SPECIAL FEATURE: ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Alternatives to Sustainable Development: What can we Learn from the Pluriverse in Practice?

Flexible institutionalisation in Auroville: a prefigurative alternative to development

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Abstract

Scholars interested in mechanisms of transformative change are increasingly looking at 'real utopias', emancipatory enactments within the mainstream that prefigure its transcendence: eco-villages and intentional communities, cooperatives, Time Banks, urban gardens, co-housing associations. Academic and activist views on these initiatives are divergent. While some argue that they are seeding the transcendence of the current dominant socio-economic and political system, others dismiss them as niches unable to socially reproduce themselves, let alone disrupt and present viable alternatives to a hegemonic mainstream. To better equip ourselves to understand their transformative potential and potentially move beyond this stalemate, in this article we examine how one of the most enduring and successful prefigurative experiments is organised and sustained. Our case study is the international township Auroville, in India, the largest intentional community in the world and one of the longest-standing. It presents a unique opportunity to examine how an alternative to development is maintained and developed within and in relationship with a dominant system, and whether prefigurative experiments can become 'institutionalised' while retaining a prefigurative character.

Keywords Prefiguration · Alternatives to development · Flexible institutionalisation · Auroville · Intentional community · Cooperative economy

Introduction: prefigurative alternatives as heterogenous worldings

In the last ten years, a growing number of scholars coming from a diverse array of fields within the social sciences—political science, economics, anthropology, organisational studies, utopian studies, social movement studies, development studies—have been looking at alternatives to development and alternative forms of organisation within the context of the contemporary dominant socio-economic system: late capitalism. Scholars interested in mechanisms of transformative change have started to look at what the late Erik Olin Wright defined as 'real utopias' (Wright 2010), emancipatory enactments within the mainstream that prefigure its transcendence: ecovillages and intentional communities, cooperatives, Time Banks, urban gardens, co-housing associations, reconverted factories, and other alternative associative projects (see Monticelli 2018).[1] Academic views and opinions over these initiatives are divergent. Some scholars argue that they represent positive seeds of change, albeit immersed in and inevitably having to constantly interact with an incongruous and detrimental dominant socio-economic environment (Monticelli 2018; Monticelli 2021; Federici 2019; Raekstad and Gradin 2020). On the opposite end

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[1] For a review from an organisational studies perspective, see Parker et al. 2014.

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of the spectrum, others take a dismissive stance, labelling them as mere micro and everyday apolitical niches unable to become structured, institutionalised and, ultimately, powerful enough to disrupt the status quo (Mouffe 2013).

While it must be acknowledged that not all such initiatives include among their goals and purposes the explicit contestation of a mainstream system, their very existence enacts a 'pluriverse' (Kothari et al. 2019), a universe of heterogeneous 'worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings and interruptions' (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018: 6), a pluriverse of practices that challenges the dominant narrative of such a mainstream. Common denominators are that they embody anti- or post-capitalist values, and their willingness to experiment with direct democratic and horizontal forms of organisation and decisional processes. In parallel with the formation–in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 (for a review, see Monticelli 2018)—of a transdisciplinary body of literature describing the mushrooming of these 'real utopias', the concept of 'prefigurative politics' started to be deployed in an increasing number of studies (see Graeber 2004; Maeckelbergh 2017). According to the existing literature, a prefigurative collective is one that experimentally attempts to embody, in the present, the modes of organising and relating it envisions for the future (van de Sande 2015; Monticelli 2018). Prefiguration is thus a transformative process and practice that is key to forging 'paths to the pluriverse' (Demaria and Kothari 2017).

This article's objective is twofold: firstly, to provide insights that can support such experiments and organisations in prefiguring alternatives to mainstream 'development' agendas and, secondly, to contribute to the field of (critical) development studies with an ethnographic study of Auroville, as an exemplary case of 'heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices' (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018: 4). We engage with and further the debate on these alternatives by drawing together and critically engaging with insights from social movement and collective action studies, utopian studies, and critical social theory to examine their forms and practices of organising. We focus on one key question: how can we ensure the perpetuation (over time) and the scaling (up and out) of prefigurative experiments and organisations? In line with the editors of this special feature, despite acknowledging that 'critique remains the prime contribution of critical development studies' (Radcliffe 2015: 856), we believe that in this historical moment the field of (critical) development studies has a lot to gain from the study of concrete, embodied 'real utopias'.

One of the main critiques posed to prefigurative, transformative initiatives and alternative practices is related to their difficulty in surviving, striving, and expanding while being embedded in a mainstream capitalistic system with the tendency to co-opt any emerging alternative (Decreus et al. 2014; Monticelli 2021; Smucker 2014). It is then by studying how the most enduring prefigurative initiatives are organised and sustained over time that we are better equipped to understand their transformative potential. Following Parker's words that 'organising is politics made durable' (Parker et al. 2014: 367), our aim is to critically explore a case of 'prefiguration made durable'. This exploration is based on an ethnographic study of the intentional community of Auroville. Established in 1968 in Tamil Nadu, India, and with a current international membership of almost 3000 people from over 50 different nationalities, Auroville is the largest, most culturally diverse intentional community in the world, and one of the longest-standing. Its examination inspired us to come forth with the concept of 'flexible institutionalisation', one that contributes to a broader and more nuanced understanding of prefigurative politics that goes beyond emergent and ephemeral performativity and can facilitate seminal reflections on the relationship between prefiguration, the state, and the market (Cooper 2017).

