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Sunday, May 15

I am in Berlin at the invitation of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, mainly for the purpose of a symposium on my book, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, and a public lecture on Tuesday the 17th. I didn't really know much about the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation before I arrived, other than that it was a leftwing foundation that had various projects around the world and had a journal of left ideas and thinking. Yesterday I was told by Michael Brie, the person who invited me, that the RLF was one of a number of Foundations, well-funded by the German government, connected to political parties. The best known are the Adenaur Foundation associated with the Christian democratic party and the Frederick Ebert Foundation associated with the SPD. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation was organized in 1990 after reunification of Germany and began to be funded by the government in the late 1990s when the Party for Democratic Socialism – the reorganized former Communist Party – crossed the 5% threshold in votes and became represented in parliament. Since then its funding has grown considerably. At the moment they receive €40 million/year – about \$65 million. The money is used for all sorts of purposes – student grants and fellowships, research, a journal, education and outreach programs, overseas development assistance projects, and much more.

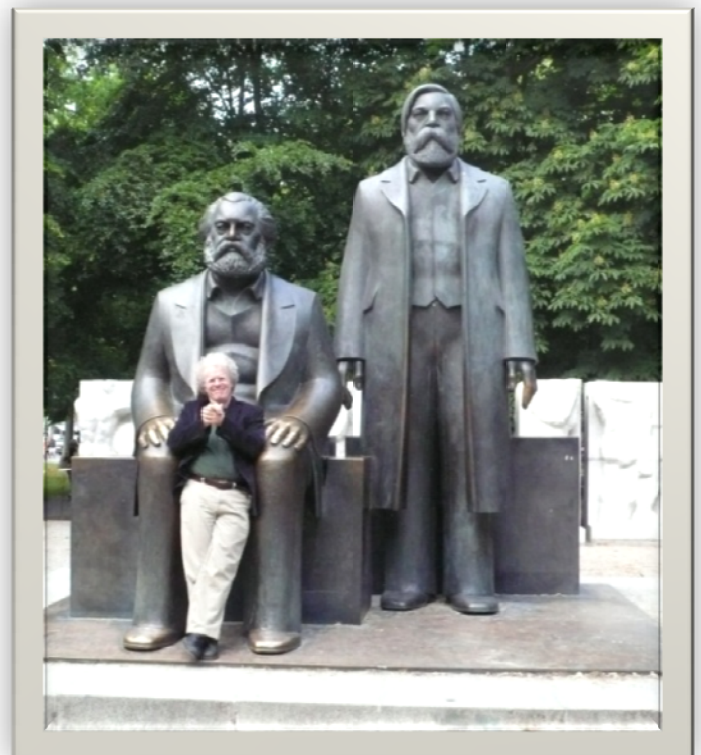


This is an interesting example of a kind of institution that is completely absent in the U.S. but a normal part of the institutional landscape in another country. One cannot imagine a Foundation closely connected to a political party receiving large, automatic government funding in the U.S. The idea here is that such institutions should not have to rely on private donations, presumably because this would create permanent inequalities and impart a class bias to the institutional ecology of Foundations, and so public funding is organized. It also reflects the view that political parties are an essential part of social cohesion in a democracy and play vital educational, outreach and research roles.

The closest thing to a government based funding mechanism linked to voters in the US are the miniscule check-offs on tax forms for public funding of campaigns, but there are some proposals for funding mechanisms for other kinds of activities that are akin to this – I'm thinking of proposals for nonrefundable tax credits given to individuals to spend on some kind of public purpose. Bob McChesney has a proposal for this for newspapers, Bruce Ackerman for political Campaigns, Rob Reich for philanthropy. In each case individuals allocate tax money for some kind of public-related purpose rather than having the state directly allocate such funds or individuals allocating private funds for these purposes. These political party foundations in Germany get funds directly from the government, but in response to voters' choices in elections (although the funding levels do not seem exactly proportional to the vote). This reflects a whole different culture around the idea of "politics" and the importance of political parties as one of the organizing principles of a society.

Yesterday I was met at the airport by Michael Brie, the director of a social analysis and research institute in the Foundation. He is a social researcher – some mix of sociologist and political scientist – who was educated and began his professional career in the GDR and lived through the very difficult period of transition for East German intellectuals. Mostly, it seems, West German academics were extremely hostile and unwelcoming to scholars from the East. In Michael's words they judged everyone by a stereotype of the group as a whole, ignoring the ways in which individual intellectuals had struggled under the GDR constraints. In any case, with the help of some more sympathetic scholars in the west – Michael mentioned Claus Offe – he eventually landed on his feet and is now well-established within the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

Michael escorted me to Alexanderplatz, in the former eastern part of Berlin, where my hotel was located, and then we went for a pleasant walk in the district and stopped for lunch. On the way back to the hotel we passed one of the iconic statues of Marx & Engels from the old era.



