a return to normalcy. Of course, this process contains a great paradox, for as the popular representative proves successful in realizing popular demands, they will begin to lose the very basis for their present power, this being the popular mobilization they have promised to quell. For the people themselves, if they accept the drive towards institutionalization and relinquish their own illegibility, then they will find their movement running out of steam. Taking up this argument in a normative sense, many contemporary anarchists argue that a notion of 'permanent conflictuality', i.e. an unwillingness to accept institutionalization, should be the ongoing attitude of any serious revolutionary movement.<sup>36</sup> Negri's position on this is similar, holding that the true strength and purpose of constituent power is "not to seek institutionality but to construct more being—ethical being, social being, community."<sup>37</sup>

If we follow Negri's reasoning to its logical end, constituent power is best understood as a totally sovereign force, one which ignores the claims of constituted power. This conclusion is affirmed when he states that "to claim that constituent power is over is pure logical nonsense."<sup>38</sup> Even as he acknowledges the deleterious effects of constituted power, it is not the case that its presence marks the total absence of constituent power. Instead, "the process started by constituent power never stops. The question is [therefore] not to limit constituent power, but to make it unlimited."<sup>39</sup> What results from this conception is something quite similar to our ongoing understanding of political emptiness. The latter's emphasis on a primordial and pervasive creativity is strongly echoed by Negri when he argues that "by insisting on the concept of constituent power as an absolute process — all-powerful and expansive, unlimited and unfinalized—we can begin to appreciate the originality of its structure."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, as a way of fully exemplifying the fundamental parallels between Negri's constituent power and the features of empty politics as previously established, I would share the following extended quote, which reads as much like a Daoist exultation of strength (*De*) as it does an explanation of the principle of openness:

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<sup>34</sup> Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 22.

<sup>35</sup> James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>36</sup> Sasha K., "Some Notes on Insurrectionary Anarchism", accessed May 31, 2022, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/sasha-k-some-notes-on-insurrectionary-anarchism>.

<sup>37</sup> Negri, *Insurgencies*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Negri, *Insurgencies*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Negri, *Insurgencies*, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Negri, *Insurgencies*, 13.

“The expansiveness of strength and its productivity are grounded in the void of limitations, in the absence of positive determinations, in this fullness of absence. Constituent power is defined emerging from the vortex of the void, from the abyss of the absence of determinations, as a totally open need. This is why constitutive strength never ends up as power, nor does the multitude tend to become a totality but, rather, a set of singularities, an open multiplicity. Constituent power is this force that, on the absence of finalities, is projected out as an all-powerful and always more expansive tendency. Lack of preconstituted assumptions and fullness of strength: this is a truly positive concept of freedom.”<sup>41</sup>

With this, a connection between political emptiness and constituent power seems fairly well established. Yet it is precisely through this comparison that a common problem is revealed. In the case of Negri’s work, we may put it like this: if constituent power represents the open drive towards a non-institutional existence, to what extent should it actually constitute anything? This question has its natural twin in the consideration of political emptiness. For if openness represents the ideal modes of deliberation and organization, what need is there for creativity? In general, why should we renew the cycle of political creation through emptiness or constituent power, when these forces are already the sovereign expressions of popular freedom and community? What these questions indicate is a profound confusion over the very nature of the political process, one which is encouraged by Negri’s opposition to constituted power as such. To resolve it, the matter of political constitution must be considered anew.

In a sense, Negri’s assessment is still absolutely correct: the institutionality of constituted power limits the potency of a more universal and open constituent power. However, two things must be acknowledged in order to clarify this picture. First, political institutions as such exist as soon as a community is defined, self-consciously or not. Even a stateless society could still know institutions in the form of customs, families, or systems of mediation. The question is therefore not to avoid institutionality as such, but rather to denote and eliminate its harmful variants—such as the systems of coercion we know the state. Secondly, the universal nature of constituent power must be interpreted as an ideal circumstances, one which can never be fully attained. In reality, as Negri’s critics argue, “we are already constituted as subjects within concrete social, spatial, and political forms that constrain what is possible.”<sup>42</sup> It is exactly this imperfection which makes the process of political constitution—as well as that of empty politics—into a cycle. The universality of constituent power can only ever be partial; its translation into actual modes of organization must always involve a degree of self-definition, and thereby self-limitation.<sup>43</sup> The cycle exists in order to ensure that this limit is ultimately overcome. When the present system has outlived its usefulness, the perpetual flywheel of constituent power will reconnect to its common institutions and so radically reconstitute them. Thus, instead of assuming any instance of emptiness to already be perfect, its overall process is one of cyclical striving.

