Beyond Refusal: Reconceptualizing Deconstruction in Prefigurative Social Spaces

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Abstract

Social scientists have often studied grassroots initiatives in terms of prefiguration, generating important insights into the construction of alternatives to capitalism. However, the role of deconstructive processes, such as the refusal to engage with capitalist logics and relations, remains debated and undertheorized. This essay brings the theoretical perspectives of schismogenesis and unmaking capitalism into conversation with theorizations of refusal in prefiguration, allowing the advancement of a novel understanding of deconstructive processes in prefigurative grassroots initiatives. Building upon a conceptualization of grassroots initiatives as the production of social space, the essay makes three contributions to the debate on refusal and deconstruction in prefiguration. First, it contends that the prefiguration of alternatives to capitalism by grassroots initiatives is inherently entangled with and enabled by deconstructive processes of differentiation from capitalist cultural and sociomaterial configurations. Thus, deconstructive processes disable or weaken the influence of capitalism on prefigurative initiatives. Second, to comprehend fully and more accurately such disabling or weakening, scholars should rely on a conceptual repertoire that encompasses refusal, as well as other processes such as unlearning, sacrifice, and defamiliarization. Third, the essay contends that such deconstructive processes may enable, if not be preconditional for, prefiguration having liberating, protective, and affirmative functions.

Keywords: social-ecological transformation; social movements; postcapitalism; social space; cultural differentiation.

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"In the long run, the elusive goal of sustainability will depend on the possibility, dim perhaps but not inexistent, of fostering meshworks of activists, local groups, ecosystems, and other actors, such as transnational NGOs and other social movements, that could *extract from the dominant logics ever-larger social and ecological spaces.* The hope is that they could foster the heterogeneity and diversity that characterize place, nature, and economy. Militating against this project are the most recalcitrant and anachronistic forms of capital, development, and the State. Supporting it are some local groups, practices of difference [...] and social movements and their allies."

Escobar (2008, pp. 109–110, emphasis added)

1   Background: Prefigurative Grassroots Initiatives

A growing body of scholarship has questioned the possibility of meeting global sustainability targets without challenging and transforming modern capitalist societies and their cultural, social, and political foundations (e.g. Brand & Wissen, 2021; Lövbrand et al., 2015; Feola et al., 2018; Fraser, 2021; Pelling et al., 2012; Rosa et al., 2017; Urry, 2010; Wiedmann et al., 2020), including racism, colonialism, and patriarchy (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2009; Gosh, 2016 & 2022; Swilling, 2019; Yusoff, 2019).

A sustainability transformation[1] to usher in a just and environmentally sustainable future entails questioning modern capitalist societies' cultural and sociomaterial infrastructure: "It is widely recognized that we need to shift some very big cultural frames — the importance of economic growth, the dominance of fossil fuel capitalism, the hope of modernity as unending progress — to deal adequately with the climate change challenge" (Head, 2019, p. ix).

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1.   The concept of sustainability transformation denotes a major, fundamental change, as opposed to minor, marginal, or incremental shifts of the social order, resulting in a reduction of the social metabolism, often in association with increasing levels of social justice. Transformation is not to be understood as a homogeneous process but rather as an ensemble of multi-level, multi-scale processes that may involve material and/or symbolic as well as structural and/or functional aspects of social, socio-technical, or social-ecological systems (Feola, 2015; ISSC/UNESCO, 2013).

While ecomodernist myths and depoliticised visions of anthropo- and techno-centric green growth transitions persist, per Swyngedouw and Ernstson (2018) and Feola (2020), the crucial connection of cultural and sociomaterial transformation has been increasingly acknowledged since "deep reductions in energy use and carbon emissions will not be possible within political economies saturated by the capitalist imperatives of growth, commodification and individualization" (Wilhite, 2016, p. 2).

Prefigurative grassroots initiatives[2] are forms of collective action that attempt to create alternative systems of provision and sociomaterial realities in the present while aligning means such as horizontal organization, deep democracy, social inclusion, and ends such as social justice, ecological sustainability, autonomy, dignity, and sovereignty (Monticelli, 2021 & 2022; Schiller-Merkens, 2022). They set exemplary cases of post-neoliberal social citizenship (cf. Laruffa, 2022). Hence, they are often seen as post-capitalist "nowtopias" and alternatives to capitalism[3] (Wright, 2013; Monticelli, 2022). Based on praxis and learning to govern by redesigning how power operates (Maeckelbergh, 2011), they realize exemplary practice, showing that "another world" is possible.

Evidence of the impacts of prefigurative grassroots initiatives abounds and includes the structural reduction of the environmental impact of mobility, housing, food production and consumption, the provision of goods and services, meeting social needs, the empowerment and socialization of new subjects to values such as care, institutional arrangements such as the commons, and the creation of broadly diffused political support for deeply ecological ways to address unsustainability and other interrelated crises (e.g. De Schutter & Dedeurwaerdere, 2021; Frantzeskaki et al., 2016; Henfrey et al., 2023; Pickerill, 2021; Sekulova et al., 2023). Most importantly, in the context of sustainability transformation, they also realize social change forms that are "deep" and precisely address the cultural foundations (Tab. 1) of capitalist modernity (Centemeri & Asara, 2022; Escobar, 2018; Gibson-Graham, 2005; Schiller-Merkens, 2022).[4]

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2. Prefigurative grassroots initiatives form a diverse phenomenon in respect to size (e.g., the number of members), history, problem focus (e.g., food, energy, care, mobility, and housing), political orientation, and positioning vis-à-vis capitalism. They are variably situated within, against, and beyond capitalism. Some are incommensurable (*sensu* Povinelli, 2001) to liberal modernity and capitalism, while others are commensurable with it. Some initiatives are explicitly anti-capitalist, while others do not explicitly or directly relate to capitalism in their discourse — though they do in various ways, consciously or not, in their practice as they are premised on, and attempt to realize in the present, values that are set in contrast to capitalism (Tab. 2).

3. Prefiguration is a political strategy that is not intrinsically progressive, nor is it adopted exclusively in collective action oriented towards increased environmental sustainability and social justice (e.g., du Plessis & Husted, 2022). Nevertheless, this essay focuses on prefigurative grassroots initiatives working towards a sustainability transformation, as defined above.