Later:

At around noon today I was met by Markus Euskirchen, a young researcher at the Foundation, for an afternoon of biking around the city. I always find this the best way to get a feel for a place. Walking is a little more intimate, but you can see so much more by biking. We wandered off to the former East Berlin, passing through the refurbished residential areas of large apartment blocks, wandered through side streets, then to remnants of the Berlin Wall and the area around the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag. At one point I asked to stop because we passed a really interesting piece of graffiti art – basically an entire building whose façade was covered with a large figure. When Markus learned that I liked such public art, we turned the afternoon into a tour of interesting graffiti concoctions. Berlin, or at least East Berlin, is a fantastic place for this. At various times since the fall of the wall there is has considerable squatting in empty buildings, and along with that has come murals, graffiti and other adornments of buildings.









Another stop on the bike trip was the Berlin Holocaust memorial. When we first approached it I thought it was not especially interesting or compelling – just a large open area with cement blocks of different heights. But when you walk into it, it produces quite a powerful sense of space and stillness, of things hidden and revealed, of disorientation. In the end, I found it quite moving.



The most surprising site of the day was biking through the grounds of the Tempelhof airport, the Berlin airport which played a pivotal role in the Cold War as the place where supplies were brought during the Berlin airlift. It was closed a decade or so ago and has been a source of controversy ever since over what to do with it. I thought its present use was fantastic: a vast, flat, open-space in the middle of a city, with long wide paved runways and expansive fields. What a wonderful place for kites and bikes. The place was filled with activity – family gatherings, barbeques, games, biking, dogs (in a special fenced doggy park), art installations

including a set of bird sculptures perched atop high poles, and all of this in the heart of a city. Naturally developers want access to this land, but so far, Steffan says, no coherent Master Plan for Templehof has been passed. In one area people from the surrounding community have begun to create community gardens hoping to create “facts on the ground” that will make it harder for plans for luxury housing to move forward. It would be nice if somehow this open, flexible, unstructured space could be retained.



In the evening I went with another person from the Foundation, Christina Kindl, to see a play, *Die Heimkehr des Odysseus*, at the Schaubühne Theater. When I arrived yesterday I told Michael Brie that my daughter Becky was a theater director and had told me that in her opinion Berlin had the most interesting theater in the world and so, even though I don't understand German, I wanted to see something. He called around and was told by someone that the Schaubühne was the most interesting theater in the city, so we got tickets for whatever happened to playing there.

The play was extraordinary, astounding. The focus was on the life of Penelope, waiting with her son Telemachus for the return of Odysseus, endlessly waiting not knowing if he would ever return, not knowing what kind of life to live. The staging was in a very wide space, perhaps a bit wider than a basketball court, with the seating rising steeply along one edge. We had seats on the front row in the middle. The space was structured around several distinct settings – a kitchen on the far right, then a large dining table with a tablecloth that reached to the floor (which hid a trap door since periodically people would come out from beneath the table or go under the table and reappear somewhere else in the room), then in the middle a fairly open space with a couple of chairs and a low table with telephones on it and on a shelf below the

tabletop, and on the left of the stage a desk covered with piles of electronic gear and more telephones. At times in the play many phones rang and many actors had phone conversations simultaneously. In the back left there was a shower, and the back center a room with large windows and a door all covered with venetian blinds, sometimes raised, mostly closed. Above and behind this room was another performance space maybe ten feet above the ground: a cutout square in the back wall in which two people could be framed.

The play was partially anchored in a 17th century opera by Monteverdi, and in fact there was a good deal of operatic singing in Italian in the play that came directly from the Opera. In the program the play is described as being by Claudio Monteverdi in a version by the ensemble. To my relief, whenever the words were in German, English was projected on the wall, so I had no trouble following the thematic threads. The performance would have been engrossing even without that, both because there was so much interesting action, emotional texture, and lots of music, and because much of the dialogue didn't make a lot of immediate sense, or at least didn't contribute to a clear linear narrative. Also, 30% of the play was in Italian without translation for anyone, and most of the Germans in the audience didn't know Italian I am sure. Still, of course, the words mattered and enhanced the power of the play.

The performance was built around a series of episodes, fairly self-contained set-pieces animated around some kind of theme played out in words, poetry, music, action. The texts were drawn from all sorts of sources, creating a montage of ideas and forms of expression: from Kafka, Derrida, Homer, and others. In the opening scene Penelope and Telemachus were sitting at the table with five or six other people. They introduced themselves. One was Time, another Fortune, a third Love. Minerva entered singing Italian and was announced as the mentor. She launched into an animated disquisition on Italian cooking in Italian (which remarkably I could pretty much follow) about spaghetti with tuna fish and how her mother always insisted that you should never have cheese in that dish. Everyone else was concentrating on their plates, simulating eating in different ways – one frenetically, one very slowly, one endlessly cutting up something with a knife and fork. It was all very stylized, choreographed.