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<sup>41</sup> Negri, *Insurgencies*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce Braun and Stephanie Wakefield, “Destituent power and common use: reading Agamben in the Anthropocene,” in *Handbook on the Geographies of Power*, ed. Mat Coleman and John Agnew (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), 262.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Lindahl, “Possibility, Actuality, Rupture: Constituent Power and the Ontology of Change,” *Constellations* 22, no.2 (June 2015): 172.

Still, this seems to bring us back to the beginning, to the basic interaction between constituent and constituted power which Negri originally objected to. And his objection yet has merit; there is a real danger in the way that established or establishing authorities seek the closure of constituent power by denying its ongoing validity. If this is to be avoided, a new conception of constituted power is clearly necessary.

In order to renew our understanding of the role and nature of constituted power, I would initially return to the Daoist philosophy which stands at the basis of political emptiness. More specifically, I believe some fruitful inspiration may be drawn from the very first passage of the *Dao De Jing*, which may be taken as a statement on the Dao's ontology. Its first line says simply that "[the Dao] that can be put into words is not really [the Dao]".<sup>44</sup> Of course, this statement is quite multi-interpretable; one of its more common readings is as a claim to ineffability. Whatever discrete meaning we may try to assign to the Dao, it is inherently other than that, only being knowable in the immediate experience of it. However, this leads to a bit of a contradiction: if the Dao is so ineffable, why would one write so much about it? For this reason, I would presently interpret it as more of a statement of epistemic humility. Though we may try and even succeed in approximating the meaning of the Dao through words, we should be mindful of the inherent limitations in our linguistic apparatus. Our grasping can never be complete.

When transposed into the context of constituted power, we could phrase this observation as such: 'the constituent power that can be institutionalized is not the real constituent power'. In a way, this is no different from what Negri is saying, for the sovereignty of true constituent power remains unsundered. Even so, we still allow ourselves to approximate the intended freedom and community of this movement through our organizational effort, just with the clear reminder that whatever is arranged institutionally is not the popular will in itself. From this perspective, a constitution is just a shadow, not to be confused for the constituent light which produces it. Its function can only ever be provisional.

This is probably the most straightforward parallel to draw between Dao and constituent power. That said, an even stronger conclusion is possible, one I would phrase as such: 'the constituted power that is put into words is not the real constituted power'. This idea gets its meaning from another variation on the original Daoist passage. Instead of focusing on the idea that words cannot impart the true meaning of the Dao, or the suggestion that these words can only deliver an approximation of that meaning, let us consider the way in which these words themselves are not essentially related to the Dao. The meaning of Dao itself is other than the symbol which denotes it, and that meaning is only found in relation to real activity in the world. Similarly, the nature of constituted power is other than the formal means by which it is organized; a constitution is just a document. What gives constituted power its power is the way in which its organization is actively enforced.

By recognizing this distinction between organization and power, a more radical analysis of constituted power is opened up. Now, instead of merely acknowledging the approximate nature of the constituted regime, we can temper the harmful effects of its inherent inaccuracies by limiting the amount of force at its disposal. After all, an injustice which is realized absolutely is far more harmful than one which cannot be enacted unilaterally. While there is always some relation between the given laws and the strength with which they are enforced, the very ability to see a difference between them guides us towards more anarchistic outcomes. Even if the process of constituent power must ultimately produce

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<sup>44</sup> Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 77.

some kind of institutional force which exists outside of it—and thereby contains the potential for injustice—at least the degree to which this power can operate unquestioningly is something under our control.