4. In this essay, following scholars referred to in the text, the transformation of capitalism by grassroots initiatives is understood as a situated reconfiguration of institutions, practices, and cultural models through the production of social spaces rather than through political action struggling against hegemonic and supposedly monolithic, all-encompassing global capitalist structures. Transformation in prefigurative grassroots initiatives is often incomplete, tentative, fragile, and unfinished, characterized by compromises and temporary setbacks. Many critics have dismissed grassroots initiatives for their local, marginal nature, their inability to "scale up", and their experimental character, which has failed to exert sizeable influence on the capitalist macro structures reproducing injustices and unsustainability (e.g., Blühdorn, 2017; Sharzer, 2012). These critiques resonate with the skepticism regarding the tendency of prefigurative politics to refrain from identifying and addressing critical nodes and structures of power, such as the state (e.g., Foran, 2012; Mouffe, 2013; Rohgalf, 2013; Smucker, 2014).

Table 1 – Prefigurative grassroots initiatives are premised on and function in varying forms and extents, according to the logics contrasting with capitalist ones. Source: Feola (2025).

Capitalism	Alternative to Capitalism
Wealth	Wellbeing
Private property	Commoning
Exchange value	Use value
Accumulation and growth (limitless)	Balance (within limits)
Production	Reproduction
Efficiency	Sufficiency (and efficiency)
Individual	Collective
Rationality	(Multiple forms of) socio-cultural engagement
Separation	Relation
Utilitarianism	Care
Externalization	Responsibility
Placeless-ness	Place-based-ness
Human	Human and non-human

2 Problem: Constructive and Deconstructive Processes in Prefiguration

It is crucial to recognize and explain how grassroots initiatives prefigure desired alternatives to capitalism. However, it remains unclear how grassroots collectives and initiatives concretely undo capitalism, including its structural imperative to grow, and how they unsettle its imaginary (Gerber, 2020; Kallis et al., 2012; Kallis, 2018; Monticelli, 2018 & 2022). Theoretical accounts of prefiguration have tended to overly emphasize the constructive processes responsible for the emergence of novelty, while undertheorizing those that deconstruct existing capitalist cultural and sociomaterial configurations. If, as argued by Nancy Fraser (2021), "We cannot save the planet without disabling some core, defining features of our [capitalist] social order" (p. 102, emphasis added), then a critical analysis of how capitalism is concretely disabled, or not, through deconstructive processes in prefigurative grassroots initiatives has much to offer to the understanding of prefiguration.

Two issues remain unresolved and are specifically addressed in this essay. First, the risk of reproducing an "innovation bias" exists (Davidson, 2019; Schmid & Taylor Aiken, 2023), as accounts of prefiguration have generally foregrounded constructive, creative, and future-oriented processes. Social scientists have discussed the importance of a sense of hope reflecting a strong future orientation and the anticipatory consciousness of the "not-yet-become" which recognizes the possibility of alternative realities arising from the openness of the present one (Dinerstein, 2015; Dinerstein & Deneulin, 2012; Gibson-Graham, 2006 & 2008; Mason, 2014; Pickerill, 2021; Sales, 2023; Yates, 2015). Prefigurative grassroots initiatives thrive when they activate and sustain creativity and experimentation in open-ended and emergent transformative processes. While novel relations and practices may become institutionalized, institutionalization is "flexible", as it is constantly open for renewal and adjustment (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022) — key to this is the ability to maintain active processes of conscious self-reflection alongside the affirmation of new subjectivities, relations, structures, and imaginaries (Dinerstein, 2015; Gibson-Graham, 2006 & 2008; Henfrey et al., 2023; Monticelli, 2018 & 2022; Yates, 2015).

The innovation bias, then, assumes that the displacement of extant configurations is somehow the automatic consequence of adding socially, technically, or culturally innovative alternatives. Furthermore, this innovation bias implies the intrinsic utility of novel practices, technologies, and experiments while de-emphasizing and losing sight of social, socio-ecological and socio-technical relations already in place, as well as past and present forms of solidarity, trust, respect, and cooperation on which transformative change may rest through renewal and re-assemblage (Goulet & Vink, 2012; Schmid & Taylor Aiken, 2023; Shove, 2012; also see Sekulova et al., 2023).[5]

An affirmationist bias is a second risk of accounts of prefiguration. An affirmationist bias associates "the lively and life, novelty and experimentation, and the generous and generative in conjunction with a suspicion of negativity" (Dekeyser & Jellis, 2021, p. 318; also see Kanngieser & Beuret, 2017). Ergo, rather than realizing an alternative to capitalism, prefiguration may reproduce capitalism's affirmative logic — and the ensuing imperative of self-valorization — while constraining the transformative potential of prefigurative grassroots initiatives. A real alternative, then, would reject the pulsion to construct an alternative but adopt a strategy of exit and disengagement. Pellizzoni (2021), who built on the autonomist thinking of Agamben, Tronti, and Virno, framed the question as follows:

> [T]his, analytically, entails a two-step movement: first, withdrawal (from some arrangement); second, affirmation (of something different). [...] The question of the emancipatory import of prefiguration boils down to whether the two moments are distinct from each other and set in opposition or whether the second is already contained in the first, implying that subtraction is itself an assertion (p. 366).

Pellizzoni's (2021) proposal resonated with other scholars regarding whether recognizing the affirmative function of subtraction implies that the deconstructive and constructive dynamics are in opposition to one another (e.g. see Törnberg, 2021). Furthermore, it is impossible to think of full withdrawal from capitalism of prefigurative grassroots initiatives that exist "within" it (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Holloway, 2010). Hence, prefiguration is likely predicated on disabling and weakening rather than severing the cultural and sociomaterial connection to capitalism. However, as the discussions around the above-mentioned biases show, deconstructive processes remain debated and undertheorized in the literature on prefiguration.

This is, thus, the question guiding this essay: how to conceptualize deconstructive processes involved in prefiguration? Taking an interdisciplinary perspective, this essay aims to provide a refined understanding of deconstructive processes, their functions, and the entanglement with constructive processes in prefigurative grassroots initiatives.

