

Reading Interrogations #1
Sociology 929: Envisioning Real Utopias
January 31, 2008
Session 2. The Tasks of Emancipatory Social Science

1. Edo Navot

I. Preface

A. As I understand it, the purpose of the preface is to set the tone of hopeful and optimistic outlook on radical/progressive institutional change that is not revolutionary and that does not adhere to any single ideology. It is a "...project [that] has focused on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of basic social institutions rather than on either general, abstract formulations of grand designs, or on small reforms of existing practices," (iii). **[one very small comment here: The idea of real utopias does necessarily imply that the changes under study are "not revolutionary" in either of two senses: a) they may constitute absolutely fundamental transformations, and b) they may require ruptural breaks to be instituted. The agenda is not restricted to those transformations that have these properties, but it does not exclude them.]**

While Marx clearly acknowledged and was aware that the conditions of life for workers could be significantly improved within capitalism, a conviction of Marxism that isn't mentioned in the preface is that the degree and the permanency of those improvements are intrinsically and ineluctably constrained by capitalism. Is the *real utopian* emphasis on institutional change, rather than wholesale social change, structural change, or some kind of class "war" an abandonment of this classic conviction of Marxism? **[It is, I suppose, a rejection of the conviction that we know for sure what is and is not possible in terms of "the degree and permanency of improvements". But even aside from that, the idea of envisioning real utopias supposes that even if institutional designs that embody emancipatory ideals and move in the direction of an alternative to capitalism cannot be stably and deeply implemented inside of capitalism, it could still be the case that the struggle for their implementation inside of capitalism is the best of of ultimately moving beyond capitalism. We'll discuss that issue in the analysis of logics of transformation at the end of the seminar.]** How can we guarantee the permanency of radical institutional reform if these new institutions remain embedded in capitalist social relations? **[No guarantees, that's for sure! But of course there are no guarantees if we destroy capitalism that whatever emancipatory ideals we have will be stably institutionalized either.]** It seems to me that, unless we view real utopian institutional reform as a larger project where incremental social change aims to **eventually rewrite social relations wholesale**, it will be a frustrating Sisyphean process. (It will probably be such a process anyway, but if it doesn't aim to eventually change capitalist social relations themselves it may be a foredoomed enterprise.) **[I agree with what you are arguing here: the idea of envisioning real utopias and implementing in whatever way possible transformations *inside* of capitalism should be part of (a) a societal vision beyond capitalism, and (b) a strategic vision that**

attempts to move beyond capitalism. This does not mean, however, that the strategic logic needs to be mainly ruptural in which class systems and economic structures are understood in binary terms. We'll discuss this idea of social structural hybrids in a few weeks.]

B. Insignificant editorial issues:

1. On p. ii, paragraph 2, I think there is a “by” missing. “Of course, one can point out that many reforms favored [by] conservatives...”
2. On p. iii, paragraph 3, “discuss” should be plural. “Part II then discuss[es] the problem of alternatives.”

II. Chapter 1

A. I think we should add another element to the tasks of emancipatory social science: the popularization of the ideas we come up with grounded in activism that tries to realize them in actuality. If we take upon ourselves the project of imaging a more perfect future, our ideals have to be both checked by and inspired by engagement with the real world and activism in social movements. It's not sufficient to write and talk about real utopias if you don't either inspire others to pursue them or help build them yourself. Since you do this already, Erik, I thought it was a safe suggestion :) **[I wonder if the notion of “popularization” is quite the right way to say this. It is more that the ideas themselves should emerge from a dialogic process with activism. Also, I am not sure that this is a “task” in the same sense as the other three – diagnosis and critique, envisioning alternatives, a theory of transformation. Those tasks are all tasks that are part of the structure of the theory – the idea-content of the theory. Popularization/dialogue is part of the process through which these tasks are pursued and the content produced/transformed.]**

B. More is said about radical egalitarianism than about radical democracy. Admittedly, I think egalitarianism is trickier. But I would like to explore issues inherent in a society run by an expansive democratic decision-making process. I would especially like to hear about the way in which egalitarianism and democracy are connected. As the book says, if democratic institutions are pushed past their current boundaries, they begin to infringe on some of the fundamental prerogatives of capitalism: private investment. Does that mean that radical democracy is incompatible with capitalism? **[Radical democracy is certainly incompatible with unfettered or unconditional capitalism, but I don't think it is incompatible with a social organization of the economy within which capitalism remains one of the economic processes. This, again, is the problem of hybrid economic structures: can we imagine an economic structure within which socialism – understood as a socially empowered control over economic activities – is dominant but in which capitalism is still present? For a very long time there were feudal forms within capitalism. Could there be capitalist forms within socialism? If so, ten radical democracy could be compatible with continuing capitalism – just not dominant capitalism.]** Do we have a notion of where in our social priorities achieving radical democracy lies? Is it a condition for real utopian institutional

change (necessary, sufficient?), does it follow, or is it simply a part of the overall project that doesn't occupy a privileged position? **[I think of democracy as pretty fundamental to my conception of envisioning real utopias – people collectively controlling their conditions of existence is one of the central values in play here. It may not be either necessary or sufficient for every other dimension of “real utopia” but it is also not just one component with no special standing.]**

Also, could we imagine an egalitarian democratic society in which basic and inviolable principles of egalitarianism are guaranteed (say, constitutionally) to every individual but all other social arrangements are subject to democratic decision-making? **[As we know from the history of the past 150 years or so, it is exceedingly rare that constitutions really guarantee anything. Most countries violate constitutions routinely. The US is somewhat exceptional in the extent to which the constitution is an operative constraint on states. So, I am not sure that constitutions could “guarantee” the egalitarian principles of social justice apart from the ways in which the constitution was deeply connected to a robust democracy.]**

C. Desirability, Viability, Achievability

1. In the *desirability* paragraph, the criteria of desirability are never really explained. Obviously, they are related to radical egalitarian democratic values but these can be hard to translate into the specifics of institutional construction (they are much easier to conceive on a general macro-social level).