Finally, the strongest redefinition of constituted power, one which goes so far as to question Negri's constituent power as well, is derived from the work of another Italian social theorist: the philosopher Giorgio Agamben. His arguments about the shortcomings of constituent power ironically derive from a similar place as that of Negri, namely from a general preoccupation with the nature of modern state authority. According to Agamben, the justification of contemporary state power is increasingly founded in notions of security, a principle which inherently exempts itself from political scrutiny.<sup>45</sup> In a rather paradoxical maneuver, the state always already maintains the power to eschew its own laws, to declare a so-called 'state of exception' and govern by decree. Within the present political order specifically, the expedience of emergency has been pursued towards a total depoliticization of government. The constituted power has revealed its own anomy, its lawlessness, and can't simply be abolished through the creation of a new institutional order. Agamben therefore claims the necessity for a destituent power, which instead of law-making will concern itself with the complete abolition of state power.<sup>46</sup> This goes beyond the earlier separation between organization and power. Instead of supposing that particular constitutions might limit the power at their own disposal—a supposition which ignores the potential for a state of exception—our organization should itself be made impervious to the centralization of power. In a way, this recalls the traditional anarchist exhortation to be or become 'ungovernable'. As long as we cannot see beyond the state's paradigm, investing it with the power to abuse us, the threat of an exceptional security regime will remain ever present.

Since it provides such a strong reaction to what has come before, it is worth wondering whether the concept of destituent power merely redefines the process of political constitution, or whether something more fundamental is changed here. By his own appraisal—as well as that of his commentators—Agamben's framing exists as a strong repudiation of both constituent and constituted power, as it seeks to transcend their cycle through ungovernability. However, while the critique of constituent power as leading to a state of control and exception is entirely valid, this ignores our earlier conclusion that the cyclicity of constitution is a function of self-definition, not state-making as such. Even the creation of ungovernable domains, if this depends on discrete forms of collective organization, would be marked by partiality and imperfection. Since simple institutionality is unavoidable, we should take care that the particular methods of attaining ungovernability do not lead to new possibilities for control. Instead, the entire process ought to be subject to a continuous process of 'restitution'. Generally speaking, as long as anything is established, it is subject to the base critique of a constituent or destituent power. Until the perfect is attained, this cycle is unavoidable.

In the end, I believe that the perspectives of Negri and Agamben are more complementary than oppositional. Both consider themselves to exist outside of instituted power, ignoring its purported authority and finality in order to set out a free and stateless mode of sociopolitical organization. If the main issue with Negri's constituent power is his contextless assumption of openness—which thereby denies the need for further constitution—

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<sup>45</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "From the State of Control to a Praxis of Destituent Power," accessed May 31, 2022, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/giorgio-agamben-from-the-state-of-control-to-a-praxis-of-destituent-power>.

<sup>46</sup> Agamben, "State of Control."

then what Agamben adds is a new and inverted way to constitute, akin to the principle of annihilation. By combining their methods, and making sure that the notion of creativity is preserved rather than obfuscated by either framing, a characteristically 'empty' synthesis is formed. In this way, the vicious cycle of political constitution is turned into a virtuous one, where the continuous adjustment of political organization is of an ever-diminishing severity. With every turn of the revolutionary wheel, there's another chance for its constituents to increase their awareness and harmony. Perhaps one day, some true state of perfect and spontaneous organization might be achieved. As it is, however, the empty mode of political constitution is already its own reward.

## Prefiguration: The Horizon of Annihilation

At its most basic, the idea of prefigurative politics defines all the programs, practices, and tendencies which indicate the emergence of a new political order within the present society. In a more specific sense, it is a self-conscious concept, drawn up by certain left-wing political theorists in order to put a name to their experimental practice. A major example of such codification is the work *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* by Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin. Since it provides a succinct yet comprehensive overview of the contemporary understanding of prefigurative politics, I shall use it extensively in the following. This begins by taking up one of the definitions provided by Raekstad and Gradin: prefigurative politics is “the *deliberate* experimental implementation of *desired* future social relations and practices in the here-and-now.”<sup>47</sup> As the emphases of the quote indicate, this formulation is distinctly different from the one discussed previously, as it excludes those forms of prefigurative causation which are drawn from a more general historical analysis. Instead, this framing turns prefiguration into a specific strategy of political activity, one which can rival or complement others so as to form a complete program for effecting radical social change.