Intervening in the above-mentioned debates on prefiguration, this essay makes three contributions. First, I contend that the construction of alternatives to capitalism through the social spaces produced by prefigurative grassroots initiatives is inherently entangled with and enabled by deconstructive processes of cultural differentiation from capitalism. In other words, while prefigurative grassroots initiatives may also engage in political strategies of protest and contestation alongside prefiguration (De Geus et al., 2023; Evans, 2021; Monticelli, 2021; Schiller-Merkens, 2022), there is also another range of deconstructive processes that disable or weaken

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5. This idea resonates with emerging theorization of social innovation positing that grassroots initiatives may be transformative when prefigurative power (i.e., the capacity for new ways of doing, thinking, and organizing) and reinforcing power (i.e., the capacity to reproduce existing and new structures and institutions) as well as countervailing power (i.e., the capacity to challenge and dismantle existing structures and institutions) are aptly deployed (de Geus et al., 2023).

relations with capitalist cultural and sociomaterial configurations, thus enabling prefiguration. My second contention is that to fully comprehend the disabling or weakening of capitalism's influence on prefigurative grassroots initiatives, scholars should build upon, but also move beyond, the concept of refusal as elaborated in the extant prefiguration literature. The conceptual repertoire should encompass unlearning, sacrifice, everyday resistance, decolonization of the imaginary, and defamiliarization. These are deconstructive yet generative processes in the everyday and often covert experience of individuals and collectives prefiguring alternatives to capitalism in concrete places. Third, I contend that such deconstructive processes are generative in at least three ways: they make different sociomaterial configurations, hence the prefiguration of alternatives possible (liberating function); they reduce the legibility and translatability of the prefigurative grassroots initiative for outsiders (protective function), thus reducing the likelihood of cooption of alternatives; and they reveal the non-inevitability of the capitalist order while affirming alternative allegiances (affirmative function), hence tightening relations on which prefiguration rests. Underpinning this thinking is a spatial conceptualization of prefigurative grassroots initiatives that sees them as the production of social space: condensation of sociomaterial relations that occur through processes of cultural differentiation and proximation.

In the remainder of this essay, I first introduce a spatial understanding of prefigurative grassroots initiatives as social spaces. In the following section, I integrate such a conceptualization of prefigurative grassroots initiatives with the concept of schismogenesis,[6] to articulate the entanglement of constructive and deconstructive processes within these initiatives. In the two subsequent sections, I attend to the deconstructive processes. I first discuss the conceptualization of refusal, which is the predominant understanding of deconstruction in the prefiguration literature, and introduce the unmaking capitalism perspective, allowing me to show how refusal is but one type of process among many engaged in by individuals and collectives prefiguring alternatives to capitalism in concrete places. I then outline three generative functions of refusal and other deconstructive processes in prefigurative grassroots initiatives, before concluding the essay with some reflections on future research.

3   Prefigurative Grassroots Initiatives as Social Spaces

Inspired by scholars who have employed spatial lenses on collective action and social movements (e.g. Bourdieu, 1985 & 1996; Escobar, 2008; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Melucci, 1995; Polletta, 1999; Routledge, 2003; Schmid & Smith, 2020), I consider prefigurative grassroots initiatives as social spaces formed by the assemblage of relations endowed with meaning between individuals and groups, human and non-human and material and immaterial cultural elements, including cognitive structures (i.e. symbolic spaces). Social spaces include objects and material elements of the physical environment as appropriated by agents (Bourdieu, 1996).

Prefigurative grassroots initiatives are thus social formations defined by a multiplicity of social relations that are bundled together so that they are interpreted in everyday life as a unity. Each element in this space is defined by its social position related to the other elements. However, the space is multidimensional and involves layering various symbolic (e.g. gender, race, and age) and material (e.g. resources) dimensions. As invisible sets of relationships, grassroots

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6. The term schismogenesis denotes a process of conscious cultural differentiation charged with political meaning. The refusal of another group's culture is a force for sociogenesis within a group, as it fosters the self-conscious definition of human communities through differentiation.

initiatives do not correspond to physical space but tend to translate into the physical distribution of social actors, objects, and their properties (Bourdieu, 1996).

By reading prefigurative grassroots initiatives spatially, we can understand them as relatively permanent condensations of relations produced through coexisting processes of (i) differentiation, which involves distancing and dissociation from relations with the material and symbolic elements of the undesired social, cultural, and economic system, and (ii) proximation, which involves the (re)association and tightening of relations with the elements composing the grassroots initiative. Differentiation involves the delineation of a prefigurative grassroots initiative based on its environment, thus "locat[ing] itself within a system of relations" (Melucci, 1995, p. 47), bearing in mind that collective identity construction may occur utilizing denial and opposition (ibidem). In the differentiation lies the potentiality of unity and purposeful mobilization for common objectives (Bourdieu, 1996), while proximation rests on constructing and activating relations that constitute the social space (Melucci, 1995).

This reading underscores the processual and relational nature of prefigurative grassroots initiatives as social spaces. Space is "folded into" social relations through social action. Social space is reproduced, constituted, and performed through social action; it does not pre-exist. The identity of such social formation is, following Melucci (1995), not predetermined nor inscribed in some structural (e.g., socio-economic) characteristics of the actors but results from a process of progressive crystallization since "[c]ollective identity tends to coincide with conscious processes of organization" (p. 51).

Building on bell hooks (1989) and John Holloway (2010), I understand prefigurative grassroots initiatives as spaces within the capitalist whole, albeit at its margins. The marginal position is chosen by those occupying it rather than imposed by the "center" through marginalization and exclusion, although this may also be true. This "breaking out" (Chatterton, 2016) allows for more degrees of freedom to create alternative sociomaterial configurations for "radical openness" (hooks, 1989). The marginal position is reflected in an assemblage of relations that weakens — but never fully severs — relations between the grassroots social formation and the broader capitalist system in which it is embedded, even if that initiative exists in some measure "against" and "beyond" that system (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Holloway, 2010).

Ergo, as illustrated by Escobar's quote opening this essay, prefigurative grassroots initiatives can be understood as social spaces extracted from capitalism, which are defined by relatively stable condensations of relations infused with alternative or post-capitalist logics and values.[7]

However, they configure no stoppage of or escape from capitalism, since they are impossible for social formations that inevitably exist within capitalism. Prefigurative grassroots initiatives are thus spaces that are both oppositional and symbiotic (cf. Liu, 2021; also see Wright, 2013) to spaces of capitalism: they are produced by differentiation and proximation, but an overlap between such initiatives and spaces of capitalism remains. Grassroots initiatives face movement across social space (e.g., new members bringing values, artefacts, ideas, and practices from other social spaces), engaging actively in brokerage (e.g., accessing public funding or support) while also defending the space — i.e., guardianship (Liu, 2021; also see Guerrero Lara et al., 2024). In sum, prefigurative grassroots initiatives remain related to capitalism; therefore, a theorization of construction and deconstruction in grassroots transformative spaces must be able to capture these dynamic relationships.

I propose that the dynamics through which the refusal of capitalism is connected to the creation of alternatives can be insightfully grasped by drawing on the notion of schismogene-

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7.   See Table 1.

sis. Schismogenesis helps to understand cultural differentiation through a spatial perspective consistent with the notion of the production of social space discussed above. Importantly, the notion of schismogenesis helps explain how differentiation between social spaces can be generative of — and intrinsically entangled with — the creation of sociomaterial configurations and cultural norms within such spaces. It is thus to the notion of schismogenesis that I now turn.