One especially engaging section involved an intense debate initiated by Telemachus about whether they should just decide Odysseus was dead and then figure out how best to market his adventures so that they could get some cash out of his wandering. What is the best way to make this into a myth? The debate was over how many rough edges there should be and how important it was for the hero to have inner emotional conflicts. Love, Time and Fortune had different views of this, but Telemachus only wanted to figure out the marketing angle. Then Penelope came screaming into the room hysterically yelling “no, no, no, Odysseus is not dead”, accompanied by a fantastic violinist (who throughout the play was in a lab coat and always accompanied Penelope as a kind of attendant and caretaker).

The music was also wonderful throughout the performance. Minerva was a powerful operatic soprano who filled the entire hall with song. The violinist was clearly a high level soloist. Telemachus played wonderful piano, but also violin. There was a guitarist, equally talented.

I can't really convey the beauty and power of this piece. It has that rare quality of being both incomprehensible and coherent. It was continually perplexing and yet conveyed layers of meaning. It is always a challenge, early on in this kind of performance, figuring out the dramatic vocabulary – figuring out in a sense how to watch it. I find that if I relax and don't worry about it, don't really try to figure anything out, it is easier. Since I had anticipated that I wouldn't understand any of the dialogue anyway, I was in that frame of mind from the start for this show. I only wish that Becky and Adriano had been there with me to reflect upon it later.

Thursday, May 19, 2011

It is 7:50 in the morning and I am sitting on platform 5 in the Marburg train station, waiting for the regional train to Kassel where I will change trains for the inter-city express to Berlin. The sun is shining brightly. Birds are chirping enthusiastically. I have that special feeling of newly found mastery that comes when you travel in a new country where you do not speak the language and then cross the epistemological threshold of understanding how things work well enough to get around without the shadow of anxiety that comes with first arrival. Yesterday morning I ventured out from my hotel, bags in hand, with written instructions about how to get from Berlin to Marburg: walk through Alexanderplatz; go to the S-Bahn, take train to Hauptbahnhof station; go to platform 13; get on inter-city train to Kassel; in Kassel switch to regional train to Marburg; someone will meet you on the platform. Even though I am an old hand at globe-trotting, I am really a pampered, coddled traveler: when I am abroad, especially in new places, nearly always I am met at airports and escorted from place to place. I do not have that many occasions to travel by train, and even then it is almost always a point-to-point trip between big cities, without transfers and navigation. Of course, it really isn't that big a deal finding the right platform in a well-ordered country like Germany where the trains travel mostly on time and lots of people speak English if something does go awry. Still, the first of such expeditions always has an undercurrent of uncertainty. But today that is gone: I confidently had my breakfast this morning, walked the 200 meters to the train station, and went to platform five. Mind you, if I was really fully confident I would not have gotten here 30 minutes before the train. Five minutes would have been fine.

I now have a four hour train ride back to Berlin which gives me time to fill in my fragmentary notes from recent days.

[later, on the train from Kassel: the regional train from Marburg was 12 minutes late getting into Kassel. My connection was 16 minutes. I ran from Platform 9 up a long ramp to the station and then to platform 3, arriving there at 9:41. The train arrived on schedule at 9:43. I am really glad that I didn't have to face the challenge of getting a new ticket for the next train and calling Michael Brie to let him know I would be late getting back to Berlin.]

Monday, May 16, 2011, Mecklenburg-Vopommern trip

Today I went with two members of the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation, Stefan Kühne and another person to the Mecklenburg region 200K km North of Berlin. The trip was supposed to have included a visit to a Bioenergiedorf – a bio-energy village – but in the end the entire time was spent at a solar energy development center. The region is a quite poor part of Germany – the north of the former East Germany – that has lost a huge amount of employment in recent

years. There is apparently a serious effort underway to make the region energy self-sufficient as a way of promoting further development. This involves developing wind energy (both by having wind turbines dotted all over the countryside and larger wind farms in the Baltic Sea), solar energy, and bio-energy (bio-diesel, ethanol, etc.). Much of the discussion we had at the solar center revolved around technical issues – this place was run by very enthusiastic engineers who were enamored with the technological breakthroughs and efficiencies they have been working on. The most sociologically interesting issue concerned the struggle between efforts to build decentralized forms of energy provision and the monopolistic-centralized production. The big energy companies are pushing for the big wind farms, but energy activists want to develop the more decentralized versions. This is feasible, it seems, because of some fairly favorable rules that enable village-based wind turbines to feed electricity into the grid and get credit for this, so that energy production can actually become a fairly good source of income for local people. The initial capital costs can be financed through some fairly generous provisions in which banks put up 96% of the capital costs which get paid back over 20 years from the revenues from the turbines (and also solar panels if those are used).