In its political-organizational meaning, the notion of prefiguration did not emerge in isolation, but rather formed as part of a specific discourse within the anti-capitalist Left. While in general it reflects the opposition between statist and anarchist schools of socialism, its importance is most keenly felt in the debate over means and ends. Within this context, prefiguration is best understood as a particular attempt at achieving unity between means and ends, a strategy which may be contrasted to more instrumental, goal-oriented theories of change. By elaborating on this unity and developing its contrast with instrumentalism, we can quickly develop a thorough understanding of theory and praxis associated with prefigurative politics.

As a term, the notion of prefiguration is both older and younger than its practical examples would suggest. While originating as a theological term for any supposed pre-Christian indications of the arrival of Christ, its contemporary political usage stems from the 1970s, when it was first used to describe the practice of various past and present social causes.<sup>48</sup> Its usage in anarchist circles—and in ‘libertarian socialist’ communities more broadly—stems from this original denomination. However, the historical phenomenon it describes is considerably older. If the act of prefiguration can be summarized as an organizational emphasis on means-ends unity, then it has been part of the anarchist ethos since at least its formal origin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A good expression of this tendency can be found in the work of Errico Malatesta, in a section which also represents the anarchist argument in favor of prefiguration:

“But it is not enough to desire something; if one really wants it adequate means must be used to secure it. And these means are not arbitrary, but instead cannot but be conditioned by the ends we aspire to and by the circumstances in which the struggle takes place, for if we ignore the choice of means we would achieve other ends, possibly diametrically opposed to those we aspire to, and this would be the obvious and inevitable consequence of our choice of

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 36.

<sup>48</sup> Raekstad and Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics*, 19.



means. Whoever sets out on the highroad and takes a wrong turning does not go where he intends to go but where the road leads him.”<sup>49</sup>

As this quote suggests, the anarchist position in favor of prefiguration should primarily be taken as a question of directionality. The claim here is that a means which is not properly informed by its own ends cannot help but diverge from it. This is a stance which opposes itself to more instrumental forms of political strategy, as these imply that the means and ends of a given process are relatively divorced from one another. Taken in the abstract, this anarchist opposition to instrumentality could be explained as an extension of their general ethics. Given that the rejection of coercion and domination is an inherent part of anarchism, their use as part of one’s political practice would be highly controversial. For an anarchist, the means generally do not justify the ends.

That said, the anarchist opposition to seizing and developing state power is not merely the function of a moral objection, although this is an important factor. Rather, it also reflects a profound skepticism about the efficacy of such strategies, one which is based in the aforementioned question of directionality. Raekstad and Gradin hold fast to this position as well, and defend it primarily by appealing to an argument of *praxis*, i.e. of theorized practical activity. Simply put, their claim is that prefigurative politics are a necessary tool in developing the right kind of abilities and dispositions, thereby enabling and motivating us to establish our desired society.<sup>50</sup>

In their framing of the issue, Raekstad and Gradin divide the praxis of prefigurative politics into three components: powers, drives, and consciousness. Starting with the notion of power, they argue that prefiguration entails an implicit form of political education, where its participants can learn the social and organizational skills that a truly free society would demand of them. For example, the consensus-based decision-making of most anarchist collectives provides a general democratic aptitude that could be applied under a host of different circumstances. As imperceptible as it may seem, such political training can be indispensable under more revolutionary circumstances, where this mode of organization could be quickly scaled upwards so as to preserve the popularity of self-government.

The second element of prefigurative praxis consists of the drives it imparts. Beyond mere ability, it is also important that we develop the right motivations and tendencies through the prefiguration of our desired society. The wrong intentions could leave us trapped in our old behaviors, socialized into a system we don’t really want to reproduce. Fortunately, the persistent practice of a liberated life can free our minds as well as our bodies. The creation of new social arrangements inherently leads to new kinds of social experience, and these in turn show us new ways to appreciate and act on our lived existence. Raekstad and Gradin explain this through the reciprocal influence of powers and drives; learned abilities augment our senses and needs, which in turn motivate us to educate ourselves further.<sup>51</sup> For example, one who has not experienced communist forms of exchange cannot truly understand its subtleties—how do you act when ownership is absent?—yet those who try them out may develop an entirely new sense of what is economically possible and desirable. If such a change sounds rather extraordinary, consider how the ubiquity of digital information transmission has already loosened our adherence to the sanctity of intellectual property. Just

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<sup>49</sup> Errico Malatesta, “An Anarchist Programme,” accessed May 31, 2022, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/errico-malatesta-an-anarchist-programme>.

