The Prefigurative Politics of Translation and Interpreting in Place-Based and Global Movements of Protest

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This presentation will focus on one aspect of the politics of translation and interpreting in the increasingly complex landscape of contemporary protest movements, namely, prefiguration (or prophecy, the term used by Alberto Melucci 1996 for the same concept). The idea of prefiguration originally derived from anarchist discourse; it concerns “the distinction between a ‘here and now’ and a distant future, and the division between the ‘means’ and ‘ends’ of political action” (van de Sande 2013:225). Prefiguration involves experimenting with currently available means in such a way that they come to mirror or actualize the political ideals that inform a movement, thus collapsing the traditional distinction between means and ends. Experimentation is central to this process, since (a) available means have to be creatively deployed and reconfigured to serve non-traditional purposes, and (b) the shape of the ideal society being envisioned is not determined by one or more leaders but is rather negotiated and constantly rethought within open and overlapping networks of diverse individuals and collectives. Practically all the literature on prefiguration has so far focused on structural, organizational and interactional issues: specifically, how activist communities attempt to create in their own interactions and in the way they organize their work the kind of society they envision: non-hierarchical, non-representational, respectful of diversity, etc.

Embedded in this new culture of global and local politics, a wide range of volunteer translation and interpreting tasks are now undertaken by politically committed individuals and collectives who may or may not self-identify as translators and interpreters. These range from collectives like Babels and Translator Brigades, who clearly signal their identity as translators and interpreters and function as separate, cohesive groups, to individuals of varying backgrounds who translate and interpret for a wide range of collectives and do not form a separate community in their own right. The presentation will examine the prefigurative practices of collectives like Babel, which are embedded in global movements and are not tied to a particular locale. It will also examine prefiguration in place-based movements, specifically, the extent to which volunteer translation and interpreting undertaken by disparate individuals for collectives connected with the Egyptian Revolution supports or undermines the prefigurative agendas of these collectives. In doing so, I will attempt to extend the current definition of prefiguration, which tends to focus on structural issues and modes of organization, to encompass textual, visual and aesthetic practices that prefigure activist principles and actualize them in the present, and will examine the level of experimentation involved in such practices.