2. I'm a little confused about the distinction between viability and achievability. Intuitively, I think of the achievability of something as whether it can be brought about in the first place and viability as whether, after coming into being, this thing can be sustained. But in that case, shouldn't achievability come before viability in the hierarchy? Also, the word “achievable” was used at least four times to describe viability. This blurred the lines between them further. **[I definitely should not use the word achievable – in this context – to describe viability. While it may be the case that achievability is about bringing something into being and viability about sustainability or workability, nevertheless I think the hierarchy is better expressed in the way I did. It is important to articulate viable alternatives even if we cannot demonstrate that they are achievable. Now, if you could demonstrate that they could never be achieved, that they were unachievable in principle, then their viability would be of less interest. But the more typical situation is that we are pretty sure some alternatives (which we believe would be viable) are not achievable under existing historical-political conditions and we have no theory that would give us confidence that future conditions would make this alternative achievable, but we also cannot demonstrate that it is unachievable in principle. We have no “impossibility theorem” of achievability. I would argue that this is the case for virtually any conception of socialism for the US: socialism is certainly not achievable under existing conditions and we don't have a basis for a strong prediction that the conditions will ever make it achievable, but equally we cannot show it is unachievable. It would be a mistake, therefore, to restrict our discussions of viable alternatives to those we have good reason to believe are achievable.]**

3. The section on viability is much longer than those on desirability and achievability. This may be a completely presumptuous suggestion, but it seemed to me that the three paragraphs starting “Given this uncertainty about the future...” (8) all the way to “...scientifically grounded conception of viable alternative institutions.” (9) might fit better immediately after Figure 1, in the general section bolded “Viable Alternatives”.

D. More insignificant editorial stuff

1. On p.10, end of the top paragraph, is this comma superfluous? “...how to make viable alternative, achievable.”

2. Also p. 10, in the paragraph of (2), toward the bottom, should the sentence ending “...we cannot assume a priori that sufficiently sharp contradictions of social reproduction exist to allow for effective emancipatory challenge,” actually end with “change”?

With all these critiques out of the way, I want to say this: The preface and first chapter very effectively got me excited about both the rest of the book and the project of real utopias as a whole. The overall approach seems great and I can’t wait to go on. (Yay!)

2. Wes Markofski

On the irreducibility of (some) human suffering and failure to flourish (Chapter 1, page 3): In the discussion about the first normative principle of social justice (revolving around “human flourishing”), you make the crucial point that a socially just society would not necessarily guarantee that every individual in that society *would* flourish, but rather that in such a society every individual would have “broadly equal access” to the *means* of human flourishing (such that failure to flourish would not result from social injustice). I think this is a key point for advocates of the possibility of “real” utopian institutions to acknowledge, both scientifically and strategically. Scientifically, it is unlikely that any social institution can *guarantee* flourishing to every individual in a society given a realistic appraisal of the human condition and the principle of human freedom (any deeply democratic organization of social life would seem to necessarily include enough human freedom such that an individual might fail to flourish due to personal decisions or choices.) Strategically, the acknowledgment of some irreducible level of human suffering and failure to flourish, even under the best possible institutional conditions for social and political justice, can make real utopian proposals more plausible to skeptics.

However, the acknowledgement of the **imperfection of all social institutions** also raises two difficult problems. **[I really liked your first paragraph, but I am not quite sure that it is best captured by speaking of the “imperfection” of institutions as opposed to the inherent *limitations* of institutions. But maybe I am just being picky here.]** First, it opens the way for conservatives to argue (as they do) that failure to flourish under the current American system of democratic capitalism has more to do with individual and generational choices than it does with institutional design. Second and perhaps more importantly, what happens when some segment of a given society fails to

flourish “after the revolution”? A new round of diagnosis, critique, and exploration of alternatives would inevitably ensue. What is to prevent an iterative cycle of radical political and social revolutions aimed at attaining a higher degree of human flourishing than under existing conditions, *some of which may actually reduce the potential for human flourishing*? Is there way to avoid this sort of long-term iterative cycle? Or is it inevitable? Does the irreducibility of some level of human failure to flourish in a society privilege a more incremental approach to social transformation than the typical Marxian revolutionary one, an approach where radical normative principles of democratic egalitarianism are maintained while *specific, realistic* alternative institutional arrangements are rigorously weighed against existing arrangements (rather than measuring existing arrangements against an unrealistic morally-inspired utopia of perfect human flourishing)? **[I think the democratic principle of political justice is the best hope for dealing with the problems of institutional failures and uneven effects of any institutional arrangement on prospects for flourishing. I think some of the issues will be clarified by discussing in more depth the idea of a “flourishing life” – this is not a binary – you flourish or not. A radical egalitarian project tries to achieve equal access to the means to live a flourishing life. The critique of an institutional arrangement under that standard would be that some change would reduce whatever *inequalities in access* remain. The equal access to democratic deliberation principle is, I think, the best way of avoiding shifts in that standard, which is what would really destabilize any solution.]**

Regarding the contemporary “cynicism about the human capacity to realize [radical democratic egalitarian] values on a substantial scale” (Preface, ii- iii): A pessimistic view of “human nature” and human potential often associated with conservatism might *also* (ironically) support real utopian projects and principles. One needn’t be possessed of the “optimism of the will” or intellect typical of many radicals on the left in order to support the same institutional designs supported by radical democratic egalitarians. For example, participatory democracy reduces power concentration in the pessimistic spirit of “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Likewise, social justice is important because of human propensity for cruelty and violence under conditions of material and social inequality. Thus pessimistic conservatives as well as optimistic radicals might conceivably converge around many radical utopian projects. **[That is an interesting suggestion: radical democratic egalitarianism could be consistent with at least some conservative views on human potentials on the grounds that conservatives might believe that people will cause less harm under equal power conditions. The problem, however, is that conservative views of human nature would also, generally, regard a democratic-egalitarian participatory structure as inherently unstable and unreproducible: it would simply degenerate into new forms of power and domination.]**

Regarding the contrast between radicals and conservatives in the preface (ii): The argument frames the primary distinction between radicals and conservatives as those favoring trial-and-error incremental change and a “pessimistic view of human possibility” versus those favoring more radical large-scale social change and optimism with respect to human possibility. But is this really the most important distinction between these camps? Isn’t the argument more about specific *institutional principles* than it is about revolutionary versus incremental social change, or pessimism versus optimism regarding

human possibility? (E.g. free-market, small government, individual choice philosophies/principles versus social democratic/socialist philosophies/principles?) **[I think you are right here as a general manner. I was invoking the Hayek pessimism about any kind of ruptural, fundamental changes, which is a specific form of conservatism (also associated with Burke 150 years earlier): it is about the need to conserve institutions that have evolved because of the nature of the social equilibrium which that generates.]**

On the importance of beliefs (Preface i; Chapter 1, 8-9): What are the theoretical implications of the argument that “what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions”? The reading gives a primary place to the importance of beliefs in partially determining the outcome of political struggles. But what constrains beliefs about what is possible, and how are those beliefs transformed (beliefs structure political struggles; what structures beliefs?) How does Wright’s theory of ideas and agency relate to traditional Marxian theory and other perspectives? If beliefs constrain possibilities, how do we think about constraints on beliefs? **[I certainly would not want this to suggest an idealist position in which limits of possibilities are entirely constituted by beliefs. I am merely indicating that beliefs are partially constitutive of possibilities. The theory of agency behind this is one in which actions depend both upon a feasible set of things people can do and people’s beliefs about that feasible set. I have no general theory about the relationship between these two.]**

On theories of transformation: We’ll no doubt talk about this later in the semester, but is democratic egalitarianism achievable through democratic means and processes, or does it require more radical (perhaps non-democratic) “ruptural” change followed by a return to (deeper) democracy?

3. Rudolfo Elbert

The *preface* of a book is usually the place where the reader finds an overall summary of the ideas presented in that book, describing the making of those ideas as well as the general purposes of the author. Because of this, I believe that the preface is also the place where the author defines the audience to which the book is directed, as well as the intended message he/she wants to direct to that audience. Taking this into account, I think that the preface to ERU shows a tension between the different audiences to which the book is directed: i. a more cynic/skeptical audience from the political right, or from the mainstream academia, that would reject any possibility of social change, not to mention a “scientific” approach to that change, ii. the radical left, those in academia as well as those involved in political/social activism. This group would be open to any discussion about social change but might be more skeptical to the ways proposed in the book. Starting from this tension, I think the preface puts too much emphasis in “convincing” the first group that social change is not only possible but desirable, while leaves to a second place any concern that might be posed from a radical or leftist perspective (or a classical Marxist perspective). Is this a decision that expresses the intentions of the book, or it could include a more “balanced” preface? **[You make a very astute point here about the Preface. In fact, I more or less lifted this preface from something I wrote in the**

early 1990s and I am sure that I will want to rework it a lot once the book is done. So I have to think about what I want to accomplish here.] In particular, one discussion that is not mentioned in the preface and that would certainly raise concerns from a leftist perspective is that of the moral basis of the critique to capitalism. In my opinion, this should be a central discussion in the book, and it is not as important in the preface or in chapter 1 as it should be. Starting from Marx's opposition to base his critique of capitalism on moral grounds, this topic has been an important part of the discussion about both the critique of the existing social system as well as the desirable alternatives. I would like to discuss how Wright deals with this tension between the scientific critique and the moral critique. Assuming a deeper discussion within the left, I would also like to see an extended development of the different socialist traditions that has word on this issue. Marx and Engels developed the scientific version of socialism against the Utopian Socialists. A question that might be worth discussing is: What differences, if any, are between Real Utopias and Socialist Utopias like those of Fourier? Coming back to my first paragraph, I know that this discussion might be more appropriate to a book directed to the leftist part of the audience, but shouldn't be ERU that book? **[This is a very good theme for a seminar discussion. I think that there are two contrasts in play here: 1) a scientific vs a moral critique of capitalism; 2. an interest-based critique vs a moral critique. These are connected in so far as the scientific analysis of how capitalism works and whose it serves provides the grounding for the critique of capitalism from the vantage point of the interests of the working class. I think the guts of Marx's critique of capitalism is that the material interests of workers are harmed by capitalism relative to an historically accessible alternative. Workers should oppose capitalism not because it is unjust but because their lives would improve in socialism. That claim could, in principle, be scientifically established regardless of ones moral views about capitalism or socialism.]**

4. Charity Schmidt

My general response to the preface and first chapter are very positive. I appreciated the overall language used to convey a need for utopian visions balanced with conditional realities. EOW speaks to a pragmatic desire for institutional improvements to increase social equality, but also, bravely and most importantly as I see it, to the moral impetus for such change. This offers social scientists the space to carry their subjective viewpoints into their work, often an (although decreasing) academic taboo.

I find the systematic organization of the piece very helpful and I think it will make the subject matter attractive to academics (the three basic tasks for an emancipatory social science as an example). However, reading the three criteria for evaluating social alternatives, I am concerned with the third; achievability. It seems as though this concept could easily give way to the fatalistic and cynical attitudes of many academics, as the first chapter describes the tendency for such attitudes to inherently "reduce the prospects for change" (p. 8). Therefore, if ideas are not viewed as achievable from the start, will they be at all entertained? This also leads to the question of compromise. At what point do we abandon the most central principles of our utopian vision to reach a compromise for

achievability's sake? Does the question lie in the scope of compromise, rather than its sheer existence? We understand that there will have to be a level of negotiation in any plan/program, but where is the line? When does our utopian visions become so compromised that (such as described in the discussion on theories of social reproduction) they "serve to further stabilize the system of domination itself" (p. 10). Putting a band-aid on a social wound rather than the required stitches only serves to cover up that wound... not to heal it. **[The problem of achievability and how it should be included in the analysis is a very difficult one. Revolutionaries have often had unrealistic expectations about what is achievable and, perhaps as a result, in the face of failure have often blamed betrayals, bad-faith allies, opportunism, etc. So, an inflated sense of achievability can have perverse effects. But this may also motivate people to struggle in ways which makes less ambitious transformations achievable which would not have been achievable if they had been viewed as the only possibility. Sometimes it is said that a perhaps false belief in revolutionary achievability made social democracy possible.]**