<sup>50</sup> Raekstad and Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics*, 56.

<sup>51</sup> Raekstad and Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics*, 49.

as our individual powers aren't fixed, so can our sense of taste and morality shift significantly over time, partly determined by our abilities.

Lastly, Raekstad and Gradin also consider consciousness to be an essential element of the praxis of prefigurative politics. Here again, there is a significant interaction with the previous notions of powers and drives, both of which shape and are shaped by our general awareness and understanding of social situations. Within the context of prefiguration, it is vital that we learn to recognize the right signs of either our oppression or our liberation, lest we fall for the deceptions of a false consciousness. Through the experimental practice of new social relations, we can know the difference between various forms of conduct, and thereby figure out what exactly unnerves us about the present state of affairs. As just a small example of this, I would argue that asking for another's gender and pronouns, as well as explicitly introducing one's own, can help to both normalize queer identities and recognize the enforcement of false binaries. This is a clear case in which prefigurative action creates a mode of consciousness; when enacted collectively, such practices can rapidly permeate the larger culture. Of course, sometimes this causal chain runs in the other direction, and it takes the invention of a new theory to enable our prefigurative exercise. In a way, the very concept of prefigurative politics accords with this mechanism. Its coining in the late 1970s has helped tremendously in describing some of the base differences between various kinds of political organization. Thus, a new consciousness allows for new activities.

Between these three elements of powers, drives, and consciousness, it should be clear by now that prefiguration has a far-reaching effect on our character and conduct, helping us to develop and actually effect our ideological principles. Of course, I am primarily interested here in how this strategy interacts with the principles of empty politics. Based on my explanation of its praxis, I believe this accordance has now become a lot more intuitive.

Starting from the principle of annihilation, there are two ways in which this element could be applied to the concept of prefiguration. First, there is the simple annihilation inherent in replacing old habits and institutions with new, prefigured ones. While the practices associated with prefigurative politics are yet embedded within the existing society, they still represent a novel way of life. Beyond the old dichotomy of reform versus revolution, prefiguration proceeds by its own concept of progress, one where the yet regnant social order is increasingly hollowed out by its experimental replacements.

So far, this all describes a quite regular conception of the principle of annihilation. However, there is also a second possible interpretation of the relation between prefiguration and annihilation. This second meaning takes a temporal view of the matter, and considers how prefiguration dissolves the barrier between utopian future and practical present. The key to this insight is a proper understanding of how the concept of 'the future' can be mobilized politically. Given its basic uncertainty, any vision, prediction, or imagination of the future is inherently speculative, often being more of an ideological statement than a literal truth. Its presentation expresses either our desires or our fears, thus becoming a means of motivating us towards one action or another. While this can be an effective political tool, it is only useful insofar as it actually leads us towards virtuous actions. For every climate activist appealing to the specter of natural catastrophe, there is a right-wing authoritarian fearmongering about racial replacement. Foretelling the future is a risky business.

With this in mind, it may be worth wondering why prefiguration bothers to suppose a future utopia at all. Doesn't our present activity suffice? Indeed, this is a prominent intra-anarchist objection levelled at the temporality of prefigurative politics. In his article on hope and prefiguration, anarchist Uri Gordon takes a third position: that while presentism "covers

for a reluctance to confront the absent promise of revolutionary accomplishment” and prefigurativism offers a false reassurance based on its claim to temporal recursion, a properly anarchist approach to time ought to be generative in nature.<sup>52</sup> What Gordon means by this is that the historical anarchist conception of the future has always focused on its creative aspect, on the way that our present ethics of organization could produce a utopian outcome if thoroughly generalized. This forward-looking attitude is quite unlike the Christian mode of prefiguration, which Gordon sees as corrupting our present understanding of means-ends unity. Thus, instead of ‘prefigurative politics’, we should be speaking of ‘concrete utopia’.<sup>53</sup>

Personally, I believe this distinction between prefigurative and generative futurism to be a matter of semantic rather than functional difference. The way in which the term ‘prefiguration’ is used by contemporary theorists and revolutionaries already reflects Gordon’s framing. Furthermore, in accordance with the principle of annihilation, any worthwhile attitude towards a future utopia should seek to avoid its own reification. As long as we understand our use of the term ‘prefiguration’ to be rhetorical or aspirational, any sense of necessity or destiny can be forestalled.