The solar center was itself pretty interesting technologically. The woman who showed us around, Brigitte Schmidt, was an engineer and totally excited about how efficient everything was. She kept asking questions of the form: “Tell me, what temperature do you think we can raise the rain water we get through passive solar processes?” Her style was to insist that we make a guess and to proudly show us how far off we were. They use a fairly broad range of technologies to capture energy from the sun and are convinced that decentralized solar energy, even in a northern climate, can provide most energy needs. In addition to photo-voltaic cells, they are developing a technology of large plastic curved sheets that function as lenses that concentrate sunlight into intense sources of heat that are then used to raise water temperature, which acts as a mechanism of energy storage. Another device is to use the daytime solar energy to pump water to an elevated tank, and then have the water descend at night or when the sun is absent to run turbines that generate electricity. The energy storage problem for solar power is important, of course, so perhaps these are good solutions. But the whole presentation had the air of hyperbole from enthusiastic activists.





A statue of a CO₂ eating dog



Tuesday, May 17

Today was among my most intense academic encounters in many many years: From 9:00 in the morning until around 5pm, with an hour or so for lunch, there was a symposium on *Envisioning Real Utopias* at the Foundation, and then from 7pm until 9:30 at night, I gave a lecture at the Volksbrühne Grüner Salon, followed by dinner with my old friend Claus Offe.

The symposium was divided into three parts. In the morning we discussed my conception of socialism and real utopias. After lunch we examined my theory of transformation. And then, at the end of the day, I presented a slide show with a 10 minute set of videos about the Wisconsin protests. There were perhaps 15 people present, all people connected to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Each of the main discussions began with me giving a 15 minute or so presentation of the central ideas to be discussed. In the morning the discussion meandered in the forms of short comments and responses. In the afternoon a couple of people had longer, prepared comments on the problem of transformation. The discussion was very productive and energetic, and as often happens, the dialogue triggered new clarifications and refinements.

Some scattered notes from the day's discussion:

Mario Candeas

After your introduction I am a bit more confused than when I read the book. You elaborate a range of combinatory mixes – I find it somewhat difficult to fully understand these different forms of power and how they work in a system. It seems to me that there are contradictions between these forms of power and various kinds of limits to different configurations. If you have strong state regulation of capitalist power you might come to a point where capitalism doesn't work anymore, because it no longer can generate profits. Wouldn't this be a contradiction. Your idea of Hybrids means what we call mixed

economies, but such systems have strong contradictions. When we had a strongly mixed economy, capitalist powers came back to fight state planning.

Response: I replied that hybrids were often contradictory, maybe always contradictory. The idea of hybrid does not assume any kind of smooth functional integration. And yes, it is true that in the face of such contradictions, when they become intense, the power of capital generally prevails. This is part of what it means to say that capitalism is dominant within the hybrid. But transformations can also occur within such contradictions. This is really the crux of the problem: how to push hybrids in one kind of direction in spite of these tendencies.

Chris

I am not sure of your definition of social power as opposed to capitalist power. Capitalist power also involves “social power”. You only talk about social power of the masses, of the multitude. Why isn’t the power of power elites also a form of social power, of voluntary associational power. There are really two kinds of social power -- Elite social power and mass social power. Capitalists exercise economic power as you stress, but they also form associations and act with collective action. Isn’t this capitalist social power?

Response: this is a very good point. Capitalists can affect social power both by the way they deploy their economic power – this is the way capitalists shape the social power of political parties, for example – and by forming elite associations. But even in the latter, as Offe says, the power of capitalist associations depends more on their *willingness to pay* than their *willingness to act*. In any case, there are many many different forms of association within the umbrella idea of social power. The idea that social power is strengthened means that these associations play a larger role within the overall configurations of power. This is basically the same as saying that the system becomes more democratic: economic power and state power are both more accountable to social power. If indeed it was the power of elite associations that were becoming more powerful within the broad category “social power”, this configuration would not really signal an increase in social power *over* economic power, but social power as a transmission for economic power.

Michael Brie

Elites have privileged social power – more time, more resources. Until now privileged elite have the most social power and defeat other forms of social power. In some ways you seem to be mixing the motivations of power exercise with the forms of power.

Response: The forms of power depend upon their basis, on the kind of capacity that they represent. This capacity can be used for all sorts of purposes. Economic power need not be used only for profit maximization, although in capitalism, where economic power dominates, this tends to be the case. State power need not be used simply to advance the interests of state actors, although this can be the case. Social power can be deployed in the interests of holders of economic power – this is what capitalist associations do.

Chris

The aims of elite social power are not just economic aims. There is an attempt to address all sorts of questions – normative, religious, etc. Elite social power also tries to create conditions for mass cooperation with these noneconomic purposes.

Response: My focus in the structural analysis is with the configurations of power more than the motivations of the actors. When a person or groups is located in a powerful position within the configurations they have higher capacity for action, for doing things in the world, and they can use that

power for all sorts of purposes. Engels was a capitalist and used his economic power to fund Marx when he wrote *Das Kapital*. If suddenly all capitalists became like Engels the system of power configurations would be called into question, for the motivations would no longer correspond to reproducing those power configurations. Capitalism is stable in part because the dominance of economic power is reproduced through its exercise over investment, production and distribution.