What is a prefigurative alternative? Responding to theoretical stalemates

What is a prefigurative alternative? With the flourishing of grassroots and civil society-led initiatives in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, the debate around what constitutes a desirable 'alternative' has gained a certain relevance among critical scholars in the social sciences. Amongst the most active within this debate, Martin Parker provides three key principles that help identify alternative organisations: autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility for the future (Parker et al. 2014: 36). On the one hand, 'autonomy' refers to the ability of each individual to choose and decide upon their life according to their ideal of a 'good life' (ibid). 'Solidarity', on the other hand, implies that individual freedom is not enough to achieve a better future, but that collective action and mobilisation are crucial (ibid). 'Responsibility for the future', finally, relates to the need for securing the conditions and the ability of future generations to thrive. This implies being conscious that what mainstream economists often call 'externalities' produced by contemporary capitalism—massive pollution, environmental degradation, exploitation of humans and nature, rising extreme economic and social inequalities—constitute its intrinsic features, thus making it neither a sustainable nor a desirable socio-economic system for the future (and the present). In addition to these three principles, Parker et al. underline that

an alternative organisation is a reflexive organisation, one that 'deliberately and continually reflects on how people and things are being put together' (Parker et al. 2014: 39) by focusing on how things are done, not only on why things are done. It is precisely when the goals are reflected in the means deployed to achieve them that scholars talk about 'prefiguration' and 'prefigurative politics'.

In these initiatives, collectives, organisations, and actors are 'intentionally prefigurative of the "other world(s)" they would like to see,' with organisational means which reflect their desired ideals, so that 'the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present' (Maeckelbergh 2009: 4). Our case-study, the intentional community of Auroville, as will be described in the following section, represents not only a case of alternative organisation—as defined by the principles of autonomy, solidarity and responsibility (Parker et al. 2014)—but it also constitutes a case of 'prefigurative organisation': an organisation that embodies in the present, through everyday practices of production, consumption, through its decisional methods, and through its reflexive approach to social reproduction, the type of society and 'good life' it envisions for the future.

In the last decade the literature on prefiguration has prevalently focused on the anarchist, horizontal forms of organising and decision-making employed in contemporary social movements, in particular the alter-globalisation movement and Occupy Wall Street (Maeckelbergh 2009; Smucker 2014)—with a few divagations, notably into economic practices (Monticelli 2018; Mason 2014). A core premise of the scholars and activists of prefigurative social movements is that their practices usually articulate an alternative not only to capitalism, but also to representative democracy. To ally with, or make demands of the state—'emancipation within, acceptance by, or incorporation into current power structures' (van de Sande 2015: 178)—would thus invalidate their prefigurative nature, considering that radical change can neither emerge from, nor within it. At the same time, scholars that are critical of prefigurative movements and organisations underline that they often fail to produce lasting, political change precisely due to a lack of engagement with existing institutions (Mouffe 2013).

Some scholars have noted that there may be benefits to engaging with the state and, more broadly, with formal political institutions, given that prefigurative movements often struggle to achieve substantive social transformation (Rowe and Carroll 2015). Concerns related to the viability, and thus, the political relevance of prefigurative modes of organising have also been raised in light of a 'current resistance of the advocates of horizontalism' to incorporating representative structures, which limits the applicability of such prefigurative practice 'beyond temporary assemblies and smaller grassroots organizations' (Rowe and Carroll 2015: 157). Indeed, limitations in terms of scale, efficiency, equitability, and sustainability have all been raised (Hardt and Negri 2017).

Prefiguration scholar Davina Cooper exhorts that the 'state and other institutions, as socio-political assemblages, should not be discounted when it comes to prefigurative practice', for they are 'necessary sites for transformative action' (Cooper 2020), and she invites us to recognise 'micro, guerrilla and regional states' in order to extend the category of statehood to 'differently scaled, bounded forms of institutionalised diversity' (Cooper 2017: 350).

In the face of what currently appears to be a stalemate between criticisms of and prescriptions for prefigurative alternatives, this article brings forth a new perspective that, far from providing a ready-made answer to the ongoing debate, attempts to open up uncharted avenues for discussion. Political commentator and author Naomi Klein pointed out to Occupy Wall Street activists that principles of horizontalism are 'compatible with the hard work of building structures and institutions' (Rowe and Carroll 2015: 155). Our examination of the facilitative and flexible institutionalisation that has enabled Auroville's development in the past 50 years explores precisely this compatibility between prefigurative organisations and institutions. It includes both a cooperative relationship with the central Indian government and the adoption of representative structures within a horizontal political organisation, as well as the establishment of alternative institutions (notably economic, and educational), while arguably retaining a prefigurative nature. Our analysis thus represents a third voice in the debate (previously alluded to) between scholars who assume that such experiments will inevitably be challenged by and disempowered in their engagements with a necessarily incompatible relationship with the political mainstream, and those who discount their transformative capacity to go beyond the micro and everyday level, to respond to the pressures of scaling up (and out), and to ensure their social reproduction.

We will also explore the limits and shortcomings of institutionalisation for ongoing prefigurative practices. In a previous article, Monticelli asks whether the recognition and support of such alternative 'best practices' by current mainstream institutions is an indicator of success, or of a co-optation that undermines their ultimate transformative potential, one that is predicated on a challenge to a dominant, institutionalised social order (Monticelli 2018). The current article is *a* response to this open question—and we hope that it will spark others, for it focuses on one case-study. A broader exploration of this question is critical for informing alternative and prefigurative practice.