4 Schismogenesis: Dynamics of Refusal and Creation of New Social Formations

Schismogenesis was originally proposed by Gregory Bateson (1958 & 1987). In his effort to expand the notion of culture contact, he introduced the notion of schismogenesis to denote the "social process through which human communities split into new ones" (Pharao Hansen, 2018, p. 140).[8]

Central to the notion of schismogenesis is the acknowledgement that the relations *between* different sub-groups — "groups of individuals, with different cultural norms of behavior in each group" (Bateson, 1987, p. 74) — are generative of forms of social life and cultural norms of behavior *within* the involved sub-groups. According to Bateson (1958),

> [W]e should expect that, if the schismogenic relation between A and B is permitted to proceed to a point at which marked distortion occurs in the personalities concerned, their behavior inside their respective groups should be markedly affected by this distortion; and since the direction of the distortion is different in the two groups, we should find that in each group there is developed a special ethos, related in some simple way to the terms of the schismogenic contrast (p. 195).

In schismogenesis, norms of individual behavior within relatively homogenous cultural groups become differentiated due to cumulative interactions among individuals. This differentiation is characterized by reinforcing feedback when interactions between individuals of two cultural groups escalate in a self-amplifying process of divergence.[9]

In sum, the notion of schismogenesis draws our attention to multidimensional social differentiation, which emerges from within a given cultural group and, through self-reinforcing feedback that increases difference, generates and reinforces certain patterns of behavior *between*

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8. Bateson (1987) argued that cultural disunity could be ascertained by examining five separable but interconnected dimensions: cognitive, affective, economic, chronological-spatial, and sociological.

9. Bateson distinguished two main types of schismogenesis. In symmetrical schismogenesis, the differentiation process leads to a split between two equal groups. In complementary schismogenesis, differentiation leads to a split between a weaker, potentially oppressed or submissive group and a stronger, dominant or assertive one (Bateson, 1987). Symmetric and complementary schismogenesis are ideal types. Bateson remarked that "no healthy equilibrated relationship between groups is either purely symmetrical or purely complementary, but that every such relationship contains elements of the other type" (1987, p. 80; also see Gorup & Podjed, 2017). Symmetric and complementary schismogenesis can co-occur and motivate different narratives of cultural differentiation in practice. For instance, in the case of a Mexican Indigenous town lobbying the state government to become an autonomous entity under customary law, members of the community justified their claims using a narrative of symmetrical schismogenesis (i.e. the town having established itself as a competitor — an equal — of the municipal seat), which was morally reinforced by a narrative of complementary schismogenesis (i.e., the town narrating itself through the subordinate category of indigeneity, which gives stronger ethical and historical force to claims of cultural difference; see Pharao Hansen, 2018).

groups, with parallel processes of construction of social forms (e.g. social institutions, economic relations, and practices; cognitive and affective patterns; and spatial and temporal ordering of social life) *within* those groups.

Various scholars have employed the notion of schismogenesis to examine social polarization in environmental conflicts (Brox, 2000; Harrison & Loring, 2014; Hobbs, 2011) and the disintegration of intentional communities (Andelson, 2002). In fact, according to Bateson (1987), schismogenesis — if left unchecked by balancing mechanisms — may cause the collapse of a cultural group.

Departing from those interpretations, the understanding of schismogenesis in this essay is informed by research that has employed this concept to study cultural differentiation (Gorup & Podjed, 2017; Graeber, 2013; Graeber & Wengrow, 2018; Prasse-Freeman & Mauser, 2020; Wengrow & Graeber, 2018), emphasizing the constitution of new social formations. In this view, schismogenesis is not seen as a social pathology leading to social collapse but as a process of conscious cultural differentiation charged with political meaning, which underpins the construction of new and potentially more autonomous, egalitarian, and ecologically sustainable social formations (also see Gorup & Podjed, 2017).

I am especially inspired by the work of the late David Graeber and David Wengrow, who employed the notion of schismogenesis to support their analysis of archaeological evidence of so-called "heroic societies".[10] Archaeological scholarship has usually interpreted the cultures of these outlier societies as primordial givens, cultural loss (from more complex, hierarchical societies to simpler, egalitarian ones), or environmental adaptation. In contrast, Graeber and Wengrow (2018) contended that these societies must be understood as large-scale projects of mutual self-definition: "At least some egalitarian societies were shaping their ideals and institutions in conscious reaction to hierarchical ones" (p. 4). For example, discussing the egalitarian societies of the Aboriginal Californians, Wengrow and Graeber argued that these societies were aware of, and at least periodically in contact with, the peoples of the Northwest Coast, whom they perceived as warlike and disposed to exploit the labour of defeated peoples. The Californians recognized the exploitation of war captives as an ongoing possibility in their society but rejected it because exploiting captives would lead to results diametrically opposed to key social values (Wengrow & Graeber, 2018). Thus, this emergence of two cultural areas on the Pacific Coast can be explained, according to Wengrow and Graeber, in terms of schismogenesis rather than environmental adaptation or primordial cultural difference.

The broader argument is that cultures "in their origins and to a large extent in their maintenance [can be] self-conscious political projects" (Graeber, 2013, p. 2). Graeber argued that "cultures are not just conceptions of what the world is like, not just ways of being and acting in the world, but active political projects which often operate by the explicit rejection of other ones" (2013, p. 1). Informed also by the autonomist thinking and the notion of "engaged withdrawal" of Paolo Virno (Graeber, 2004), Graeber and Wengrow complemented Bateson's concept of schismogenesis with a strong emphasis on the collective and deliberate refusal of cultural traits, and thus on cultural confrontation as a sustaining force of schismogenesis. In this view, the refusal of another group's culture serves as a force for sociogenesis *within* a group, namely, the self-conscious definition of human communities through differentiation.

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10. According to Graeber (2013, p. 5), heroic societies shared the following common features: they (i) were decentralized aristocracies, without a centralized authority or principle of sovereignty; (ii) focused on game-like contests as the primary business of ritual and political, life, and resisted accumulation for its own sake; (iii) were theatrical, where boasting and lying were highly developed and appreciated arts; (iv) resisted certain features of nearby urban civilizations, above all writing and commerce, hence money.

In sum, I argue that the notion of schismogenesis articulates refusal in a spatial understanding of prefigurative grassroots initiatives, one that helps grasp the dynamics through which the refusal of capitalism is systemically connected to the construction of alternatives. In the reading proposed here, schismogenesis helps to understand cultural differentiation through a processual and spatial perspective consistent with the notion of the production of social space discussed above. Importantly, by providing an overarching perspective on constructive and deconstructive processes, the notion of schismogenesis helps explain how differentiation *between* social formations or social spaces can be generative of — and intrinsically entangled with — sociomaterial configurations and cultural norms *within* such spaces. While differentiation is a multidimensional, unfinished, and ambivalent project, a schismogenic perspective prompts us to appreciate how the internal structuring of new cultural and sociomaterial configurations continues to find motivation in a political project of cultural differentiation.