Richard Rosen (an American who works part of the year at the RLF)

The circles and boxes seem too aggregated to me. Social power includes Elite associations, trade unions, religious associations, neighborhood associations in local levels. There are different levels, different scales, different actors. State power is also too aggregated – central, local, agencies, courts, etc. On economic power dimension there are also many entities – multinational corporations vs small business. Can we really say anything at this high level of aggregation.

Response: This is always a problem in the formation of concepts: at what level of abstraction can we generate any insights. If one accepts the idea that a term like “capitalism” is explanatory – that this term helps us understand the constraints and dynamics in a society – then I think the other concept I am using would also be relevant, since they are at the same level of abstraction as capitalism itself.

Lutz

Where are the trade unions in your analysis?

Response: I see trade unions as an association of workers that exercise a specific kind of social power – power that comes from collective action – which they deploy against economic power (the power of capital) in order to affect various aspects of economic activity (the labor process, the labor market, etc.). Trade unions have a particularly important role in social empowerment over economic power because of their direct, on-going interactions in settings where economic power is exercised.

Judit

I don't understand what you mean by the state in your analysis.

Response: I pretty much adopt the formulations of the Marxist-based work on state theory in the late 1970s and 1980s, especially as formulated by Therborn. The term “state” contains two distinct conceptual elements: state apparatus and state power. State power is the capacity to make and enforce rules over territory; state apparatuses constitute the social machinery through which state power is exercised. What is sometimes called the “capitalist state thesis” is the idea that the apparatuses of the state in capitalism are designed in such a way as to facilitate the subordination of state power to economic power – i.e. to facilitate the exercise of state power in a way that is compatible with the predominance of economic power.

Michael Brie

One problem is still not fully solved: I agree that it is important to take the social in socialism seriously. I take the social to be voluntary action. But there is also the question of the direction or motivation of such action. I can imagine a full democracy in which everything is directed towards increasing profits and consumption. So, don't we have to make a distinction between the forms of power and the subordination of power to certain goals. What is the aim of voluntary action?

Response

I do not want to include in the definition of configurations of power the motivations of the actors who use these forms of power. In a radically democratic society in which social power was dominant, people could indeed in principle decide to give profit maximization the highest priority within economic

activities. But if they did so they would in effect be abdicating power to the holders of economic power, because it is really only if economic power has a capacity to allocate investments and organize production fairly freely that profits can be maximized. It is also the case that capitalists, holders of economic power, could decide to allocate all of their wealth to the service of the poor, but if they did so they would be undermining economic power. So, while I don't want to build motivations into the definition of power, some motivations or goals would be inconsistent with the reproduction of specific configurations of power.

One other interesting issue from the morning discussion: Someone asked why worker cooperatives weren't really just a variant of capitalist firms. The workers owned the capital and had full power over it, so this really is the dominance of economic power. The fact that it is governed by one-person-one-vote doesn't constitute a lot of social power. I responded that the important thing about worker cooperatives is that it creates an economic structure within which concentrations of economic power are reduced and the holders of economic power are also involved in the democratic exercise of social power. The result is that this is a structure that is much more easily regulated by other mechanisms of social power, especially through the state and various kinds of social-corporatist councils. A cooperative market economy is more easily subordinated to democratic will.

In the afternoon the discussion shifted to the problem of transformation. Mario Candeas had some especially interesting comments that focused on the transformation strategies of elites. Here is the gist of what he said:

I think it is important not simply to look at the collective action and transformation strategies of the masses, of workers and others, but also of elites. This is the focus of the theory of passive revolutions: the transformative strategies of capitalists in the face of the contradictions that emerge and change as capitalism develops. This generates varieties of capitalism as different responses to distinctive contradictions of different periods. We are now in a real organic crisis of neoliberal period which is more than just a periodic cycle. The transformation responses are not only by popular forces; the power block also tries to form projects for the next passive revolution, to define new rules and create new rules and obstacles and possibilities. "Passive revolutions" are revolutions of containment.

Transformation is a process without a unified controlling subject, but of course it is a process with many subjects and their strategies. A theory of transformation needs to understand this plurality.

The conversation continued with a range of pretty abstract and sometimes murky topics:

- Not all unintended consequences are accidental; they are the result of contradictions. (But they are also in a way part of the definition of a contradiction – a contradiction is when unintended consequences undermine the intended ones).
- The book presents little discussion of what an institution is. Maybe they should be viewed as historical form of specific social relations. (murky). Institutions should be viewed as single movements of social contradictions. (murkier)
- Perhaps it is enough to predict cycles of crisis as points of opportunity rather than have a theory of the trajectory of types and degrees of crisis. Crisis is an opportunity – but also for the powerful for a passive revolution, to even sometimes integrate emancipatory moments.
- In the current crisis, maybe there are even some interstitial capitalist strategies.
- There is a continual process of double transformation – of capitalism and of alternatives.