Having now made clear how and why the principle of annihilation applies to prefigurative politics, I can be somewhat more brief in explaining its connection to the second notion of openness. Turning to the basic definition of prefiguration, one is assured that it inherently involves experimental practice, and thereby remains a continuous and ever-unfinished project. This already extends the principle of openness into a temporal and structural meaning, contrasting sharply with the more rigidly planned programs of other political tendencies. One could say that there is a certain humility about this incompleteness, a sense of persistent imperfection which paradoxically allows us to go on in the face of perceived failure. There is an element of adaptability and resilience about all prefigurative activities, and this should not go unappreciated.

However, beyond this general attribution of openness, a different facet emerges once we focus on the specific practices associated with prefigurative politics. As noted before, most of these are founded in the basic activities of the anarchistic Left. From consensus decision-making to mutual aid societies, a lot of pre-existing organizing strategies can be reconsidered within the prefigurative framework. This includes a set of practices from radical feminist and anti-racist political currents, the influence of which should not go ignored. Their primary contribution to the concept is prefiguration is the ‘personal-political argument’, which holds that we cannot meaningfully distinguish between a personal and political sphere of activity.<sup>54</sup>

Within the present context, the most important application of the person-political argument concerns the need for diversity and participation. To some extent, this need is already implied by the previous explanation of its general praxis. As I have argued earlier, prefigurative practices help us to develop certain powers, drives, and modes of consciousness, none of which can be assumed to emerge otherwise. Going one step further now, it might be claimed that practical knowledge itself can’t be substituted by abstract understanding. Personal experience is too unique to the individual to be conveyed through representatives. In practice, this means that only a diverse and participatory political process can respect the lived experience of its participants; openness is therefore an absolute necessity.

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<sup>52</sup> Uri Gordon, “Prefigurative Politics, Catastrophe, and Hope,” accessed May 31, 2022, <https://nl.crimethinc.com/2018/06/12/prefigurative-politics-catastrophe-and-hope-does-the-idea-of-prefiguration-offer-false-reassurance>.

<sup>53</sup> Idem

<sup>54</sup> Raekstad and Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics*, 89.

Thus for the openness of prefigurative politics. Finally, the empty element of creativity is perhaps the easiest component to project onto the process of prefiguration. The establishment of new institutions within the shell of the existing social order is undoubtedly a creative exercise, one which in no way relinquishes the general socialist duty to create a world beyond capitalism. Indeed, perhaps the most fruitful discussion in this context is to elucidate the transformative aspect of prefigurative politics, so as to distinguish them from mere social experiments. Among the many criticisms which Raekstad and Gradin repudiate in their work, there is the accusation that prefiguration is a naïve enterprise, the product of feel-good activism rather than structural analysis.<sup>55</sup> Much of this argument is based on the fragility of social movements like Occupy, whose spontaneous organization eventually came apart through police action. However, such affairs hardly represent the whole spectrum of efforts which might be considered prefigurative. The creation of worker cooperatives and mutual aid groups are more valid examples, as these institutions can work to establish new kinds of social relations over a longer term than most protest movements.

“Social relations” is a key term in this discussion, as it indicates the prime difference between the prefigurative conception of creativity and its more conventional state-based alternatives. The prefigurative approach to social creativity is not founded on centralized, top-down restructuring. Rather, it focuses on the collective implementation of the praxis discussed earlier, seeking to establish the right powers, drives, and consciousness in a broad and egalitarian fashion. This kind of self-directed re-education is a far cry from the coercive indoctrination more commonly associated with radical ideological shifts. In many prefigurative practices, the goal is to simultaneously establish the norms and habits of a liberated society, provide a direct material benefit to those involved, and build up a network of parallel and independent social institutions. Educating, exemplifying, autonomizing: prefiguration can serve a lot of functions at once.