Case study: Auroville, prefiguration made durable

An ethnographic study of Auroville provides a unique opportunity to go beyond the theoretical stalemates concerning the usefulness of prefigurative initiatives described in the previous section. Thousands of intentional communities exist today, in various forms: from anarchist enclaves such as Christiania in Copenhagen, to co-housing cooperatives in gentrified neighbourhoods of cosmopolitan cities such as London and San Francisco, to ecovillages throughout rural areas across the world,[2] to spiritual and educational centres such as Findhorn. The vast majority focus on a particular aspect of collective living, or a set of aims—be these environmental, economic, educational or spiritual.[3]

Auroville is one of few intentional communities that has engaged with pioneering, organising, and socially reproducing an 'institutionally complete,' prefigurative society since its founding in 1968—the year in which the revolutionary slogan 'Another world is possible' was born. In the years leading up to 1968, in India, two spiritual activists—Sri Aurobindo, a revolutionary in India's independence movement who had turned to spirituality to further the work of realising an emancipated society, and Mirra Alfassa, also known as 'The Mother', his partner in this socio-spiritual undertaking—had begun (r)evolutionising the yoga tradition. Rather than individual enlightenment achieved through ascetic withdrawal, the premise of Integral Yoga was the spiritualisation of all aspects not only of self, but of society. While 'to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an "alternative world" in the present', (Yates 2015: 4) the premise of the Auroville project was, and remains, to prefigure society as a whole, following Sri Aurobindo's adage 'all life is yoga' (Sri Aurobindo 1999: 8). This spiritually informed transformation of cultural, social, environmental and sustainable living, perceived as central for the evolution of humanity, is its founding and living concept and experimental practice of a 'good life'.

Auroville was founded in Tamil Nadu, South India, in February of 1968 by The Mother, as an experimental township dedicated to this spiritually transformative endeavour. The project was initially supported by the nearby Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, where The Mother remained a resident, insisting that Auroville, by contrast, should be self-organised (Clarence-Smith 2019). The budding community drew young Westerners stirred by the radical period of '68 seeking for alternative ways of living, as well as young Indian and foreign members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram; other local Tamilians came to Auroville looking for work,

some integrating into the community with their families. Fifty years on, Auroville is the largest, most diverse intentional community in the world and one of the longest-standing, with approximately 3000 members of over 58 nationalities, half of which are Indian citizens, and in which one of this article's authors, Clarence-Smith, was born and raised and is a current resident (Census March 2021—Auroville population). Entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers, architects, artists, ecologists, therapists, linguists, teachers, bakers, farmers, builders, administrators and more today live in the township.

The township is located a few kilometres north of the Indian coastal town of Puducherry, on a plateau ecologically restored and afforested in the community's pioneering years. Its current infrastructure includes residential settlements, schools and libraries, sports facilities, health and healing arts centres, multimedia performance venues and exhibition spaces, community canteens, restaurants and cafés, as well as small to medium scale (predominantly crafts) industries, institutes for scientific and educational research, a Town Hall and Visitors Centre, and at the centre of the community, the Matrimandir, a geodesic dome with a chamber devoted to silent, seated meditation. This 'City' area is surrounded by a 'Green Belt' of farms, forest, ecological centres and botanical gardens. Auroville's town plan projects a city of 50,000 permanent residents, occupying a circular area of about 20 square kilometres, and the community currently owns approximately 80% of its designated 'City' area and 40% of its designated 'Green Belt', its land holdings interspersed with farmland owned by local Tamilians—some of whom are also members of the Auroville community.

Understood by its members to be a 'laboratory for evolution' Auroville is rife with prefigurative micro-institutions, social enterprises, associations and communal projects that act as sites of experimentation for the development of alternative models of collective organisation and of practices that seek to prefigure the 'good life' that the community seeks to embody and evolve towards (see Auroville Charter 1968): from 'conscious consumption' cooperatives with shared accounts for all members, to decision-making forums that integrate mindfulness practices such as moments of silence, to enterprises that propose ecological solutions in India and beyond. This range reflects the diversity of Aurovilians and what they aspire to contribute to the multi-fold manifestation of Auroville; many are attracted to the project by its ideal of unity in diversity and the opportunity to experiment with alternative ways of living, which are central to the evolutionary vision of Integral Yoga (Sri Aurobindo 1999). Given the community's longevity, some of its organisational practices have become somewhat institutionalised; yet reformulation is a constant, legitimised by the experimental ethos that Aurovilians ascribe to. This is consistent with Sargisson's observations of intentional community praxis, which

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[2] See Global Ecovillage Network: www.ecovillage.org.

[3] See Fellowship for Intentional Community: https://www.ic.org/.

she describes as 'flexible and resistant to permanence and order' (Sargisson 2000: 2), and which echoes the 'inherently experimental and experiential' (van de Sande 2015: 189) nature of prefigurative practice. Indeed, alongside the authors of this article, other scholars of intentional communities are beginning to adopt the concept of 'prefiguration' to describe these experiments, given that they are a radical, embodied exercise in redefining society according to alternative values, of the present and for the future (Farias 2017).

Significantly, Auroville is endorsed by the Government of India, UNESCO, and other international governmental and non-governmental bodies who consider Auroville to be pioneering a model of human society. These regularly fund its transformative social, educational, and environmental practices. Over the last 50 years, Auroville has been a focal point for pioneering innovative forms of collective and economic organisation, renewable technologies, sustainable architecture, educational practices, and social enterprise, with award-winning local, regional, national, and international reach and impact: the Auroville Earth Institute holds the UNESCO Chair of Earthen Architecture, researching and educating people worldwide in earthen building technologies; Tamil Nadu state textbooks have recently incorporated educational content on waste management from the Auroville social enterprise Wasteless, reaching millions of Tamil children (Auroville 2019a).

A common criticism posed to prefigurative social movements including intentional or 'utopian' communities is that they draw energy and activism away from working for social change in mainstream society, that they are insular and escapist projects. Yet these communities have made little known but significant contributions to the broader societies in which they are embedded, as harbingers of forward-looking practices born from and reflective of progressive values, later to be adopted into the mainstream (Schehr 1997).

While there are many ways in which Auroville enacts and diffuses prefigurative practices, in this article we focus on aspects of its institutionalisation as a prefigurative alternative to development. For, following Wright (2006), Hardt and Negri (2017), and Monticelli (2021), we consider that the potential of such alternatives is predicated on their engagement in prefiguring a radical rearrangement, leading to an emancipatory transformation, of the old and contemporary institutionalised social order. Thus, discussing how such alternatives are established is key to understanding their transformational potential. To come back to Parker's words 'organising is politics made durable' (Parker et al. 2014: 367)—and in this article we will explore whether the flexible institutionalisation that has arguably rendered Auroville

durable has also facilitated, and is able to inherently retain, a prefigurative character.

In the first of the following two empirical sections, we will examine Auroville's overarching governance system: its relationship with the Indian central government and its communal practice of political decision-making, which has been marked by a move towards representative structures as the community has grown in size and complexity. In the second, we will focus on a specific socio-economic institution within Auroville, the 'Pour Tous Distribution Centre' community cooperative (hereafter 'PTDC'), as a case-study of a prefigurative institution. The data presented in these empirical sections was collected by Clarence-Smith in the course of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Auroville from April–May of 2016, and July 2017–May 2018. The fieldwork conducted in 2016 was dedicated to a study of the 'Pour Tous Distribution Centre', which Clarence-Smith undertook as a researcher-member of both Auroville and the PTDC (Clarence-Smith 2016). The second fieldwork period was dedicated to Clarence-Smith's doctoral research (Clarence-Smith 2019), in which she spent a significant amount of time as a participant-observer of Auroville's decision making forums: General Meetings of Auroville's Residents Assembly, meetings of Auroville's administrative committees—'Working Groups'— and their Selection Process, and meetings of Auroville's 'Governing Board'—a board of advisors to Auroville appointed by the Indian government. Across both fieldwork periods, she conducted a total of 28 interviews with Aurovilians, some of which are featured in this article. The second author, Monticelli, carried out a period of exploratory fieldwork in Auroville focused on the interactions between this prefigurative community and the capitalist surroundings in which it is embedded. Her fieldwork included participant observation, unstructured biographical interviews, and focus groups, held between February and March 2018.

Heralding an institutionalised future for prefigurative politics

Since its conception, Auroville garnered national support from the government of India, and supranational support from UNESCO (see Auroville 2018a, b). The first of five UNESCO resolutions on Auroville was passed in 1966, 2 years prior to the community's inauguration, and the latest in 2017; each highlights the township's alignment with UNESCO's core values—notably of peace and harmony, cultural diversity, lifelong education, and sustainability (see Auroville 2018a). In 1988, following a successful court case that Aurovilians brought against the Sri Aurobindo Society (a not-for-profit organization and research institute under which The Mother had registered Auroville), Auroville

was established as an independent statutory body. The Auroville Foundation Act (1988) provided Auroville with a unique status within the legal framework of the Indian government, one that allows it to retain autonomy over its internal affairs—enabling it to be self-managing and to experiment with alternative practices—while benefiting from government endorsement as a Foundation of the Human Resources Development Ministry, with associated funding, primarily for educational research. The latter is a key focus in Auroville, whose Charter states that it will be a site of "unending education" (Auroville Charter 1968). The allocation of these government grants is decided on by Aurovilians.

Although scholars of the community have expressed concerns around the potential for government co-optation of the project (Horassius 2013), it should be noted that legal pressure has compromised the viability of other intentional community projects; for many, their disbandment was precipitated by the fact that their alternative practices did not fit into existing legal frameworks (Clarence-Smith 2019). In light of this, it is pertinent to consider how the Auroville Foundation Act provides a facilitative legal framework for the realisation of some of Auroville's key ideals—notably, that of being self-organised (Clarence-Smith 2019). The Auroville Foundation has three authorities, of which the 'Residents' Assembly' (legally defined as all Aurovilians over 18) is responsible for all day-to-day management, administration and decision-making of the community in whichever way it sees fit, "in accordance with its original Charter" (Auroville Foundation Act 1988). This allows for freedom of experimentation, formulation and reformulation in accordance with the evolution of the township as intended by The Mother, which we label in this article as 'flexible institutionalisation'. The parliamentary debates that led to the passing of the Auroville Foundation Act evoke the importance of these 'autonomous arrangements' for the development of Auroville (Auroville Foundation Bill 1988).

The other two authorities are the Governing Board and the International Advisory Committee, to which members of Auroville and of 'Auroville International', a network of supporters of the community, have previously been posted by the Human Resources Department Ministry (Auroville International 2019). The Governing Board is composed of Indian citizens appointed by the Central Government and is vested with the 'general superintendence' of the Auroville Foundation (Auroville Foundation Act 1988: Sec 1.13). It meets in Auroville twice a year, and is briefed by representative community groups. While the Governing Board has occasionally made requests for certain initiatives to be taken up or differently managed—such as the Sri Aurobindo Institute for International Research, the official channel for government funding of educational research in Auroville—lack of familiarity with the complexity and ground realities of the township has often led to these remaining unimplemented (Clarence-Smith 2019). The Governing Board is advised by the International Advisory Council, a body composed of eminent international figures also appointed by the Central Government (in keeping with The Mother's conception of Auroville as an international township). Past members include reputed academics such as Prof. Amartya Sen, Director-Generals of UNESCO, and members of the Club of Rome (see Auroville 2019c). Figure 1 summarises the institutional structure of Auroville.