I did find a sentence that I view as problematic, but it serves to generate a broader discussion. On page 2, EOW discusses feminist literature as an example of the task to diagnose and critique social institutions/structures and states; "Feminist studies of the state have examined the way in which state structures and policies have, **at least until recently**, systematically reinforced the subordination of women and various forms of gender inequality" (p.2). I simply don't agree with that statement. Let's use some simple every day examples: women still make around \$.70 to every man's dollar, most medical insurance plans cover viagra, but not birth control. Now, I can understand the argument that the conditions that reproduce gender inequality, such as the examples just given, are set by the private sector, not directly by the state. But isn't the control over such conditions a character of the state? **[You are certainly right that one should take as seriously inactions by the state as actions. This is an essential part of the claims that the state is a capitalist state – certain kinds of actions are excluded systematically, and those exclusions have a systematic class bias to them. This applies to gender as well. Here I was referring to the ways in which in the past the state actively imposed the subordination of women and created positive legal support for Patriarchy. That is what has largely – but not entirely – disappeared.]** Meaning that the state gives the responsibility of healthcare to private entities and individuals. This evasion of resolving social dilemmas (such as the need for family planning, or for day care, etc) is a symptom of state institutions' avoidance or inability to tackle social issues. And, as the first chapter addresses, "the demarcation between "public" and "private"...significantly insulates a wide range of decisions over private property from intrusive democratic control" (p. 5). In short, doesn't blaming the private sector or attributing negative consequences of social institutions to them distract us from the lack of democratic control and the faulty organization of the state itself, those collective force that determine the nature of society?

My last comment is calling for a much needed adjective. In the discussion on theories of transformation, the last line of the 'theory of social reproduction' section, EOW states, "we must develop a scientific understanding of how this reproduction occurs" (p.10). It

should include an adjective; “we must develop a **more thorough** scientific understanding of how this reproduction occurs.” This is only a literary critique, but EOW goes on to mention two major theories of social reproduction (Foucault and Bourdieu in footnote 8). Also, on page 11, EOW states, “we may have good scientific understanding of the mechanisms of social reproduction and their contradictions....”. Those two points lead to a contradiction of the original sentence. We do have some understanding of how social reproduction occurs, we just need a more thorough, holistic or constructive theory. **[good point – I certainly don’t mean to suggest that we have no knowledge of these matters.]**

5. Eduardo Cavieres

I want to pose the question: Who are the concrete social actors that would have to carry/are carrying out this project? Should we have a theory of social movements or social actors? What characteristic/features should they have? Now, actually this might be part of a theory of collective actors, strategies, and struggles, but it wouldn’t only focus on actions but on identities/values/vocations/commitments, etc. And again, how will individual pursuits combine with collective struggles? Up to what point should radical citizens renounce to some aspects of their “flourishing life” to allow others to flourish? The other point relates to the role of conflict in this project, and how can conflict interact with democratic forms especially if those form are already “contaminated” by oppressive forces.

You raise a lot of difficult issues in this series of questions. The general problem of the actors, organizations and struggles involved in bringing out emancipatory transformation is a theme we will deal with most directly in the discussion of chapter 7. Here I will only make a couple of comments:

1. You state that we should be concerned not merely with actions, but also with identities/values/etc. I agree, of course, that identities and values are important, but with respect to the problem of carrying out the political project of social emancipation, isn’t the main way that values and identities are important is in terms of their relationship to actions (practices)? That is, it is not values as a strictly internal subjective phenomenon that is relevant to the problem of social transformation, but values as they bear on what we do in the world – how we relate to others, how we cooperate to challenge oppressions, etc.

2. You write: “Up to what point should radical citizens renounce to some aspects of their “flourishing life” to allow others to flourish?” I think you are asking a question here about the moral standing of how individuals chose to live their own lives relative to the political project of creating a world with “equal access to the means to live a flourishing life.” G.A. Cohen wrote a book called “If you’re an egalitarian, why are you so rich?” The issue here is not precisely renouncing aspects of a flourishing life as such, but renouncing some of the resources one uses as *means*

to a flourishing life. This is a longstanding issue in political philosophy and ethics: if you believe in the moral principle of egalitarianism on whatever dimension, and you happen to benefit from a world in which there is unequal distribution, are you morally obligated to personally redistribute your “excess” resources?

6. Molly Noble

One thing that stood out from this week’s readings is the idea of “conditions” for social change. It seems that you say, at various points in the text, that the success of a specific strategy for social change depends on the conditions of the society in which the strategy is targeted. While I agree that awareness of structural and institutional strengths and weaknesses are imperative for the formation of strategies for social change, the emphasis placed on conditions seems to take the agency out of actors working for social and political justice. If “the process of social reproduction” does not “open up spaces in which collective struggles for new possibilities are possible” is there a way for agents of social change to create those openings? One of the things that appeals to me about Real Utopias is the acknowledgement that actors (outside academia) are a vital part of the process toward social change. I also appreciate the stress on social change as a process, most likely a very long process. That being said I think that just as important as strategies dealing with the structures and institutions of society are strategies dealing with the internal mechanics of the group working toward change. We are dealing with people after all and people, even those who recognize that the source of injustice lies not in individuals but in the institutions of society, are not impervious to the conditions constructed by the very institutions they seek to change. How will these groups deal with power struggles, conflicting values, the phenomena known in many social work and educational settings as “burnt out,” etc? Any group working to change the structures and institutions of society exists in a dynamic relationship with those structures and institutions; because the structures and institutions of society are liable to change, as you point out, these groups and their strategies need to be flexible without losing sight their ideals for socially and politically just societies. I guess what I’m talking about would be part of what you call a theory of transformative strategy but I couldn’t agree more that, at least in my limited experience, social science has failed to satisfactorily address these practical issues of social transformation.

I think the most interesting question posed above is this: “If ‘the process of social reproduction’ does not ‘open up spaces in which collective struggles for new possibilities are possible’ is there a way for agents of social change to create those openings?” This is indeed something we will deal with more systematically in the chapter on a theory of Transformation.

One image of emancipatory transformation is that the best we can hope for is to be ready to “seize the time” when crises occur and various institutions begin to break down. This is an interpretation of Marx’s famous aphorism “people make history but not just as they choose,” only here the idea is “...not when they choose.” To be in a position to “seize the time”, of course, means being “ready”, which means having organization and capacity that has been built up before hand. But such

organization and capacity, of course, cannot be suspended in thin air; it has to be used for something to be “ready”. A lot of traditional revolutionary theory is preoccupied just with this question: what should revolution or emancipatory social movements do in times and places where they cannot directly challenge “the system” as such, where they cannot attack the structures of power in ways that plausibly would destroy those structures? Gramsci posed this problem as the “war of position” rather than the “war of maneuver.” All of these discussions presume that conscious strategy and agency themselves do not really create revolutionary conditions.

The alternative strategic vision softens the contrast between conditions and strategies and poses the possibility that strategies and practices in the existing world can potentially shape the conditions themselves. In the 1970s this was called “nonreformist reforms” – struggles within the rules of the game that change the rules in ways that open up create room for action. In part II of the book we will discuss interstitial and symbiotic strategies, both of which entertain the possibility of action that alters the conditions for action.

7. Hanif Nu'Man

I believe the task of emancipatory social science has upon it a lofty goal, yet vulnerable to dominant circular trappings. The reality of deregulation is upon us! Institutions have been given free reign to congest the social psyche with the phlegm of distortion in morality, freedom and justice. The social impairments that exist can now be initiated through legal manipulation, and exacerbated by willing participants. The willing participants are cloaked with licenses, issued by the states, to pursue rewards that come at the cost of social morality. The social-psychological devices that are developed within an industry extract, if you will, the green of morality - in which an agent's “duties” as well as incentives may knowingly beget the perpetuation to social harm without a deterrent effect. Identifying the causal processes will entail acquiescence: of all institutions, monetary institutions dominant all other dominators.

A just society is one in which the laws reflect “a global principle for humanity” by ensuring the separation between private institution and state. A state must have the ability to regulate institution whose activity directly impacts the development and exercise of one's potential toward the idea of human flourishing. Institutions that establish industry norms should not be smiled upon by state deregulation- leaving federal laws to address local issues. When institutions regulate themselves they can utilize resources to create toothless agencies that stage the actors of pseudo-enforcement. Agents, motivated primarily by personal incentives, are more likely to attach morality to the industry norms in which they operate, and therefore more inclined to engage in questionable behavior. This, in turn, strips the people of their confidence to participate in attaining the American dream for fear of agents who scour communities for potential profits - preying on those ignorant of their feeble legal protection.

Social structural conditions that constitute ‘broadly equal access’ should put forth every effort to avoid cultivating a social-psychological apparatus that not only controls desirability, but stymies “the trajectory” of success of any strategy. Strategies must address the institutions’ powerful objective of regulatory independence from state laws. Creating strategies that are vulnerable to the distortion of one’s understanding of how their activities may negatively affect society facilitate a costly journey - leading to a bleak future regardless of the components exercised for its achievement.

Social responsibility requires a commitment, made evident through both law in action and in the books, to protect the people from the social-psychological mechanisms maintained by institutions to ensure their bottom line. Any industry that employs agents who have the potential to be in an advantageous position - whether from more relevant information or controlling a perceived necessity - can be socialized to abandon much moral judgment. The circular trappings come from the constant perception of necessity, and therefrom willing agents motivated by personal interest. To the extent private institutions are allowed to lobby and be successful in deregulating activities that inherently protect a state (and its inhabitants), any notion of social justice fails since agents can always be employed to perpetuate social harm. If asked whether I wanted to live under the author’s definition of socially justice society, I would accept only under the condition of expansive protection from being stripped of my moral compass, directly or indirectly, thus causing me to disregard a perceived harmful outcome in order to live a flourishing life.

I have to admit that I found it hard to follow the thread of this interrogation. Except in a very loose way it did not seem to engage very directly any of the arguments or themes of the chapter under discussion. The very last sentence does seem to touch on one of the problems explored in the chapter – the problem of defining a principle of social justice – but I didn’t really understand exactly what you were trying to say in that sentence. You write: “If asked whether I wanted to live under the author’s definition of socially justice society, I would accept only under the condition of expansive protection from being stripped of my moral compass, directly or indirectly, thus causing me to disregard a perceived harmful outcome in order to live a flourishing life.” You say that you would accept my principles of social justice – equal access of all people to the social and material means to live flourishing lives – only “under the condition of expansive protection from being stripped of my moral compass”. What does that mean? You seem to be implying that we could have a world in which (a) everyone had equal access to both social and material means to live a flourishing life and also (b) people could be stripped of their moral compasses. (If this combination – flourishing + stripping of moral compass – was not possible, then there would be no need to say that the only condition under which you would accept these principles of justice would be the one to specify here.) I just don’t see how it would be possible to have (a) and (b) together, since being able to live a moral life is one aspect of the “social means to a flourishing life.” But perhaps I am completely misunderstanding your point here.

More importantly for the purposes of the seminar: what you write here does not systematically engage the text under discussion and does not, I think, help sharpen

an agenda for discussion linked to the chapter. That is the purpose of the interrogations.

8. Catherine Willis

Reading through these sections brought me to think about the issues of trial and error in institution building (preface ii), the movement around the idea “another world is possible” (chpt 1 p8) and the pessimistic post-modern rejection of the global scale as a place of action (preface ii, chpt 1 p8). Realising that alternatives exist but can only be built through trial and error, an important question comes to mind regarding the ability to maintain an ongoing acceptance of trial and error: how does everyone involved continue to remain convinced that changes are more likely to improve everyone’s condition and not threaten theirs. **[This a is one of the pivotal issues in the importance of democratic participation – creating the conditions under which people feel an identification with the process of transformation and increase the toleration for ambiguity. There is also the critical problem of how to stretch people’s time-horizons so that they put up with the messiness of trial-and-error long enough for things to work out.]** This is especially true if we wanted to attack problems at most scales of resource distribution. The design of an institutional form that would allow this (briefly mentioned on chpt1 p9) is one of the more intriguing challenges. The post-modern appreciation of the “small is beautiful” approach makes a lot of sense: small trial and error experiences may freeze over time, but others may emerge to push solutions in different directions. However, the drawbacks of the “small” approach are also numerous (incompatibility or exclusivity) and prevent the attainment of the larger goal of emancipation. If experimented at the smaller scale, (even national or state level), institutional designs need to be thought through in a manner which does not inhibit the emancipation of external groups (whether they adopt similar or different institutional arrangements) or can persist in including other groups, spaces and people.

The question of scale also relates to the “another world in possible” movement in several ways. While criticism of the antiglobalisation movement, and to a large extent the alterglobalisation movement have been based in the fact that the protestors – other than through the protests – are not actively contributing to the construction and experimentation of viable alternatives (especially in the North); they are criticized for being too busy fighting on the ephemeral international stage or establishing their identity through the negation of the existing system. As the cracks open up which allow for the identification of weaknesses for new possibilities, does not the experimentation through smaller scale initiatives help to redefine the limits of the possible and engage more people in the battle for these new goals (relates to the idea of the necessity of the theory of collective actors in chpt 1 p11)?

Overall, I have a hard time writing off the post-modern approach to change, although I do recognize its weaknesses. Can the local and global interact positively in the creation of alternative institutions? How can creating emancipatory institutions within a larger context of non-emancipatory institutions contribute to the building of “another world,” both through resistance to the status quo at the larger scale and the creation and perpetuation of alternatives locally.

[The issue of scale and scalability of emancipatory transformations is pretty fundamental to the idea of envisioning real utopias. This is also an old theme in socialism: the “socialism in one country” debate in the 1930s was precisely about the necessary scale for socialism to work. In the present historical context this discussion is more often less about national vs. global revolution than it is about the prospects for local transformations systematically contributing to more macro-level transformation (or even of *personal* transformation contributing to broader change as the in “personal-is-political” perspective in 1970s feminism). We will discuss some of this issue in the chapter on interstitial transformations later in the semester, but “interstitiality” need not be local in the geographical sense. Wikipedia is an interstitial transformation even though it is a global process.

I don't have a general stand on this issue; I think it is quite historically contingent how the local, national and global interconnect both in the functioning of particular institutional structures and in their transformation. I do think that contrary to lots of discussions of globalization the nation state scale remains very important.]

9. Guillaume Neault

Chapter I: The Tasks of Emancipatory Social Science. For this week's intervention, I want to bring up two briefs points that I would like to discuss in class: the notions of social justice and of political justice.

Social Justice. Under your rubric ‘Diagnosis and Critique,’ you identify “social institutions and social structures” as point of departure for building an emancipatory social science, and a few lines later you add that the explanation of suffering and inequality lies in the specific properties of institutions and social structures. I strongly agree with this observation, for your argument suggests that inequalities are ‘embedded’ in the social structure of institutions. Then, this discussion culminates to the definition of *social justice*: “all people...”. I have some reservations and questions, however, as to the nature and implication of your definition. My first observation is that the discussion focuses on institutional inequalities (institutional level) while your definition of social justice adopts an individual-level focus: “all people” (individual). My questions are the following: 1) If the initial accent is on the inequalities generated by current institutional designs, would it not be logical to conceive of social justice at the institutional level, rather than treating it as a form of individual right? **[Justice and injustice are generated by social structures/relations/institutions, and therefore institutions are the object of struggles for justice, but it is still the case that what renders an institution just or unjust is the impact on the lives of individuals. I don't think we should care about institutional design except insofar as they enhance or impede human flourishing. So, I am not quite sure what contrast you are drawing between conceiving social justice at the “institutional level” and treating it as form of “individual right” (Although I should add that I don't really use the language of individual *rights*, but rather of *equal access to the means to flourish. I suppose one could say that individuals have a right to equal access)*** 2) Does having equal access potentially mean that people could

have more access than others? (for example, following closely the current definition it is possible to imagine that some people could try to maximize their access to certain means.) **[I don't quite follow your point here: if we have a system that gives everyone equal access this would of necessity block efforts by people to maximize their access to certain means. Of course people could always try to do so, but institutions of social justice would make this difficult.]** I look at *social justice* as an institutional virtue based on principles of regulation. This means that institutions ought to *restrict* and *control* access so that people in needs are not left uncared for. This way, I emphasize the distributive character of justice and take into consideration that social and material means available are limited. **[I agree that it is more important that people in need are not left uncared for than that everyone have equal access to the means to live a flourishing life. But simply guaranteeing everyone some package of minimal basic needs – which is what I take avoiding being “uncared for” means – is a much more limited notion of social justice than demanding that everyone have equal access to the means to live a flourishing life. If everyone has access to the means to live a flourishing life then everyone has their basic needs met, since that is one of the conditions for living a flourishing life.]**

So, here I propose an alternative definition, which is much similar to yours: In a socially just society, *institutions* would not restrict access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives. **[Why do you say institutions would “not restrict access” rather than saying institutions would “guarantee equal access”?]**

Political Justice. Here I want to focus on some of the irreconcilable difficulties of political justice. I fully agree that “electoral politics are heavily dominated by elites,” but I also think that a politically just society is not impervious to dominance and power relations (I don't think you make the claim that politically just societies are perfect, I just want to stress one component). I believe there must also exist dominance and coercion in the most democratic forms of governance. What are the possible causes? They might be internal to the organization: here, I think of strong personalities. Or, they might be external: accepting funding from sources that are not deemed “ethical” by an institution can create tensions, especially if the institution's survival is on the line. **[My criterion for political justice is equal access to the means of political participation in collective decisions. That is consistent with some of these collective decisions being decisions about domination or coercion. So political justice and coercion can co-exist. But if domination is derived from extra-political sources of power – such a wealth, for example – that is allowed to penetrate the forms of governance, then this is a political injustice. Are you claiming that this need not violate justice, or simply that such things will always happen, so perfect justice is not possible?]**

10. Julia McReynolds

I have two main questions that were raised by the section on the diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists. First, I wonder if it is possible for social justice and political justice to undermine each other in some societies. I certainly don't wish to suggest that they would be inherently opposed to each other, only that it is possible to imagine situations where they may act against each other. For example, in an extremely

religious, fundamentalist society it is possible that an extremely open, participatory political life could lead to discriminatory laws and community norms being imposed on all individuals. The logical response to this is creating guarantees of fundamental freedoms. But then the question is whether those guarantees would also be open to democratic participation (in which case the majority could choose to do away with them) or if they should be absolute and unchangeable (in which case they would be an undemocratic part of the system). **[If you take the political justice idea seriously, then I think the scenario you lay out here would likely also contradict political justice. That is, political justice requires that all people have equal access to the political means to participate in collective decisions. That means women as well as men. It means that norms of individual freedoms and autonomy would have to be respected, otherwise people would not have equal access to political means. Significant inequalities in access to the material and social means to live a flourishing life would seem likely to contradict these conditions for political equality.]**

My second question is about the possibility for ideological disagreements about what a just society looks like. Is there really an absolute, objective social justice? The reading points out that libertarians think suffering is acceptable as long as it does not infringe on property rights, so they are not really disagreeing about how to achieve social justice, but about the importance of this goal. **[Libertarians do disagree about the meaning of justice: they feel it is unjust to tax people to help others so long as individuals acquired their property without force or fraud. This is an instance of disagreement over the meaning of justice, not just the importance of justice relative to other goals.]** But there are elements on the political right that argue that free markets would bring about less suffering, were they allowed to function properly. These free market proponents argue that unions and welfare benefits create unemployment (by making labor overpriced, and giving benefits to people who don't work). They think that if these institutions were done away with then in the long term people would suffer less, because the market would eventually right itself to create full employment. They see short-term suffering as a small price to pay for this eventual stabilization of society through market mechanisms. Setting aside for a moment that there is no empirical evidence to support this argument, it does appear that there are ideological disagreements about how a just society can be accomplished. **[Now, if free marketers were empirically correct that the best way to reduce suffering and foster human flourishing was unfettered capitalism, then I would be a staunch defender of capitalism and capitalism would in fact be the best way of moving towards my standard of social justice. Usually defenders of capitalism also invoke libertarian-type arguments about individual rights to private property, about the inherent connection between capitalism and freedom, and so on. Those are philosophical differences in how to understand justice].** A related question regards whether it would be possible to judge amongst various imperfect (but better than the existing) systems of social and political justice. Would we prefer a system that is free of hunger but contains social stigma, or one where isolation is unknown but material hardship is present? I wonder about the possibility of making clear, objective judgments about these important goals. **[That is a pretty tough question – which is worse, psychological or physical suffering. I think that as long as basic physical needs are met, then affronts to**

human dignity are probably worse than injustices in the distribution of material advantages above basic needs.]

11. Tod Van Gunten

My main question regarding this chapter relates to the concept of human flourishing and its theoretical role in establishing the grounds for a theory of social transformation. I understand the concept as providing a rough partial answer to the question: what do real utopias attempt to create? (Answer: conditions to enable human flourishing). It is a partial answer because it comes up under the heading of social justice, while political justice is a somewhat separate topic. What I would appreciate here is perhaps a more concrete sense of “what is wrong with capitalism” and what the solutions to these problems are. I realize these issues are dealt with more thoroughly in the next chapter, but the worry is that flourishing is so wide open here that it becomes opaque. For example, two things I think ought to be addressed under the rubric of social justice are: conditions of employment that enable them to experience autonomy, creativity, satisfaction, etc, and ample leisure time and meaningful activities to fill it with. My question is: are work autonomy, etc and meaningful non-work sufficiently “the same” enough to allow them both to be glossed as forms of “flourishing” in a way that nonetheless remains substantive, or are they actually relatively different? Would we better served by thinking about institutions that foster work autonomy and meaningful non-work somewhat independently? I understand the desire for an umbrella term to capture what real utopias are after, but I wonder if a short list of desired qualities might be more useful. **[Flourishing is indeed a broad umbrella term that is meant to help answer the question: why should we care if people have meaningful leisure or work autonomy? I think we care about these because of the belief that access to meaningful work (for example) is one dimension of what it takes to live a flourishing life. The radical egalitarian conception of social justice always has the form of something like: “everyone should have equal access to the means to acquire X” or, perhaps, “equal opportunity to acquire X” (or, more rarely: “equal X”). There are many things that X could stand for, including a long list of particulars: “in a just society everyone has equal access to meaningful leisure, autonomous work, loving relations, good health care, etc.” I think “access to the material and social means to live a flourishing life” is preferable to a long list because it does not prejudge precisely what are the means for a flourishing life, which could certainly vary across people and across times and places.]**

12. Sung Ik Cho

It seems that the primary task of “Real Utopia” project is to understand problems and to find ‘institutional’ principles to create alternative institutions, trying not to fall into fatalistic realism or illusory idealism. In this task there is some thing that needs more discussion; that is, the difference between ‘what are problems’ and ‘what problems look like’ and then between ‘what should be alternatives’ and ‘what alternatives should look like.’ In addition to questioning of what “institutional principles” are, the ways of diagnosing problems and prescribing alternatives can be understood in a different way.

By evaluating existing social institutions and detecting structural contradictions, we can set up concrete institutions based on alternative principles. Thus, this process looks like “defining problems” and “creating new institutions from scratch or replacing old institutions with new ones.” But a question is that ways of defining problems would affect ways of “creating institutions.” Put it differently, there might be differences between defining problems as a ‘noun’ and defining problems as ‘adjective’. The former style would presume the separation between diagnosis and prescription, and also imply the image of the wholesale change of a social institution. Thus the strategy for change is to ‘create alternatives and replace old institutions’; that is, ‘creation and replacement strategy.’ On the other hand, the latter style would presuppose the connection between diagnosis and prescription process, and all problems do not necessarily need to be supplanted by alternatives. Instead, alternative strategies for changing institutions could be varied, depending on diverse shapes of problems; for instance, interposing new institutions into old ones, combining or “transposing”^{*} pre-existing institutions or old and new ones, and “grafting”^{*} new institutions onto old ones. In this sense, depending on the different characterization of problems, alternative strategies could appear more likely technical and functional rather than fundamental, affecting probable trajectories and political dynamics of transformation. **[I agree totally with the basic idea you are pushing here – that the notion of an emancipatory alternative does not necessarily imply a logic of wholesale replacing of an old institution with a new one; there can also be all sorts of processes of metamorphosis, grafting, reconfiguration, etc. I am not sure that this contrast is well captured by the expressions you use at the beginning: “‘what are problems’ and ‘what problems look like’” (but perhaps I just didn’t quite get your use of words there). I also didn’t get the contrast between “‘problems as a noun” and “‘problems as an adjective.” As I understand your substantive point, it is about how transformable a given institution is, whether the harms that are generated by the existing structures can be effectively neutralized by internal modifications, by grafting, by structural recombinations, or – instead – the only way to neutralize the harms is destroy-and-replace. This is not so much a question of how we define the nature of the problem, but rather how the harms are generated. Take, for example, the institution of slavery in the US or racial exclusions in a later period. It is certainly the case that the lives of slaves could be improved by grafting on certain liberal principles into slavery. Requiring due process protections before whippings, for example. But fundamentally it was also the case that the harms of slavery could be ended only if slavery were ended one way or another, it is hard to see how this could happen by iterated grafting and transposing. Anyway, your basic point is important and one we will discuss later.**

^{*} Colin Crouch. 2005. *Capitalist Diversity and Change: Recombinant Governance and Institutional Entrepreneurs*. Oxford University Press.

Comments from Buenos Aires parallel Seminar

Session 2. January 31, 2008

In the Preface, we find the proposal of the ERU's project: redesign basic social institutions based on a clear elaboration of the institutional principles of a radical alternative. In that sense, we would like to ask: which is the basic idea, a long or median run project? **[I think the basic idea is to somehow link long run and medium run projects/strategies. Of course, a fundamental transformation of power structures and inequality is "long run" in the simple sense that this cannot be accomplished quickly, but the strategy must also embody short run projects which continue to the realization of that long-run transformation.]** We infer that you are thinking in the creation of a new culture of social justice and equality for building up a real utopia. We ask: how to work out the obstacles that our society presents against the working of a democracy based on a re-design of existing practices and basic social institutions? How to implement these ideas? We have been discussing whether be convenient to implement groups (like therapeutic groups) to work for the empowerment of common people. **[I'm not quite sure what you mean by "therapeutic groups," but it is certainly the case that social empowerment requires the formation of concrete organizations and groups that creatively contribute to the construction of these alternatives.]**

Taking into account the functioning nowadays of the capitalist economy, how could it be incorporate in this project the transformation of the market rules that operate against justice and democracy? We expect at least the curtailment of its pernicious consequences. **[We will examine the structural and strategic logic of transformation later, but one of the central problems is how to create new institutional forms *within* capitalist societies that (a) are at least minimally compatible with capitalism in the sense that they do not require an end to capitalism to exist, and yet (b) expand the possibilities of social empowerment.]**

We totally agree with the idea of an Emancipatory Scientific Social research. The scientific knowledge has to be the input to built up new institutions. People who agree with this position should start proposing an agenda of research. In the task of diagnosis and critique, we think with you that it is necessary to investigate all those social issues and situations we know act against the working of social justice. The central questions to answer in this point are: which are the social mechanism or structures that generate harms, sufferings and inequality?, and how do these "obstacles" operate against social emancipatory institutions?

In reference of the knowledge of social change, we ask what is the role of literature and arts in the construction of Real Utopia? **[I would say several things about the arts and literature and other expressive and creative activities: (1) there is a certain sense in which the arts themselves embody aspects of the emancipatory ideals themselves, since the arts are so closely connected to human flourishing. So, the arts themselves prefigure some of the ideal. (2) The *production* of the arts – music, theater, dance, painting, literature – often involves significant noncapitalist processes. Much artistic production is partially decommodified through**

community and state support. More radical forms of cooperative and collective artistic production are also common. I understand that there is a strong tradition in Buenos Aires for this. So, one aspect of actually designing real utopias is figuring out how to expand the sphere of socially empowered artistic production. (3) The *content* of art often involves imaginative leaps outside of the social and power realities of the existing world: art can infuse with moral and emotional passion the critique of the world as it is and the imagination of the world as it might be.]

Concerning social science we guess how to control our own prejudices and desires that bias our research. For example, the problem of transferring to people our own expectations when there exist different ideas about what is a flourishing life. How to make a decision about it?

For developing and exercising potentials, education has a priority but it is also a delicate issue. It is not enough to open opportunities to all; these opportunities have to be seen as such. The matter is how to transmit the idea of the empowerment potential of the education? (In our country, this was the socialist credo in the last XIX and early XX century) In Argentina we see that low middle class or working class families take more advantage of school opportunities than very poor families. We believe that the quality of education is a central issue in creating equality of opportunities; in addition, we ask how to create in people's minds a psychological link between education and life opportunities? Reality has to be congruent with expectation, don't you think so? **[There is a large radical literature on "pedagogy of the oppressed" which envisions schooling as a way that contributes to human flourishing, even under conditions of oppression. One of the key dimensions is that the education should be democratic and participatory. I don't think this means simply that education should be tightly linked to "life opportunities" in the pragmatic sense of getting jobs and earning money. Education needs to be experienced as an enhancement in the quality of life because the ideas, sensibilities, artistic appreciation, mastery, and knowledge it cultivates, as well as the practical skills. This is all, of course, very difficult under conditions of huge inequalities in resources available to schools and the enormous economic pressures families and children face in their daily lives.]**

For democracy to be effective it is necessary to control the disposition of private property (or to control the distribution of its benefits). We would like to discuss two issues: i.) how far the obsession of private accumulation and/or personal/private conspicuous consumption may be controlled?; ii.) Is it possible to develop human sensibility towards the suffering of poor and ill people? Is it possible to change (to force) the views of those who waste resources in a superfluous style of life? We know this sounds as a puritan old fashioned socialist thought but we believe that waste and consumption as a social model which help to maintain and reinforce the hegemonic power. The message is: this system offers you the achievement of those pleasures. Help to keep it. We think that these issues about symbolic aspects of social system reproduction should be included in the agenda. **[These are all very big issues. Curtailing consumerism within capitalism is very difficult, since commodified consumption in the market is so pivotal to the stability of capitalism, and**

community and state support. More radical forms of cooperative and collective artistic production are also common. I understand that there is a strong tradition in Buenos Aires for this. So, one aspect of actually designing real utopias is figuring out how to expand the sphere of socially empowered artistic production. (3) The *content* of art often involves imaginative leaps outside of the social and power realities of the existing world: art can infuse with moral and emotional passion the critique of the world as it is and the imagination of the world as it might be.]

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the consumer utopia that capitalism offers is so appealing to a large segment of the population. There are social movements in rich countries that go under the rubric “the voluntary simplicity movement” but this has, so far, pretty limited appeal. High marginal taxation can curtail some consumerism of the rich, and progressive consumption taxes can do something, but of course this assumes an effective tax capacity of the state. Using taxes to provide high quality public goods that facilitate collective consumption and leisure activity – parks, community centers, performance and sports centers, etc. – can also undercut consumerism in ways that foster human flourishing in a less privatized way. But all of this confronts capitalist constraints.]