The notion of schismogenesis focuses on the meso-level. It outlines refusal in rather abstract terms and emphasizes refusal as the primary — or only — process characterizing the deconstructive dynamics of prefigurative grassroots initiatives. In contrast, empirical evidence suggests that a more diverse range of micro-level processes may be involved in grassroots initiatives. For this reason, in the following two sections, I draw from conceptualizations of deconstructive processes as discussed in the scholarship on prefiguration and unmaking capitalism in grassroots initiatives, respectively. The conceptualizations of deconstructive processes offered by these perspectives complement the notion of schismogenesis (i) by providing a theorization of refusal and its role in prefiguration, and (ii) by broadening the spectrum of micro-level processes upon which the prefiguration of alternatives to capitalism may rest.

5   Prefiguration: The Role of Refusal

Accounts of prefiguration have generally foregrounded constructive, creative, and future-oriented processes. However, various scholars have discussed deconstructive processes, specifically in terms of refusal in the context of prefiguration. Refusal is the deliberate rejection of an imposed and taken-for-granted definition of a situation, subjectivity, and/or social relation. Refusal is viewed as a political act involving concrete everyday distancing practices, such as a withdrawal from work (in the autonomist tradition, e.g., Tronti, 1965) and other capitalist relations, including class identity (Pizzolato, 2017). Refusal is not understood as a political strategy in addition to prefiguration (as in DeGeus et al., 2023; Evans, 2021; Monticelli, 2021; Schiller-Merkens, 2022), but as one of its inherent components, and possibly a precondition. For example, Federici (2010) discussed the prefiguration of the commons contending that commoning is grounded in the refusal of the suffering caused by capitalist development. She argued that "[n]o common is possible unless we refuse to base our life and our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them" (p. 386). Carlsson and Manning (2010) showed that convivial "nowtopian" communities are formed through "conscious withdrawal from capitalist culture and concerted rejection of the value form" (p. 924). Therefore, refusal defies capitalism's affirmationist imperative and the ensuing imperative of self-valorization (Pellizzoni, 2021), implying the breaking of particular relations with capitalism and the rejection of the frame of reference holding capitalist sociomaterial configurations together.

Much of this scholarship supports a generative understanding of refusal. For example, Sales (2023) discussed the distinction between refusal and resistance (or opposition), arguing that the former is productive while the latter is not. According to Sales (2023), the "productive

features of refusal are (a) the recognition of the historically transitory nature of the current state of affairs; (b) the acceptance of the dialectical and unfinished status of the current reality; (c) the invitation to move beyond what is possible in a situated historical moment" (p. 50). The reading of refusal proposed by Sales largely aligned with Dinerstein's approach (2012 & 2015).

Reflecting on John Holloway's seminal book *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2002), as related to Ernst Bloch's monumental work on utopia, Dinerstein (2012) usefully highlighted the generative connection between refusal and hope. In her view, refusal is a conscious rejection of identity within capitalism; it establishes the possibility of disagreement and, hence, of politics and political subjects capable of creating new realities. In connecting hope and negativity, Dinerstein, (2015) articulated four dimensions: negating, creating, contradicting, and exceeding:

> Negating is deciphered as a rejection of the given – capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial – realities. [...] The creating mode of autonomy anticipates the future by modeling concrete utopias (i.e., invents new practices, relations, sociabilities, and horizons or pushes forward and organizes customs, habits, and traditions that already exist in a new light). The contradicting mode of autonomy is about navigating and resisting the danger of appropriation and translation of autonomy into the grammar of power and the necessity of disappointment. Finally, excess is informed by the category of the not yet (i.e., it is related to the search towards the realization of an unrealized reality that can be invented or rendered visible by anticipating it in different contexts). The art of organizing hope is about playing the four modes al unison in the key of hope (p. 61).

One of the advantages of this framework is its ability to overcome the risk of understanding refusal as a single denunciatory moment rather than as an ongoing process of differentiation contributing to the production of social space. Hence, I suggest that the dimension of "contradicting" is important.

Seen from the spatial perspective outlined earlier, in which social spaces do not pre-exist but are produced through social action in joint processes of differentiation (distancing) and proximation, the dimension of "contradiction" in Dinerstein's framework underscores the continuous presence of relations with capitalism underpinning risks of the cooption, capture, and translatability of prefigured cultural and sociomaterial configurations. Nevertheless, I contend that, from a spatial perspective, both negation and contradiction can be seen as having separate yet similar functions, namely differentiation, in the production of spaces of difference (Escobar 2008) and their reproduction within and against capitalism. Indeed, they both disable or weaken the attachments to the symbolic, social, and material elements of capitalism. Furthermore, they involve persisting relations with what becomes external to the grassroots space; they signify the continuous friction at the symbolic and sociomaterial border of the space, which allows novel relations to be formed and institutionalized through the production of that space (in Dinerstein's terms, "creation" and "excess").

On the other hand, the empirical evidence suggests that deconstructive processes may not be fully or accurately captured by such a notion of refusal. For example, Kanngieser and Beuret (2017) highlighted the strategic use of silence to "foster the suspension of assertions on how the world is, or how it should be" (p. 363). Silence challenges the affirmationist imperative and the privileging of novelty, experimentation, and interventions that increase capacities to act (Dekeyser & Jellis, 2021). Silence suspends the urgency of assessment and action; it is thus "crucial to *making* spaces in which the proliferation of different ways of being can occur, and

from within which resistance against forms of cognitive capitalism, neocolonialism and the ecological destruction of the earth can take place" (Kanngieser & Beuret, 2017, p. 363, emphasis added).

Moreover, Brunori, Rossi and Guidi (2012) studied solidarity-based purchasing groups in Italy and revealed the role of dynamics of detachment from and reattachment to networks of relations as crucial to cognitive and normative reframing leading to a change in knowledge, values, attitudes, and practices towards food:

> For a great part of their daily life, consumers involved [in alternative food networks] live in the same relational context as conventional consumers. The shift from the second category to the first one has, therefore, to be understood as a process of building new networks, *detachment from old networks and attachment to new ones*, and of *the creation and destruction of coherence between sub-spheres of daily life*. [...] In these new networks, changing consumption patterns rest on the change of patterns of relations, the adoption of new rules and *breaking down of old ones*, the use of new artefacts and the abandonment of old ones (pp. 4–21, emphasis added).

In a similar fashion, Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese (2022) investigated individual experiences of prefiguring degrowth. They identified a phase of identitarian differentiation from imperatives and practices of economic growth to facilitate the embodiment and performance of alternative ways of living. For the research participants interviewed in that study, transformation often involved a sense of dissociation and crisis of being, followed by a "disentangling from organizational spaces governed by growth" (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Biese, 2022, p. 21).

As the quotes above show, differentiation may imply refusing established practices, including their material elements, and subjectivities in ways that exceed the notions of refusal discussed above. While this literature foregrounds refusal, the empirical evidence thus shows that a lack of action (silence), reconfiguration of social practices, and embodied experiences of different organizational forms may also contribute to the diversity of processes at play when prefigurative grassroots initiatives deconstruct capitalism.

In sum, considering how refusal has been developed in part of the prefiguration scholarship helps to conceptualize it as a generative process and, to an extent, overcome the risk of understanding refusal as a single act or as mere rejection. Nonetheless, the scope remains to articulate deconstructive micro-level processes in a more diverse manner, one that comprises refusal, but which is at the same time capable of grasping the diversity of processes involved in differentiation, as illustrated above and further discussed in the following section.

6   Broadening the Understanding of Deconstructive Processes in Prefiguration: Beyond Refusal

The unmaking perspective emerged as a challenge to theories of sustainability transformation blind to capitalism (Feola, 2020) or flawed by the innovation bias (Feola et al., 2021). This perspective offers an analytical framework for understanding the range of interconnected, multi-level, and multidimensional processes that make space for radical alternatives to capitalist modernity (Feola, 2019; see Table 2 below). Inspired by scholars arguing that sustainability transformation entails the deconstruction of and liberation from capitalist imaginaries of endless economic growth (e.g., Latouche, 2010) or the "breaking" of capitalist habits (Wilhite,

2016), unmaking posits that deconstructive processes may be *conditions for*, rather than *consequences of*, sustainability transformation beyond capitalism. Indeed, transformation in prefigurative grassroots initiatives may entail an element of *unmaking* modern capitalist configurations to make space for alternative, post-capitalist ones. In other words, sustainability transformation may not occur through the mere *addition* of supposed solutions, values, or social imperatives (e.g., Leff, 2010) but by deliberately *subtracting* problematic existing institutions, forms of knowledge, practices, imaginaries, power structures, and human/non-human relations at the outset.

Table 2 – The unmaking of capitalism can occur via different processes, which are studied through distinct theoretical lenses. Source: adapted from Feola et al., 2021.

Process	Short definition	Significance for the unmaking of capitalism
Unlearning	Consciously not thinking or acting in "old ways"	Abandons, rejects, discards from use, gives up, abstains from retrieving, questions taken-for-granted values, norms, beliefs (e.g., the idea of progress as endless accumulation and expansion), and operations and behaviour (e.g., over-production and consumption)
Sacrifice	Giving up something (now) for something of higher value (obtained now or in the future)	Entails the voluntary reduction of consumption (voluntary simplicity), the refusal to reproduce social expectations and imperatives, and supposedly "rational" consumer behaviour
Everyday resistance	Quiet, dispersed, disguised, or otherwise seemingly invisible acts of opposition, struggle, or refusal to cooperate with abusive powers	Questions, opposes, and objects to abusive or oppressive power relations; refuses to cooperate with or submit to oppressive behaviour and control (e.g., the appropriation and exploitation of cheap nature and labour)
Refusal	The rejection of an imposed and taken-for-granted definition of a situation, subjectivity and/or social relation	Abstains from, stops, and/or breaks exploitative and/or alienating relations (e.g. labour relations). Rejects (taken-for-granted) consent of definitions of progress with endless accumulation or consumption
Decolonisation of the imaginary	The radical and profound cultural change of the foundational imaginary significations of modern capitalist societies	Refuses complicity and collaboration with the ideology of development, as in the abstention from the use of environmentally destructive technologies or the limitation of space allotted for advertisement; cognitively subverts and critiques economicism and the imperative of endless economic growth
Defamiliarization	The "removal of an object from the sphere of" automised perception	Ruptures, de-automatises, or dis-habituates an automised perception related to cultural constructions of value and worth. Emotional detachment and critical reflection. Disrupts common sense related to taken-for-granted production-consumption routines and utilitarian value systems

This perspective has informed various studies of prefigurative grassroots initiatives. For example, in a study of territorial transformation led by a peasant movement in Colombia, Fe-

ola, Vincent and Moore (2021) examined the processes of construction of a peasant economy based on the principles of solidarity, justice, dignity, a holistic view of human and non-human life, collective participation, autonomy, and sovereignty. The study revealed that such an alternative peasant economy was enabled by the refusal of imposed and taken-for-granted peasant identities and imaginary significations, the abstention from using undignifying but routinised and interiorized language, the withdrawal from exploitative market relations, and the expulsion of destructive mining enterprises from the territory.

In a study of work relations in community-supported agriculture in Portugal, Raj et al. (2024) provided evidence of collective and individual processes of refusal, unlearning, sacrifice, everyday resistance, and defamiliarization, which enabled the transformation towards non-alienated, non-monetized, and full-of-care work relations. The three case studies investigated in Raj et al. (2024) illustrate how deconstructive processes involve refusal (e.g., the collective rejection of the devaluation of care work and gender inequality in decision-making; the members' refusal of monetary compensation for their work), but also crucially involved a more diverse set of processes including sacrifice (e.g., the perform care work to the benefit of the community), unearning (e.g., the deliberate letting go of hierarchal interactions between producers and consumers, and of a productivist approach to farming), resistance (e.g., members challenging the centralization of decision-making power on farm owners), and defamiliarization (e.g., collective conscious de-automatization of the perception of exchange – commercial – value of a basket of produce).

In another study of strategies for the de-commodification, de-instrumentalization and de-monetization of labour in community-supported agriculture initiatives, Rossi et al. (2024) identified collective attempts at unmaking capitalism in the refusal of market logics and labour exploitation, the challenging of economic valuation of labour and food, and the attempt to place volunteer work outside the constraining scope of the legal system by framing it as a recreational activity. As noted by Rossi et al. (2024), these

> situated micro processes of symbolic and material deconstruction of established capitalist models take place in the everyday life of CSA [community supported agriculture] members and communities. These actions are often covert, but essential to generate spaces where logics and relations of solidarity, care, responsibility, and reconnection, among others, can be experimented with and realized in concrete emerging institutional arrangements, such as share determination mechanisms and volunteer integration schemes (p. 1681).