The Auroville's Residents' Assembly has a long history of convening and organising itself through participatory processes, and basing decision-making on consensus. 'General Meetings' open to all Aurovilians serve as the community's ultimate tool for decision-making, while a spectrum of so-called 'Working Groups' is responsible for the management and administration of various organisational aspects (for example, the Funds and Assets Management Committee). Such direct democratic modes of organising and decision-making have been extensively used to organise thousands of participants in prefigurative social movements; Occupy Wall Street and the Global Justice Movement are two example in which, similarly, 'General Assemblies' and 'spokes-councils' (formed of representatives of groups organising various aspects of direct actions) are used (Graeber 2013: 136). While the Auroville community is not larger in terms of participants than such movements, it is the largest intentional community in the world, encompassing a far wider range of activities than direct actions such as occupations, demonstrations and protests, and it is significantly older than even the most long-standing of prefigurative social movements, such as the Zapatistas' civil resistance, active since 1983. Auroville thus provides a unique case-study in which to assess the viability and observe the trajectory of such forms of organising, whose limitations in terms of scale, efficiency, equitability, and sustainability have already been raised (Hardt and Negri 2017).

What we observe is that, over time, the Auroville community has come to enact and embody a flexible form of institutionalisation. In its early years, when the community was composed of a few hundred people, decision-making was undertaken collectively at weekly community meetings—today referred to as 'General Meetings'—in which any Aurovilian could bring forth a topic, and express their resonance or concern with the issues raised, to arrive at a consensus. As the community grew in size—from a few hundred, to almost 3000 at the time of writing—and complexity, 'Working Groups' were formed, in bottom-up processes initiated by community members and endorsed in General Meetings, to focus on specific aspects of community administration (such as town planning, communal funds and assets management, stewardship of farms and forest), a common scaling mechanism in direct democratic forums
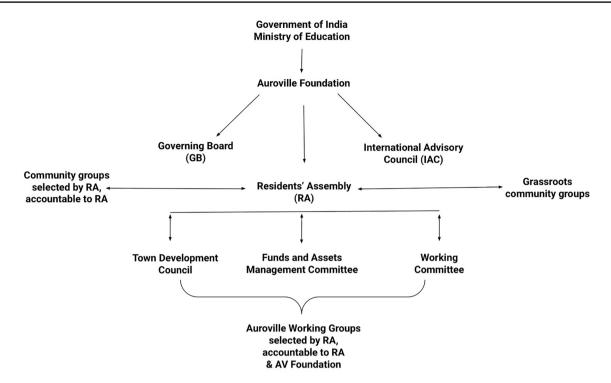
Fig. 1 Institutional structure of Auroville

(Graeber 2010; Graeber 2013). The large number and participatory selection of such groups, as well as the regular turnover in their membership, has resulted in a significant number and diverse profiles of Aurovilians (in terms of age, nationality, educational and professional background) having served in at least one of these at some point during their community membership. While the number of people who attend General Meetings is relatively small (rarely more than 10 per cent of the adult Aurovilian population), many community members are engaged in yet other forums (such as special task forces or ongoing 'sector' groups i.e., the 'Forest Group'), more directly related to their areas of interest and activity (Clarence-Smith 2019).

All in all, Auroville's institutional structure maintains the possibility of constant reformulation—this is key to the flexible nature of its institutionalisation. Auroville's administrative groups vary in their level of officialdom, with some—the Working Committee (a body that represents the community in an official capacity), the Funds and Assets Management Committee, and the Town Development Council—formally incorporated into the structure of the Auroville Foundation, and therefore accountable to it and by extension, to the government of India. The other groups exist purely within the 'civil society' space of Auroville, which means they answer only to the Residents' Assembly, who may dissolve or redefine them at any time. Importantly, the structure, membership, selection and functioning of even those officially recognised Working Groups is not legally
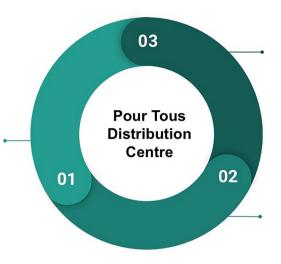
enshrined and can be amended by the Residents' Assembly; two of these—Auroville's Town Development Council (TDC) and its Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC)—recently underwent a community-mandated and led restructure, in 2016 and 2017. Both became groups to be selected by the community at large for fixed terms, whereas previously the TDC was a self-appointed team with no fixed terms, and the FAMC composed of representatives selected by various sector groups (i.e. farming, housing etc.) for fixed terms. Furthermore, any major decisions Working Groups wish to take on behalf of the community must be ratified in community-wide General Meetings, and they do not have the exclusive right to make a proposal to the Residents' Assembly for ratification. Often, in fact, it is policy proposals made by informal groupings of concerned Aurovilians that drive change in the community, rather than the Working Groups officially in charge (Clarence-Smith 2019). A recent example is the amendment of Auroville's Entry Policy (for accepting new members to the community) in 2017, which notably mandated a new, community-selected 'Entry Board' to review and approve all applications for an Auroville status—a responsibility previously held by community members who volunteered to mentor individual applicants (see Auroville 2019b).

Can we thus consider Auroville's institutional structure, and even its relationship with the government, to be embodying a form of flexible institutionalisation that facilitates its prefigurative nature, as incongruous as the terms

Monthly Contributions
Each participant pays a monthly contribution based on an estimate of the consumption patterns of their household. This amount is collected into a single common account used by the PTDC cooperative to purchase the products. The running costs are covered by Auroville's communal budget.

Conscious Consumption
Participants of the PTDC cooperative can take as many products as they feel they need. A balance sheet is kept and participants are called to align their monthly contribution to their consumption patterns if needed.

Solidary Suppliers
Many products are purchased at cost-price or discounted rates from Auroville's commercial units or farms, and from regional partners who share a similar ethos to PTDC and Auroville at large.

Pour Tous Distribution Centre

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Fig. 2 Auroville's Pour Tous Distribution Centre

'prefiguration' and 'institutional' may seem? We will discuss this potential—albeit provocative—'generative friction' (Akbulut et al. 2022), by drawing on other research on prefigurative politics and municipal governments, following the ethnographic exploration of the Auroville cooperative 'Pour Tous' in the next section.

Pour Tous Distribution Centre: a solidary cooperative for conscious consumption

Along with Auroville's institutional structure, one of the community cooperative provisioning centres, called the 'Pour Tous Distribution Centre' (henceforth 'PTDC'), is worth examining since it constitutes, in our view, a fascinating example of how flexible institutionalisation is implemented in a prefigurative economic micro-organisation.[4] PTDC's organisation and functioning is intentionally based on Mirra Alfassa's founding economic vision for Auroville: a society in which members would give what they could in terms of work and involvement and have their basic needs met without the exchange of money, through centrally supported community services. This emphasis on basic needs and a non-market economy resonates with current debates on 'degrowth' and 'post-growth' that provide alternative paradigms to that of an unbridled consumerism fomented by the capitalist system.

Let us begin with a short explanation of how PTDC operates (for a summary see Fig. 2). Its running costs—the

stipends of Aurovilians working in service, the transport of goods, and the maintenance costs of the building that houses the service—are fully subsidised by Auroville's communal budget[5], while the goods it carries are purchased with fixed monthly contributions by the cooperative members. The funds are collected into a single common account and are used to procure a range of items that correspond to the category of 'basic needs'-primarily (vegetarian) food products such as grains, lentils, fruits and vegetables, and household items such as personal care and cleaning supplies.

As per PTDC's original guidelines, members (from here onwards called 'participants', the term used in PTDC to emphasise the participatory nature of the cooperative) choose from one of three standard monthly contributions as approximates their needs, but today, these contribution amounts are flexible. In the ideal, PTDC participants give what they are able to, and take whatever they feel amounts to their 'basic needs'. To encourage this focus on needs rather than costs, the price of individual items are not displayed on the shelves. In practice, participants may select any of the items available in the cooperative, but are expected to contribute monthly in relationship to their usage. One of the key criteria for the selection of items available at PTDC is affordability, so that individuals subsisting on the Auroville 'Maintenance', a modest stipend awarded to Aurovilians from the community's central fund in remuneration for work and on the basis of need (see Clarence-Smith 2019), would

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[4] Here it should be noted that Auroville has 4 official languages: English, French, Tamil and Sanskrit.

[5] Financed by the community's income-generating activities, community member contributions, government of India grants, and foreign donations. See https://auroville.org/contents/3158.

be able to provide for their daily life while remaining within their PTDC contribution budget.

To what extent is PTDC 'prefigurative' of Auroville's socio-economic ideals? Opinions differ among its participants. Some feel that it represents a significant step towards the future of the Auroville economy in terms of the realisation of its ideals, precisely because it has embodied these in an Auroville community 'public service' institution. Others, however, fail to see how the economic model of PTDC is prefigurative of an economy with 'no exchange of money' in which people's needs are assured for by the collective—because each person contributes in money, their consumption is individually tracked on the basis of the Indian Rupee cost of the items they select, and they are expected to contribute more if their individual expenditure does not meet their budget (Clarence-Smith 2016).

Indeed, participants who regularly overuse are contacted throughout the year, informed of the discrepancy between the contribution and usage, and asked if they can increase the former or reduce the latter. Some try to avoid raising their monthly contribution even if their consumption often overshoots it, preferring to pay back the service the exact amount it owes, in the hopes of saving money. PTDC management tries to discourage this pattern, both because it goes against a collective economic ethos, and because it makes for more complex accounting. When collective usage is higher than collective contributions, the PTDC service also appeals to *all* participants to make an additional donation, if they can afford to—so that these excesses can be collectively subsidised. Some intentionally choose to make monthly contributions that are higher than their relative consumption, because they know that this will subsidise those that are struggling financially—and many feel positively when their monthly contribution exceeds their use, for the same reason: 'I could not care less at the end of the month when my balance is positive that it goes to the common pot, I find that fantastic… It's no longer me or you, we are one. We are one. It's the collective.'[6]

While the latter is an indication of how the communal economic organisation of PTDC facilitates the concretisation of solidary relationships among community members, some of its founding members feel that, as the service has evolved over time from a collective experiment to an established service, new participants have joined not because they are interested in it as a prefigurative socio-economic experiment, but because it is cheap and centrally-located.[7]

A key dynamic that has been noted by those involved in the co-operative movement is how much solidarity is generated between co-operatives, and that this prefigures

alternative socio-economic relationships that are not predicated on profiteering from competitiveness. One important aspect to consider in the PTDC experiment is that it fosters relationships with other productive and commercial units of Auroville that prefigure Auroville's ideals for its economic organisation. It has also formed solidary relationships with non-Aurovilian suppliers whose ethos resonates with that of PTDC and of the Auroville community at large, and who sell their goods to the PTDC at a discounted rate because they know it is not a profit-making outfit.