At around 3:30 we shifted from the discussion of the book to the Wisconsin protests. I gave my slide show and the 10 minute set of video clips. The participants at the seminar loved it and Michael said I really should include it in the evening public lecture.

The Rosa Luxembourg Foundation building

The building where the RLF is located is the former building of the main Communist Party newspaper during the GDR years. It is a classic Eastern European 1960s building. Concrete ugly. But it has been remodeled internally into fairly nice rooms, and it had one really fun feature: a

continuously moving set of vertically connected closet-sized compartment that went up and down between floors. You hopped on to these on one floor and hopped off on another.



Lecture at Volksbuhne

The lecture in the evening was a blast. It was held in a famous building constructed, I think, in the 1920s as a kind of people's hall for performances and meetings. In the early 30s the platz in front of the theater, now called the Rosa Luxemburg Platz, was the sight of clashes between communists and Nazis. Now is a popular venue for holding all sorts of different kinds of events, including public lectures.



In the pavement of the Rosa Luxemburg Platz there are many brass inlaid quotes from her work. It is a bit ironic that she was a hero in the GDR because she had been so critical of the authoritarianism of the Bolsheviks and so insistent that a socialist revolution had to be resolutely democratic. But now it is very appropriate that she is the symbol for the Left Party's Foundation. The Left party also is the only party whose foundation is named after a woman.



The lecture itself took place in a kind of night club or cabaret space, with a very nice bar, jazz playing when

Although the venue was small, by the time I began it was packed, with every chair filled and people sitting on the floor. I began thus: "I have been a professor for 35 years and given lectures all over the world, but this is the first time I have ever given a lecture by candle light." I then spent 30 minutes or so telling the story of the Wisconsin protests. For me it was a magical moment: I felt a complete connection to the audience and the material, and flowed across the themes of the protests and the chronology of events. The high point, for me anyway, was the vignette about my testimony at the hearings and the deep impression it made on me. After



the last clip in the video – people dressed up as cows in the farmers parade around the capitol on March 12 – I said (more or less) this: “Like most protests, the banners and chants at the Wisconsin protests were generally much clearer about what it was against than its vision for an alternative world. People affirmed strongly certain basic values, especially democracy, but the main thrust was defensive: kill the bill, stop the cuts. But movements for social emancipation need a vision. We need some way of thinking about the kind of world we want. This is the idea behind envisioning real utopias.” I then went on my still evolving real utopias song & dance.

The lecture started around 7:15 and ended about 8:40. I told everyone that I still had plenty of stamina and would be happy to have as much discussion as people wanted. We continued until 9:30. Afterwards I went with Claus Offe for dinner in his neighborhood, not too far from where we were. I have known Claus since 1973 when he taught at Berkeley for a year while I was a grad student. He was actually very important to me as a student. I took a course from him in which I wrote a quite good paper comparing Weber and Lenin on democracy and bureaucracy – they both wrote essays on the subject in 1918. Claus wrote very positive comments on the paper, and ended by saying: “Erik, don’t waste your time talking so much about other people’s ideas; yours are so interesting you should work on them.”

Claus was forced to retire at 65 from Humbolt University where he had taught for some time, but has since gotten a job at one of the few private universities in Germany, which do not have mandatory retirement ages. He continues to be amazingly productive, working on issues of immigration, the emergence of a class of workers he calls the “precariat”, the contradictions of neoliberalism, and many other topics.

Wednesday, May 18

Marburg is a charming university town an hour or so away from Frankfurt. It is apparently the oldest protestant university in the world (of course it is now secular) and also has a solid tradition of left scholarship. Because of the success of the previous evening I decided to combine the Wisconsin Protests with the Real Utopias discussion, and once again it was a very warmly received.

After the lecture, as we walked through the heart of the old city on the way to dinner, I had a very productive discussion with a retired professor named Dieter Boris about the problem of coherence of social power. He raised the problem that social power – the form of power that I argue constitutes the basis for an alternative to capitalism – is so fragmented and incoherent that doesn’t seem possible for it to play that kind of role in society. I responded by suggesting that all forms of power are fragmented and to a variable degree incoherent. Look at the state: there are different agencies, different branches, different levels – local, state, national – different factions in different bureaucracies, etc. One cannot assume that power is wielded coherently in a unified way through the state. Indeed this is one of the pivotal ways in which states vary – the extent to which they can forge some sort of unity of power. Economic power is also usually fragmented and cross cutting – multinationals, national firms, local firms, family firms, different sectors – energy and manufacturing, high tech and low tech, agricultural capital and industry, etc. It is often extremely hard for the power connected to these fragments to be wielded coherently. Nevertheless it is dominant within the economic structure because of the way institutions are designed. This is the key point: Institutions are needed for turning