In yet another study, van Oers et al. (2023) detailed the processes of unlearning payment routines and, more importantly, valuation and collective responsibilities that were activated by the farmers in two Dutch community-supported agriculture farms implementing solidarity payment schemes. In those farms characterized by a precarious economic position of the farmers, the farmers unlearned and were liberated from a discursive emphasis on the non-monetary benefits of farming to justify low income and self-exploitation. In turn, through the collective process activated by the farmers, community members were provoked to suspend their beliefs about consumer roles and responsibilities within the community-supported agriculture initiative and encouraged to think and act with care and solidarity.

These studies illustrate that deliberate refusal, sacrifice, unlearning defamiliarization with, and everyday resistance to symbolic or material elements of capitalist configurations should not be seen as endpoints but as means inscribed in the performance of socio-ecological transformation, which may or may not result in the unmaking of those configurations.

The unmaking perspective resonates with the above-mentioned debates on refusal in the autonomist and Marxist traditions (e.g. Dinerstein, 2015; Graeber, 2013; Pellizzoni, 2021), but is informed by yet a different tradition of thinking about refusal, namely a decolonial and cultural anthropological one (e.g., McGranahan, 2016a & 2016b; Simpson, 2016; Weiss, 2016), as well as by sustainability transitions, organization, degrowth, political ecology, decolonial and indigenous, resistance, anarchist, and cultural studies scholarship (Feola et al., 2021). The cultural anthropological and decolonial literature on refusal helps to understand the generative role of deconstructive processes (Tab. 2), whereby ethical support from a dominant system is withdrawn in favor of other ethical allegiances. Thus, these processes are social and affiliative — to unmake is to reject some affiliations to reconfigure relations or enable other meaningful affiliations. Deliberately refusing capitalist relations reaffirms the primacy of alternative attachments, connections, and shared goals (McGranahan, 2016b). Deconstructive processes (Tab. 2) can be an affirmative investment of hopes and energies in another possibility (Simpson, 2016), thereby enabling the imagination and prefiguration of different futures because they create the possibility of reconfiguring the otherwise unthinkable or out of reach (see Feola, 2019).

This perspective hinges on an understanding of deconstruction as historical and situated (Feola et al., 2021; Piccoli et al., 2023; Raj et al., 2024). Cultural and sociomaterial configurations have been historically embodied or reflected in institutions, values, materials, infrastructures, cognitive structures, competencies, and meanings. Existing assemblages of elements influence emerging novel ones and potentially constrain new configurations, thereby explaining why what causes a rupture in certain relations in one place may not create a rupture somewhere else.

The unmaking perspective suggests that differentiation can occur through public actions such as civil disobedience and protests, as well as the development of disruptive public discourse (Feola et al., 2021). However, these processes are often covert because they are bound to the private sphere of everyday life and undermine established and socially accepted order, including institutionalized social expectations, institutions, cultural models, and material infrastructure. Hence, cultural differentiation challenges these norms while questioning the legitimacy of the systems of rules and authority that maintain them. Decolonial and cultural anthropological theorizations of refusal suggest the operation of a different "grammar of activism" posing a test of autonomy in challenging the state and the market to foster distancing of grassroots initiatives from dominant configurations in ways that neither reinforce the state's (or market's) authority nor subject it to outright public defiance.

The unmaking perspective also frames social transformations as personal shifts in being, emphasizing the importance of approaching deconstruction as the "concrete, shared experience that reflects both the cultural, material and historical givens of its carriers" (Scott, 1985, p. 45; also see Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). In processes of cultural differentiation from capitalism, cultural models are at stake alongside more mundane, material, and often inconsistent reconfigurations of everyday life, as shown, for example, by the empirical studies mentioned earlier (e.g., Brunori et al., 2012; Ehrnström-Fuentes & Biese, 2022; Raj et al., 2024; van Oers et al., 2023). By recognizing the personal, experiential dimension of cultural differentiation and the contradictions and messiness of its component processes, this perspective acknowledges the involved compromises, negotiations, setbacks, and dilemmas (Piccoli et al., 2023; Raj et al., 2024; Rossi et al., 2024; van Oers et al., 2023).

In sum, the unmaking perspective complements the perspectives on refusal in prefiguration sketched earlier with a proposal that provides a more fine-grained theoretical entry point into

(i) the everyday experience of deconstructive at the micro level, (ii) a broader and more diverse range of processes that may be activated beside refusal, and (iii) the often-covert strategies and diverse political grammar of activism involved.

7　The Generative Functions of Deconstruction: Towards a Synthesis

This essay injected the theoretical perspectives of schismogenesis and unmaking capitalism into the debate on refusal in prefiguration. I built upon a spatial conceptualization of grassroots initiatives as the production of social space: the condensation of sociomaterial relations that occur through processes of cultural differentiation and proximation. I proposed integrating such a spatial conceptualization of grassroots initiatives by reading differentiation and proximation through the concept of schismogenesis. This allowed me to explain how deconstructive processes of differentiation *between* social spaces can be generative of — and intrinsically entangled with — the deliberate and politically meaningful construction of alternatives to capitalist sociomaterial configurations and cultural norms *within* such spaces. However, I argued that deconstructive processes should not be read only in terms of refusal, as predominantly done in the prefiguration literature (e.g. Dinerstein, 2012; Graeber, 2004 & 2013; Holloway, 2010), but that refusal should be seen as only one of a range of processes (Tab. 2) in the everyday and the often-covert experience of individuals and collectives prefiguring alternatives to capitalism in concrete places.

From this standpoint, based on the discussion developed in the previous sections, it is possible to postulate three functions to explain how refusal and other deconstructive processes, as discussed in this essay, are not only entangled with, but most importantly also generative of prefiguration of alternatives to capitalist sociomaterial configurations.

First, prefiguration may be enabled by the liberating function of refusal and other deconstructive processes (Tab. 2). The disabling or weakening of relations with capitalism and its spaces (i.e., the influence of capitalism on social actors, materials, and symbolic elements constituting the prefigurative grassroots initiative) makes different sociomaterial configurations within the prefigurative grassroots initiative possible. The disabling or weakening of one or more relations may not imply that all the relations between the prefigurative grassroots initiative and spaces of capitalism are affected; overlaps between spaces — members of such initiative also live in other capitalist spaces — as well as the coexistence of symbiotic and oppositional positionings vis-à-vis capitalism may persist (Liu, 2021). Nonetheless, the partial and possibly temporally limited disabling and weakening liberates sociomaterial elements in the social space for establishing relations with other elements of that prefigurative grassroots initiative in institutionalizing alternatives to capitalism. For example, in the above-mentioned study of a peasant movement in Colombia rejecting an exploitative vocabulary allows for adopting a dignifying and empowering one; the subtraction of a portion of land from industrial agriculture makes it available for agroecological production and related regenerative socio-ecological relations; the rejection of mono-dimensional consumption- or production-oriented identities liberates individuals to redefine themselves and their relations with other human and non-human beings; and exiting certain market relations makes space for building non-market and solidarity-based economic exchange systems (Feola et al., 2021). In another case mentioned above, the attachment to materials, meanings, and skills (i.e., practices) of sustainable consumption is made possible by the breaking down of "old" informal rules, relations, and artefacts (Brunori et al., 2012). Similarly, in the study of individual experiences of prefiguring degrowth mentioned in an earlier section, the participants' personal transformation and embodiment of alternative ways of

living was facilitated by the refusal of imperatives and practices of economic growth in the organizational spaces they lived (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Biese, 2022).

Second, prefiguration may be enabled by the protecting function of refusal and other deconstructive processes (Tab. 2). They reduce the legibility and translatability of the prefigurative grassroots initiative for outsiders. They shield the formation and consolidation of relations and the institutionalization of alternatives within the grassroots social space, reducing the risk of re-establishing relations with capitalist spaces, external interference, capture, or cooption. The protecting function hinges specifically on the modality, as well as on the symbolic valence of deconstructive processes, that is, the implicated refusal of the "frame of reference", the meaning-making logics associated with, for example, the refusal of a specific technology, practice, or vocabulary. For example, silence is less audible than voice (Kanngieser & Beuret, 2017), disengagement (e.g., abstention from overconsumption) can be more unsettling than alter-engagement (e.g., consumption of "fair" or sustainable products) (Latouche, 2010), and refusing taken-for-granted efficiency logics (e.g., in favor of sufficiency) can catch external actors off guard because it entails rejecting not only an object or practice, but the more pervasive underlying logic. Similarly, for peasants involved in the aforementioned Colombian movement, unlearning the dominant and interiorized language of domination meant disabling deeply seated, exploitative, and marginalizing system logics (Feola et al., 2021). However, the protecting function is not exempt from ensuing tensions and ambivalences in the context of a persisting overlap and connection with spaces of capitalism and the necessity to strategically leverage legibility (e.g., to access resources) and illegibility (e.g., when the prefiguration of alternatives hinges on working around formal norms) (e.g., Rossi et al., 2024, on the logics of valuation of labour in community-supported agriculture).

Third, prefiguration may be enabled by the affirming function of refusal and other deconstructive processes (Tab. 2). The disabling or weakening of relations with capitalism inherently affirms alternative allegiances; it reflects the recognition of the non-inevitability of the current state of affairs and invites a move beyond what is considered possible. For example, in community-supported agriculture, refusing the economic valuation of farmer labour affirms and reinforces alternative logics of care, exchange value, reciprocity, and belonging (Raj et al., 2024; Rossi et al., 2024; van Oers et al., 2023). Deserting exploitative market relations inherently affirms the value of non-market ones, such as reciprocity (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Spatially, the affirming function strengthens existing relations or establishes new ones within the prefigurative social space. Like previous ones, this function must be considered an ongoing achievement that is constantly in need of reproduction and maintenance (Dinerstein, 2015; McGranahan, 2016b; Feola, 2019).

The achievements related to these three functions are never set in stone because partially or temporarily deconstructed relations may resurface or gain new strength. Ample empirical evidence exists on the tensions within prefigurative grassroots initiatives by the persistence of relations with spaces of capitalism (for agri-food prefigurative initiatives, see, e.g., Bonfert, 2023; Galt, 2013; Galt et al., 2016; Raj et al., 2024; Rossi et al., 2024; Smessaert & Feola, 2024; van Oers et al., 2023) — reflecting their existence "in-against-and-beyond" capitalism (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Holloway, 2010). This evidence underscores that the constant maintenance of deconstructive processes and their fragile achievements is crucial.

8 Conclusion and Outlook

This essay renews the case for a perspective that attends to constructive and deconstructive processes in prefigurative grassroots initiatives. It sheds new light on the deconstructive processes involved in constructing alternatives to capitalism in and through prefigurative grassroots initiatives. It does so by contending that deconstructive processes, which include but exceed refusal as discussed in the literature, are entangled with constructive ones, as the former may be generative of the latter in three ways: by making different cultural and sociomaterial configurations within the prefigurative grassroots initiative possible (liberating function); by reducing the legibility and translatability of the prefigurative grassroots initiative for outsiders (protective function); and by revealing the non-inevitability of the capitalist order while affirming alternative allegiances (affirmative function).

While alternative or post-capitalist values and logics[11] provide a common grammar and inspiration to prefigurative praxis in grassroots initiatives, the propulsion for sustainability transformation may be found more in a political project of conscious cultural differentiation from capitalism than in the allure of a precisely envisioned post-capitalist future. By calling attention to the political pursuit of cultural differentiation and the sociogenesis it engenders, we can develop more refined empirical analyses and compelling theoretical accounts of the processes through which such initiatives can transform modern capitalist sociomaterial configurations in concrete places. This approach avoids the innovation bias and addresses the affirmationist bias by adopting a nuanced, tripartite perspective on the generative functions of deconstruction.

Therefore, future research may apply and test the theoretical perspective proposed in this essay to build further empirical evidence on a broad range of deconstructive processes, including — but not limited to — refusal, across different types of prefigurative grassroots initiatives in distinct contexts. Furthermore, future research may articulate theoretically how the production of prefigurative social spaces through constructive and deconstructive processes relates to multi-scalar geographies of sustainability transformation of the global capitalist political economy. Crucial to such an endeavour will be a serious consideration of the risk that cultural differentiation may further political polarization and social fragmentation in late capitalist societies, thereby hindering, rather than facilitating, broader collective action for societal transformation towards sustainability. This risk is increasingly present, given the repeated observation of the lack of diversity in many prefigurative grassroots initiatives and their difficulty in establishing durable, intersectional coalitions. On the other hand, such endeavour would also benefit from the spatial perspective proposed in this essay, which can help appreciate that — in spite of differentiation from capitalism — prefigurative grassroots initiatives remain characterized by a degree of openness due to the porous nature of their boundaries, the persistence of overlaps, connections and movement across alternative and capitalist spaces, and the presence of translocal networks and multi-actor alliances with which prefigurative grassroots initiatives engage and operate. These spatialities offer grassroots initiatives not only the possibility to support their prefigurative efforts, but also to simultaneously pursue other, more conventional political strategies, such as protest and advocacy. These strategies, variably intersecting the constructive and deconstructive processes discussed in this essay, call for further theoretical articulation.

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11.   See Table 1.

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