Having now resolved the connection between prefiguration and the principles of emptiness, I would like to offer some last notes on how these concepts can be said to interact. In estimating the augmentation of empty politics, I believe that prefigurative organizations should at least be valued for the way they emphasize simultaneity. Even at the start of my presentation of the principles of emptiness, I made clear that this three-part separation is but a convenient heuristic. In the process of prefiguration, we may recognize a good example for how these principles are always already intertwined. In annihilating the existing institutions, a space is opened for a different kind of ethics, the practice of which then goes on to create the basis for a new society. If we frame this overall development as a prime example of space-making, of clearing the Way for a free existence to flourish, then we can also begin to see how prefiguration itself is enriched by its association with emptiness. The power inherent in its praxis is founded on the same philosophical basis as emptiness itself, and this explains their strong alignment. The pursuit of one implies an understanding of the other.

With this final observation, I hope to have certified the connection between the prefigurative and empty mode of politics. All in all, the prefigurative mode of politics explains why a free society could never be imposed, but must rather be found through a process of emptiness. Ultimately, it is the only revolution we could meaningfully pursue.

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<sup>55</sup> Raekstad and Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics*, 134.

## Conclusion

In what has come before, I have sought to define a new conception of revolutionary freedom on the basis of an anti-essentialist Daoist philosophy. The resulting notion of political emptiness has proven its utility in practice, with its framework augmenting several different domains of political action. Whether the context is utopian, constituent, or prefigurative, the non-dual cycle of annihilation, openness, and creativity provides a consistent way of keeping to a free and anarchistic path. The utility of such an ideological lighthouse should not be underestimated.

Within the anarchist milieu, there has long been a certain paranoia about other left-wing tendencies. This is partly because the history of anarchism often reads like a legacy of betrayal, where incipient liberatory institutions are ruthlessly crushed for the sake of a new state regime. We may recognize this treatment in the Bolsheviks' dismantling of soviet democracy, or else in the French Communist Party's abandonment of French workers and students in May 1968. Wherever anarchy rears its head, all other political tendencies (state socialists included) seem united in their opposition to it. With this in mind, the anarchists' suspicion about other political movements is quite understandable.

Ultimately, however, to retreat into political parochialism like this is an even greater betrayal of anarchy. If the latter is to be a principle rather than a doctrine, it cannot self-select its members on the basis of ideological markers alone. A point I have kept returning to in this thesis is that "the real Dao is not the Dao that can be out into words". As it is for Daoism, so it should be for anarchism. Any attempt to derive some anarchist 'essence' from its inherently diverse history could only lead to the kind of doctrinal originalism which Marxist-Leninists are rightly mocked for. Instead of change, it would promote purity. And that might be the least anarchist thing of all.

Emptiness, as I have defined it here, is very much the antithesis of such dogmatism. It exists to be the anti-essence of anarchy, thereby transcending the limits of political essentialism. Beyond the bindings of anarchist doctrine, it also frees this freedom from its own negative conception. Anarchy is about much more than just the annihilation of rulership. While this destructive drive should be included, it should always be non-dual with the creative process it accompanies. All this must take place within a context of openness and continuity, or else the strictures of self-government will forever reproduce the same iniquities. In this way, we can see how emptiness and its principles derive from a basic revaluation of anarchy, one which tries to develop its philosophical premises to their logical conclusion.

In my pursuit of emptiness, the influence of Daoism has obviously been indispensable. It was my initial discovery of this tradition—as well as a far longer period of self-study—which put me on the path to codifying something like empty politics. For this I am immensely grateful, even if it is slightly unclear as to who is owed this gratitude. Old Laozi was likely nothing but an apocryphal figure; I suppose I should thank that vague collective of thinkers who, all those thousands of years ago, first came to suspect that what is Ultimate is that which flows forever. That said, I do not consider their teaching to be something that is set in stone, that knows any truer origin than the shared suspicions of our lived experience. With my present speculation, I hope to have founded a new current within the broad stream of those who have preceded me. However tentative its course might yet be, I can already tell that there is much more to empty politics than what I have set out here.

First of all, the anti-essentialist philosophical foundation of empty politics is still far from finished. While Daoism has provided a solid initial basis, there are still many other

traditions which could inspire my conception of emptiness. Prime among these are the various schools of Buddhist philosophy. In my initial development of this thesis, an analysis of Buddhist emptiness—best recognized in the concept of ‘Śūnyatā’—was included along with that of Daoism. However, to treat this complex notion with anything like the attention it deserves would have taken up a significant part of my work, space which was better spent on solidifying my own understanding of emptiness. Even so, I would still very much like to involve the Buddhist perspective in my overall intellectual project. While its inherent anti-essentialism can overlap with the Daoist view, it also offers a unique angle on how we should conceive of non-duality in our thought and practice. The political implications of these teachings are likely to be significant.

Together with Daoism and Buddhism, there are yet other philosophies which could be associated with the pursuit of empty politics. Some are more formalized than others, but all share a core commitment to anti-essentialism and/or non-duality. I would be particularly interested in the oft-neglected indigenous philosophies of Africa and the Americas, which tend to be drowned out by the doctrines of their colonizers. In casting such a broad philosophical net, I do not fear the dilution of emptiness itself. The latter is part of a self-conscious synthesis, one which is strengthened rather than weakened by the involvement of many different perspectives. If empty politics could no longer survive the openness it advocates, that would only reveal its own obsolescence.

Beyond philosophy, I would also like to apply political emptiness to the field of history. As a concept which is generally associated with revolution, but can also exist outside of it, it would be important to know the exact conditions of its development. This work is of special relevance in light of the anarchist historical revolution which is presently occurring in the social sciences. Thanks to such authors as David Graeber and James C. Scott, we are increasingly aware of the deep and persistent recurrence of anarchistic social forms. A systematic appreciation of this phenomenon would be indispensable in learning how the process of empty politics might be sustained.

The crafting of such a ‘history of political emptiness’ would also have important secondary effects. For starters, it would bring together a wide variety of disparate movements and communities, thereby radically increasing our means of affinity and inspiration. This in turn could be a potent antidote to the anarchists’ self-isolating tendencies; once they stop clinging to their handful of popular revolutions, their total program will seem a lot less alienating. Lastly, it could even be grounds for a re-evaluation of state socialist history. If we eschew their centralizing perspectives, many countervailing currents are clarified. Even when these are not literally anarchist, a common tendency can still be recognized through the lens of political emptiness. These socialist counter-histories are a powerful reminder of the enduring strength of the empty political ideal, as it is constantly reinvented under drastically different circumstances.

Finally, after philosophy and history, the political facet of emptiness should be developed most of all. This would require a thorough survey of the various tendencies which might be said to align of it, most of which would be located on the anarchistic Left. More than simply creating a list of affiliates, though, what this analysis would attend to is the way that these various theories conceive of political change. How do they prepare their proffered institutions for perpetual renewal, and how do they fit their positive programs within an open mode of politics? In proving the practicability of emptiness, these are vital questions.

In the end, what is perhaps most valuable about the concept of empty politics is the way in which it unites different forms of being without subordinating them. Its recognition in

a given domain is cause for joy and learning, not the imposition of a received doctrine. It is a philosophy without a center, and in this way could be said to be everywhere and nowhere at once. Even if my description of it were to be lost to entropy or ignorance, I trust it would return in one form or another. As long as people yearn for freedom, for an existence without coercion or suffering, the notion of emptiness will be close at hand.

Even here, at the end of my thesis, I still feel like there is a lot left to be said. Such work will have to be left to another place and time. For now, I merely hope that the given set of arguments and examples has inspired you in one way or another. Even those who would not call for the immediate abolition of state and capital may still find strength in the knowledge that throughout our long history, many people have striven for similar kinds of freedom. Whether in success or in failure, their struggle has produced some of the most beautiful and profound ideas that this world has ever known. With my conception of empty politics, I would merely remind you of this deep lineage, and ask you to partake of it. Who knows where it might lead you?

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