Several of Auroville's productive and commercial units contribute their products to the service at cost-price because it operates on zero-profit basis and caters exclusively to community members. For instance, the executives of Maroma, an Auroville home fragrance, beauty, and cosmetics company known worldwide for its incense, highlight PTDC's unique role and potential in Auroville's communal economy thanks to this model, noting that PTDC has offered them a channel through which they can contribute their products to the community at cost-price, where no such other platforms exist. These and other managers of profitable Auroville enterprises expressed that they foresaw donating their products to PTDC in the future. In this way PTDC prepares for what could eventually become a community service that not only does not sell products to Aurovilians, but also does not buy them from Auroville units, thereby realising the community's economic ideal of operating with 'no exchange of money' (Clarence-Smith 2016).

PTDC managers and some of the community's economic administrators also envisage that Auroville's communal fund could allocate a 'basic needs' contribution for all community members at the cooperative, now that a budget has been ascertained through the use of one account for purchase of goods by the service.[8] While some PTDC participants would find it preferable to not have any individual tracking whatsoever because they consider it antithetical to the idea of a collective economy, they recognised that having PTDC take care of monitoring expenditure on their behalf as a step towards such a communally organised economy (Clarence-Smith 2016).

In retaining a progressively experimental and participatory character, PTDC acts as an evolving but enduring prefigurative space in which new, solidary socio-economic relationships are intentionally fostered and effectively concretised: among community members, with community enterprises, and even with partner institutions beyond the community who resonate with its socio-economic ethos

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[6] Interview with Ann, 16 May 2016.

[7] Conversation with PTDC founder Nicole, 5 October 2017.

[8] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, 14 April 2016. Some PTDC participants already have their contribution allocated to the cooperative from the cash and/or in-kind portion of their Maintenance before the latter is disbursed to their individual accounts.

(Clarence-Smith 2019). While we have focussed here on the example of PTDC—because of how dynamic of an experiment it is, and the critical mass of people that participate in it—there are many other institutionalised experiments in the community that similarly base themselves on concreting Aurovilles' socio-economic ideals. PTDC manager Anandi points to how critical these kinds of prefigurative institutions, which facilitate the concretisation of Aurovilians' aspirations in everyday community life, are for manifesting Auroville's societal ideals:

> I've seen here so much… goodwill. Where would that goodwill have been expressed if Pour Tous would not have been there? In the supermarket, getting a beer? So not only you create a space where that can happen, it's also—it invites. And that for me is very important. If we don't create the space that calls for that, how are we expecting it manifest? In a supermarket? That would be a real miracle![9]

However, it is important to underline that many Aurovilians remain critical of their socio-economic achievements, including PTDC, because they consider them to be only partial, and thus even hypocritical in light of the ideals they seek to prefigure (Clarence-Smith 2016). Perhaps such partial gains are par for the course in prefigurative practice, in which 'the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present" (Maeckelbergh 2011: 4). Let us now delve into a discussion of how the process of flexible institutionalisation in prefigurative organisations, of which the governance structure of Auroville and the PTDC are only two examples, could forge prefigurative alternatives to development, the consideration that is the very crux of this article.

Discussion: flexible institutionalisation—ensuring the perpetuation and scaling of prefigurative alternatives?

The key questions we have chosen to explore in the context of this special feature are: how do we ensure the perpetuation (over time) and the scaling (up and out) of prefigurative activities in intentional communities like Auroville? And what are the tensions, paradoxes and contradictions emerging from this process? In examining prefigurative political and economic forms of organising in Auroville, a uniquely well-established intentional community, significant insights pertaining to the perpetuation of alternative constructions of society emerge. While the very notion of institutionalisation challenges the anarchist ethos and praxis that often underlies prefigurative movements and practices, our case study

responds to important concerns related to the capacity of such social experiments to establish, reproduce and maintain over time viable societal alternatives.

As an intentional community, Auroville is also rather singular in its relationship to 'scaling up and out'. Many intentional communities remain small firstly because they have no intention to scale (and therefore no motivation to summon the financial and human resources to do so). The slogan "Think Global Act Local" captures the value they see in establishing "sustainable" microcosms in which harmonious face-to-face human relationships and ecologically low-impact living can be demonstrated. Auroville, however, is envisioned as a township of 50,000. While there are environmental, social, economic and organisational concerns amongst its members in terms of how, how fast, and to what extent such scaling up is to be undertaken, there is nonetheless a widespread understanding that doing so is important if Auroville is to provide a relevant, replicable ('scaling out') model for a township that is sustainable in each of these areas.

The question of 'how' is central to whether a practice is prefigurative by nature. We argue that the flexible institutionalisation of Auroville's social and economic practices (exemplified in this article) does not, necessarily, hinder their prefigurative nature. Rather, it compels us to consider that establishing flexible institutions—ones that do not enact rigidly bureaucratic processes and are open to constant reformulation—may be part of a stage in the process of prefiguring an alternative society, a stage that ensures its perpetuation over time and its scaling up and out. This, though, requires that the organisation facilitates the social reproduction of desired alternative social relations by preserving, at the same time, their experimental nature and responsiveness to change.

Through the analysis of Auroville's governance structure we have seen that such institutionalisation may even be prefigurative of an alternative (to the) state or, at least, of an alternative way of relating to the state. At the very least, Auroville's relationship with the Indian central government compels us to carefully consider the role of the state in facilitating alternatives to development (Clarence-Smith 2019), in this case the development of an intentional community that includes cooperative economic and participatory micro-organisations, experiments with practices that align with ideals of radical ecology such as bioarchitecture, sustainable planning and regenerative land use (Sasidharan 2018).

Monticelli has previously questioned the assumption that the types of alliances Auroville has with the Indian central government and UNESCO—the former including an annual grant that funds many of Auroville's educational institutions and projects—necessarily imply co-optation, wondering whether these might instead be indicators of the success of a prefigurative project (Monticelli 2018). Activists and

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[9] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, 14 April 2016.

researchers interested in intentional communities and, more broadly, prefigurative social movements maintain that these are engaged in the articulation of new and alternative repertoires of political praxis, and that these embody new political potentials (Clarence-Smith 2021; Sargisson 2000; Chari 2016; Maeckelbergh 2011). However, both prefigurative social movements and intentional communities are often criticised for and labelled as being apolitical. Chantal Mouffe condemns the former for adopting an 'exodus approach' (Mouffe 2013: 111) from the public sphere; similarly, a common criticism of intentional communities is that they draw energy and activism away from working for social change in mainstream society. It thus seems disingenuous, today, to dismiss prefigurative projects both if they are disengaged from the political contexts in which they are embedded, and, vice versa, if they are engaged with these. Rather, we should look at the nature of this engagement, specifically at the balance struck between the boundedness required for experimenting with alternatives, and the contextual enmeshment that might be critical to their sustainability, relevance and success.

Davina Cooper in her article 'Prefiguring the State', while recognising that for many scholars radical change cannot emerge from (or within) the state but only from "outside" (Cooper 2017: 337), argues that there is room for a 'prefigurative conceptualisation' of the state, one that 'reimagines what statehood could mean' and that 'rejects a sharp distinction between states and other political governance formations' (Cooper 2017: 339). The three features of a prefigurative state she proposes are: the embeddedness in everyday relations, in which the roles of administrators and beneficiaries overlap and are entangled; the establishment of 'a multiplicity of informal junctures and networks' through which policies may be 'advanced, transformed, gutted, enabled and thwarted'; and finally, the incorporation of members of a polity and their projects in a 'constantly evolving governmental form' (Cooper 2017: 343–345). We recognise Auroville's mode of governance within these descriptions: every proposed policy gets criticised, protested, ignored, reworked, and amended continuously. Importantly, this embedded nature remains unchallenged by the current shift in the governance structure of Auroville that seems to be slowly transitioning from consensus and direct democracy towards something more akin to representative democracy.

The case of Auroville's governance structures and economic organisations has shown that there are multiple tensions between the need to preserve their experimental character and the one to preserve their functionality over time. Preserving an experimental, participatory, and radical nature in the forms of deciding and organising everyday life within the community, has over time clashed with the increasing number of inhabitants and the related institutional, organisational, and economic complexities. Processes of bureaucratisation and institutionalisation, in turn, create tensions both horizontally—within

the community-and vertically—between the community and the central Indian government. However, in the 'subjectively objective' articulation of these processes—critical, flexible, and responsive to subjective perceptions—may lay potential for prefigurative alternatives to development (Clarence-Smith 2019).

Conclusion

In this article, we have focused on the intentional community of Auroville, established in 1968 in Tamil Nadu, India, as a case of a prefigurative alternative to development. In line with the agenda of this special feature, we believe that such alternatives, although often small in scale and limited in their scope, offer precious insights if we are to fundamentally rethink what we mean by the 'good life': as Sarah Radcliffe has highlighted, 'critical development studies is itself invested in the production of alternatives' (Radcliffe 2015: 856). While Auroville is far from embodying a 'perfect' utopian alternative, its endurance and resilience over more than fifty years as an experimental society driven by an alternative conception of a 'good life' makes it a unique living laboratory that can inform dominant understandings and practices of sustainable development that "relink or regenerate practices of care" (Akbulut et al. 2022).

Throughout the article we define Auroville as an example of a 'prefigurative' alternative: an alternative that is embodying in the present a societal vision for the future, a laboratory of (and for) the future. We do so by analysing Auroville's governance structure (and its relationship with the Indian central government) and the provisioning of food and other basic goods through a cooperative, non-price-based form of economic organisation (the PTDC). Both these institutional and economic arrangements are, by their very nature, experimental and evolving over time through a process of constant (re)negotiation and adaptation.

We call this capacity to balance a prefigurative, experimental, and participatory initiative with an institutional frame 'flexible institutionalisation'. We believe that it has been key to the perpetuation and may prove necessary to the scaling up of the Auroville project. Through our exploratory conceptualisation of 'flexible institutionalisation' we aim at contributing to the ongoing debate on prefiguration that views, on one side, the sceptics who believe that prefigurative initiatives cannot have a long-lasting and scalable impact on society given their mere performative nature, and, on the other hand, the enthusiasts who believe that prefiguration can indeed foster progressive change by exploring new geometries and new configurations in the interplay between the grassroots and the institutional level. We believe that it is exactly by looking at this dense and heterogeneous political ecology of practices (Akbulut et al. 2022) that we find evidence of the transformative potential of prefigurative alternatives to development. It goes without saying that we

have explored here only the case of Auroville, and that more research is needed to explore the soundness and the limits of the concept of 'flexible institutionalisation'. The countless 'network of networks' representing the pluriverse (Escobar, 2012; Kothari et al. 2019) constitutes, we think, a fertile ground to further such empirical investigations.

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