fragmented power into coherent power. Elections help form coherent power out of fragmented social power as it engages the state. The *Chantier* in Quebec helps form more coherent social power within the social economy. There is a difficult problem in all this which may be especially important for social power: how to generate coherence without destroying autonomy. Things like participatory budgeting may be a mechanism for this: PB stimulates the formation of social movement associations by giving them greater than a capacity for having positive effects, and yet also creates a context for building consensus and coherence across associations. This is what institutions can do, or fail to do. Perhaps this is a bigger challenge for social power – how to create an institutional environment that facilitates coherence without undermining voluntary collective action. The market in capitalism with its “invisible hand” is a mechanism for system reproduction under conditions of fragmented economic power, at least where that economic power can also form social networks and associational patterns to shape state regulations. The nature of this problem for social empowerment seems more daunting. Perhaps potential coherence of power within civil society is more precarious, institutions needed inherently more fragile. I think this is what the ideal of deliberative democracy involves – figuring out ways of forming coherence to voluntary cooperation through deliberation, and of course this requires effective institutions.

At dinner an additional interesting issue came up. A student asked me what it was like to be a Marxist in an American university. You must be in a very left wing sociology department and University, he said. I said that this wasn't really the case. I explain that my department was deeply pluralistic and that it strongly supported intellectual energy and seriousness. The pluralism meant that it was open and tolerant to divergent perspectives and valued diversity of approaches. The support for intellectual energy meant that I was given space to build a program and encourage a circle of students and colleagues engaged in critical perspectives. In practice this has meant that there is a solid progressive group in the department – perhaps a dozen out of around 40 faculty – but this is not because of any specific agenda to create a leftist department. The people at the table said that this kind of pluralism and tolerance would be pretty much unheard of in Germany. This resonated with what Michael Brie had suggested earlier about how unwelcoming German academics had generally been to intellectuals from the GDR and how marginal Marxist ideas were in German universities today.



Thursday, May 19

It was around noon when I got back to Berlin by train. I without a hitch took the S-Bahn to the Foundation and found Michael Brie for a final lunch and chat. Afterwards I went to the headquarters of the Left Party with another person from the Foundation, Lutz Brangsch, to meet with Catina Schubert, to learn about an interesting publicly financed employment project (called ÖBS). Catina is a member of the party council of the Left Party and for a long time worked in Berlin city government on issues concerning labor affairs – migration, integration and labor policy. Here is what she told me:

Berlin as a red-red government in a black island. There has been for some time a Left Party and SPD coalition which has given the Left Party some real influence.

The idea of publicly financed labor within the ÖBS program dates from the 1990s, but the actual program only began about five years ago. The idea is to create jobs in a third sector between state and the free market of private enterprises. Basically this involves enlarging the nonprofit sector between state and market – which will expand the possibilities for civil society based employment, or what could be called a social sector of employment.

Berlin is the first place in Germany to organize this in reality. The ideal would be for the trade unions to be directly involved in bargaining for the wages of the jobs in the third sector, but this has not happened yet. There is a much longer history of third sector projects with government funding, but in the past jobs created this way don't pay well and do little to alleviate long term unemployment. In 2006 we decided to enlarge the third sector with two aims: 1) to organize paid labor for tasks that are necessary for civil society, and 2) to create new chances and perspectives for longterm unemployed. This project occurred in the context of Federal Government changes in the system of financing unemployment which were introduced in 2005. This is basically a harsh workfare system, modeled after the Wisconsin system, which discriminates against people who have been unemployed for more than a year. The new system requires such people to work in what are called 1 euro jobs – jobs that pay 1 euro an hour – in order to receive the core unemployment payments. This workfare policy was adopted by the social democrats who have basically accepted the neoliberal idea that only private sector jobs are “real jobs”. In 2006 we saw building up of the ÖBS sector as a way of countering the negative effects of this. The head of this project went to the Federal Government minister for labor affairs and made the suggestions – let's take all of the money for financing unemployment and let us use this to finance real jobs in the third sector. This would have made possible jobs paying a living wage. The Federal Government said NO. The Government opposes this kind of self-organized jobs. 1 euro jobs were supposed to be bridges to the regular free labor market, but they are traps. Our philosophy is that it is possible to create useful jobs that advance social cohesion and open new perspectives.

Therefore we had to find ways to go around the federal government. The county of Berlin does not have a lot of money. We have lots of public debt, so the possibilities for our own financing were limited. The trick was to take the instruments of labor policy that are used anyhow, and take money we had and put this on top of these jobs. It was not so easy to get

this Berlin way accepted, but in the end we bothered the Federal Government enough and they agreed to let us do it.

The aim was to create 7000-8000 jobs – but we have 200,000 unemployed – so this was mainly a way of showing that this would work. We wanted to show the world that there are alternatives to workfare and that it is also good for social cohesion. Jobs were not necessarily seen as permanent – in some cases they were transitional for people. Because we have had to use “tricky devices”, we have been forced to treat these jobs as providing limited time unless we can get co-financing from private parties.

One very good example was the creation of “integration guides” in refugee immigrant communities. We would recruit long term unemployed people from that area, train them in the full range of services and agencies that would be helpful for immigrants, and then after they trained these people go and visit families in the area and help them connect to services, provide advice for questions about living in the city, etc. This has especially helped the children because it has greatly improved communication lines between parents and teachers in the school. The housing authorities see this as a very good project and now fund part of the costs.

The ÖBS project has also created what we call a “social market” in which longtime unemployed people get skills to repair toys, build new bikes from parts of old bikes, make good clothes from old clothes, etc. These items are then sold only sold to other longterm unemployed with a special social market currency.

The peak number of people in these kinds of jobs was 7600, but now is only 6000. Overall perhaps 10-12000 people have participated. [I commented that this strategy is very close to projects for social insertion in the Quebec social economy. The people in Berlin were not aware of any of the program in Quebec, so I encouraged them to hook with people connected to the Chantier and learn more about it].

We would like to greatly expand this. There is certainly the need for more social sector or third sector jobs and we have proven how beneficial this is to the long term unemployed. But expanding this is opposed by SPD. They really have accepted the neoliberal philosophy: make wages as low as possible in government supported jobs in order to get people to move to the free labor market.

But it is not just the SPD that opposes expanding third sector publicly financed employment. So do supporters of basic income. They see this as competing with basic income. [I commented that I am a strong supporter of both public support for the third sector employment and basic income. They shouldn't be seen as competing with each other – they can both be mechanisms for expanding the possibility of nonmarket-oriented employment.] Catina said that there is a prospect in Germany in the next couple of years for a *neoliberal* basic income – a basic income well below subsistence designed to lower wages in the primary labor market and undermine labor unions. This is likely in coming years.

For the moment trade unions are not in this process. Most trade unionists do not want to organize these sectors or participate in the process. Unions have very contradictory point of view on this. There is a council to survey the work of the ÖBS in which there are trade union

representatives along with people from the labor administration and private enterprises. The head of the trade unions in Berlin supports the idea of the ÖBS, but also says that there are abuses by projects and companies that compete with ordinary private sector jobs, and this is why some trade unions try to fight this. We agree that there should not be abuses, but there really are not such abuses. State sector unions are especially skeptical. They argue that these kinds of jobs should be something the state should do.

Our ambition is to get the Federal Government to build up a fund to permanently finance good jobs in the third sector. For the moment we try to bundle funding for unemployment with other sources of funding. A real expansion needs Federal Government participation in this. The Berlin budget does not allow for significant experimentation and expansion.

This was all very interesting. It is so obvious that nonmarket employment rooted in communities is needed both for the health of the communities and for people who are marginalized from the ordinary labor market. I would have thought that the social democratic party would have been more favorable to such ideas, but I guess not.

Samson and Delilah

Thursday night was my last night in Berlin, so I decided to go to the Opera. There are three operas in the city, and the Berlin Opera was performing Saint-Saens' *Samson and Delilah*, which I have never seen. I read the synopsis and figured that I would probably get a fair amount from the French anyway.

Well, the French was incomprehensible, the German supertitles were in German, and mostly the music was pretty tedious (with some wonderfully engaging exceptions). The opera building itself was unglamorous – actually pretty ugly. I even considered bailing at the intermission, but decided to stay. In the end I am glad I did. The performances by the singers were, as one would expect, terrific, and that is always a pleasure even if the music isn't super-engaging. But the real wallop came at the end in a completely bizarre and basically ridiculous way – unless I completely missed the point. So here's the situation: Samson is the hero of the Jews, right? Delilah is his lover, but actually hates him because the Jewish uprising against the Philistines killed the Philistine governor, so she is out for revenge. She finds out the source of his strength is his hair, cuts it off, gets him captured by his enemies and blinded. There is then a big gathering of the Philistines who taunt him and laugh at him. He calls on God to give him back his strength and he pulls the pillars down killing everyone. End of story. So here is what happens at the end: Samson is on a table at the party and being laughed at. There is a terrific duet between Delilah and a general or priest or someone like that. She pours blood all over Samson. All the Philistines are in lavish party dresses and tuxedos (the dress is set as basically early twentieth century garb). Then the women all take off their dresses, wearing only slips and black heavy shoes. Then men take off their shirts and are wearing only their trousers. A screen raises from behind them and reveals parallel sets of railroad tracks going back into the darkness. Next to the tracks towards the back are two box cars. All the singers turn and slowly walk back to the boxcars. Samson collapses at the front of the stage and everything goes black.

What the hell was that supposed to mean? It was obviously a Holocaust invocation, but it didn't make any sense. It was visually effective, very disquieting, but absurd. When the lights went out there were boos from some quarters of the audience. Once the singers came for bows here was applause, even enthusiastic applause. But I was really annoyed. Now, maybe I completely missed something important since I couldn't follow the libretto, but this seem like a really nutty, even offensive, form of being provocative. I will need to get someone who reads German to look up a review for me.

Friday, May 20, 2011

I am now en route back to Madison. Two views from my hotel room:

