

Berkeley Seminar on Envisioning Real Utopias October 2007

SESSION 6, OCTOBER 26. ELEMENTS OF A THEORY OF TRANSFORMATION

First theme: The relationship between “culture” and Ideology”. Jennifer’s interrogation: “In chapter 7, there are a couple of points I would like to address. First, does the division between “conscious” (ideology) and “unconscious” (culture) aspects of subjectivity make sense? Aren’t a majority of values, beliefs, and theories tacit, implicit, and unarticulated? I bring up this concern because the tacit nature of the majority of people’s worldviews might pose a dilemma for attempts to alter them – not that articulated and externalized ideologies are any easier to change.” I am not sure about this distinction. For example the issues in catholic social doctrines, world views, that may be hardest to change.

EOW: When you use the expression “world views” what do you mean? I think of the issue as the sorts of ideas people invoke in a discussion – at a picnic. These are ideas that can become explicit in dialogue. I am not making a claim about continually activated ideas, but ideas that can be invoked in argument. Some implicit elements may not be easy to activate this way, but still would be recognized when pointed out: “Oh, you must believe X” and then a person says, “yes that is right.” These would still be part of ideology as I use these terms.

Feminism suggests these sorts of issues: guys can believe that being less masculine would be a good thing and still have a macho disposition. An ideological change can come before a “cultural” or dispositional change.

Jennifer: so that is how this is important – it is a way of generating change.

EOW: I think this was central to feminist ideas of consciousness raising: discussing things, developing new ideas, could underwrite new forms of practice which then help reform dispositions so that – for example – assertiveness becomes more ingrained, less of a conscious, deliberate action.

Ofer: I was struck by the idea that consciousness can precede a change in ingrained habitus. Bourdieu would maybe say that this reflects a mind/body dualism. He would say that ingrained dispositions are part and parcel and inseparable from beliefs and ideas.

EOW: Part and parcel is different from “inseparable”. Inseparable is a stronger thesis.

Ofer: I mean the stronger claim.

EOW: If you believe the stronger one then it is hard to see how people could ever change by thinking through ideas and issues. If all aspects of subjectivity are seamless then such change would seem impossible.

Why should it be that everything is so integrated and functionalized that dispositions and ideas and requirements of roles are perfectly meshed.

Dimitri: Bourdieu does not really say this – the world feedback with contradictions. You constantly test the world with your dispositions. Habitus may not be entirely congruent with objective conditions. This is a statistical connection.

EOW: Once you say this, of course, there is no reason to imagine that the standard situation is congruence. Statistical tendency can mean a pretty loose fit. But even apart from that, there is no reason to imagine that all of the components of disposition and beliefs fit together harmoniously. There can be lots of sources of internal dissonance. Even if every disposition is aligned with a practical requirement in the world, they may be in tension with each other. You can have nurturant and competitive dispositions that are in tension.

Jennifer: But isn't that a different issue? Isn't this a different issue from the extent to which ideology is an interpretation of your practices and dispositions. The causal arrow can go either way, no?

EOW: One issue is whether our discursively formed beliefs have autonomy from dispositions, I think there is autonomy. These need not be fully integrated. And each may be dissonant with requirements of the world. People have internal dialogues, reflective capacity, in which they change belief. And these connect to social dialogue. These are ways that ideas get integrated into subjectivity in ways that disrupt how comfortable people are in the world. Of course, this may all also depend upon changes in the social conditions and the tensions between dispositions and objective requirements.

Ofer: Two possibilities: 1) change can happen when there is splintered tensions within a habitus – and you are saying that this is not necessary; 2) someone without these internal tensions could also become more reflective and this could generate change.

EOW: I assume that people will not listen in the required way unless this resonates and makes sense because of something in their lives and how their inner lives mesh with contexts. But in contemporary society there are so many disjunctures and ways in which things don't mesh well that there is a kind of chronic unstable equilibrium, > The exceptional case would be the one in which everything is so nicely integrated and reinforcing that there are no points of entry for change. This is a bit like the idea of perfect competition and information in markets – where this is a simplified assumption and then deviations are viewed as market failures. This implies that the deviations are perturbations rather than the normal state of affairs. I think the same thing applies to the integrated disposition-environment-belief nexus: these will in general be a loosely coupled messy configuration.

Lina: I think we can distinguish two kinds of socialization: 1) passive socialization in which people absorb the dominant culture and practices, and 2) active socialization when people come up with new ideas and then spread these which generate an ideological transformation which enable people to realize that there are new ways of looking at how the world works.

Roi: Correct me if I am wrong, but you seem to attribute passivity to individuals and activity to institutions.

EOW: In my active and passive social reproduction discussion I didn't mean to suggest this. Both are really about how institutions are organized and their effects on individuals.

Passive reproduction is about how institutions shape the mundane actions of people that reproduce those relations. This is the mundane actions of people within institutions that generate by-products that sustain those practices. The contrast with active reproduction is that the institution is not designed for this purpose – it is a by-product. Passive reproduction is the by-product of institutional organizations; active refers to the direct effects of those institutions. This is basically a functionalist distinction.

Now, in terms of what Lina is talking about: you seem to suggest a particular role for ideas in transforming things: people come up with new ideas.

Lina: Before every major transformation there is an ideological change, enlightenment.

EOW: Let us look closely at “enlightenment”: this refers to a change in the beliefs people have. Enlightenment has to do with how your consciously held beliefs change. You hear something and think, “yes that must be right” and then change what you do. Take the simple example: initially you believed that the ruling class was all powerful and could not be challenged and then you hear someone say the emperor has no clothes, it is all bluff and smoke and mirrors, and you believe this and then feel you can challenge the state. This is an idea change. Once you accept this new belief, then you change your practices and this may change your dispositions: you become less cowed, less deferential, etc. Habits change because of changes in practices triggered by “enlightenment”: the force of the new idea changes practices which disrupts the reinforcement of dispositions. An anthropologist come in before might have seen all the markers of status inferiority and deference and thought that this was the decisive element, but really it was the belief that the world was unchangeable.

Lina: So you are offering a specific theory of how culture changes.

EOW: Well, actually I think that there are many causal pathways that social change can occur and this is one. This is the pathway that I think I can contribute to: change ideas and beliefs about viability you can change practices and contribute to reconfiguration of the system. But I am not saying that this is the necessary way for this to occur. Disruptions can occur at the habitus/disposition level. This is what happened with gender, I think: disruption of traditional roles in WWII undermined the dispositions which then made people open to new beliefs. After the War there was an attempt at restoring the earlier gender patterns and norms but the damage had been done and the erosion continued.

The way I am critical of Bourdieu is that sometimes these forms of subject-formation and the meshing with the social system seems so reproductive and smooth, with only occasional disruptions. Whereas I think society is more of a complex sloppy jerry-rigged system which reproduction is uneven and muddled, held together well enough. I think Bourdieu has a tendency to think there is more equilibrium than there really is.

Zachary: can you think of cultural shifts that weaken capitalism? The Rosie the riveter case strengthened capitalism? I don't see real examples.

EOW: Solidarities that emerge within capitalism have this character. The idea of weakening and strengthening is not quite the right way to pose this. The question is whether forms emerge that constitute alternative principles around which social life can

be organized. Capitalism is a robust flexible system and it can survive. In Europe the social democratic forms made capitalism less capitalistic and maybe mad the system stronger, but did so by reducing the capitalist element in the hybrid. Europe is a better setting for further transformation because the hybridization makes noncapitalist elements more pervasive even if this makes capitalism stronger. A hybrid system may be a more stable capitalism and a more vulnerable capitalism for subsequent changer.

Zachary: maybe less vulnerable to ruptural change but more to interstitial and symbiotic?

Ofer: So the US might be more vulnerable to ruptural change.

EOW: Well, I don't think the US is more vulnerable to rupture because I don't think rupture is feasible in these kinds of society. If crisis provokes transformation here it will be via the ways it triggers moves towards more progressive symbiotic and interstitial transformations.

In the older view that Rupture was really possible, then there was a sense in which things had to get worse before they could get better. Provoking crisis then would increase the chance of transformation via rupture. But this assumes that rupture is plausible, which I don't believe. If system ruptures occurred in US capitalism it would be unlikely to generate democratic egalitarian outcomes. So then the issue is the way hybridization change the character of the system while possibly making it stronger at the same time. The configuration is stronger, more stable, but it is less capitalist at the same time.

This means that transformation is more like the transition from feudalism to capitalism – where capitalism emerges in the interstices of feudalism and helps feudal elites, but eventually undermines its economic structures and eventually creates the conditions in which a rupture becomes possible. Capitalism at that point is impeded by feudalism and then the feudal state is destroyed by assault. The social structural work that has to be done after the rupture is pretty small. The transformation of capitalism towards a socially empowered socialism is more like this.

Zachary: What is the impetus for ideological change and transformation. You argue that capitalism doesn't have a tendency for intensification of crisis. So why would people be driven to have their ideology change?

EOW: Remember the ten harms of capitalism. Do you need an intensification of grievances in order to get an intensification of struggles? One of the robust findings of sociology is that it is not the case that the worse the grievances the greater the struggle. Variations in the conditions facilitating collective action vary much more across contexts than the variations of grievances. That is a pivotal lesson. If grievances were the primary explanation, then if grievances didn't intensify you wouldn't get transformation. But if beliefs about what is possible matters a lot, then this can be the focus for changing beliefs. This opens up a space for an autonomous role for ideological change – not because ideology intensifies grievances but rather the sense of what is possible.

Jennifer: This is a place where looking at the way local empowerment projects can demonstrate to people that new things are possible. Seeing that your work actually makes a difference.

EOW: There is interesting role for ideological work in these settings. This can help people connect the dots – see how their activities contradict the larger system and how it connects with other activities, other struggles. An example: consumer coops and labor solidarity – these are connected ideologically, but often people don't see it.

Ofer: Isn't this view of the role of ideas completely at odds with Marx's German ideology. Are you a "young Hegelian"?

EOW: Marx must have thought ideas mattered or why would he have written books? He changed his ideas over time – he hated co-ops in the 1840s and later supported them. He thought that these views mattered and that the newer view was a better guide to action. So he must have thought that ideas mattered for action. But the fact that ideas matter doesn't mean you can determine whether or not anyone listens. That is where historical conjunctures come into play.

Second theme: Dimitri: Why don't you think that we should really try to develop a theory of the trajectory of unintended social change. In the discussion of utopian alternatives you argue that we should make stabs at a theory even if we cannot prove things. But for the dynamic theory of the future you basically throw up your hands and say we can't say anything. At least some evolutionary biologists are prepared to talk about the future.

EOW: Evolutionary biologists really reject the possibility of a dynamic theory of a trajectory into the future. They can say something about the effects of life of some exogenous event like climate change or a comet, but not the endogenous dynamics of evolution as such.

Dimitri: But take climate change – evolutionary biologists do talk about the impact of this trajectory into the future on evolution – it will lead to extinctions.

EOW: But this is still not really explaining the emergence of new species as a result of the dynamics internal to evolution itself.

Dimitri: Still, I think you can do something about this. You already make some predictions about the future when you reject the Historical Materialism predictions about homogenization of the working class.

EOW: I guess I would also have to admit that my claim about homogenization is very thin – all I can say is that the mechanism that posited the trajectory for homogenization is not there, but I cannot replace it with an alternative dynamic that shows definitively that there will not be homogenization. All I could do was simple linear extrapolation, but not a dynamic model extrapolation.

Dimitri: Still, you do say that real utopia models would have these effects in the future.

EOW: This is a much easier problem because I am not predicting dynamics into the future, just saying limited things about the effects of particular institutional designs. And one of the problems is necessarily that this is less contextualized because I do not know much about the context. Again, what I cannot say anything very coherent about is the likely long term dynamics of the system that will change the basic parameters within which we act. I am not arguing against trying to do this, but I don't see how you could

accomplish the third element in the theory of transformation. All I can do is simple extrapolation, but this isn't good enough.

An example: suppose fusion technology occurs and we suddenly have virtually free energy with no pollution for everyone. This would massively change economic conditions and crises. This would have a massive effect, but a) I cannot predict whether or not it will happen, or b) how this could be integrated into a theoretical projection of a trajectory into the future. I prefer to treat the future trajectory as a black box – sometimes that is better than a distorted partial view.

Dimitri: But don't we need this for strategy. Isn't it better to have something?

EOW: Maybe it is better to have no theory than a bad theory of the future. A bad theory will lock you in more to a pattern, whereas no theory makes you more pluralistic about alternative strategies and possibilities. An invitation to think about the problems and come to some conclusions may be an invitation to rigidity and illusion.

In practice, mostly the way social movements and parties work is to assume that the parameters of actions, of the system, remain pretty much the same. Strategies generally take stability as the presumption -- taking the time horizon of action as facing the same basic social structural conditions, or simple extrapolations of the recent changes of the past. People may have a longer term plan with many steps to build up capacity, but it is still taking the system as parametric. Dynamic changes in the environment do not figure in the sequence of steps.

Dimitri: But if gaps and contradictions are changing, why prohibit discussion of this?

EOW: It is fine to assume that there will be changes; the problem is in having real expectations of how these parameters will change, what the new contradictions will be; etc. It is good to acknowledge uncertainty, but this is different from creating speculative conjectures about what will happen very far into the future – beyond our manageable time horizons.

Jennifer: Activists need to think of strategy as a kind of tree where you look into the future and say if one piece of legislation is passed then we will do this, but if not we will do that. If this happens then we can do one thing, if not we will do another. This is looking into the future as a series of steps.

EOW: Yes: that way of thinking strategically is really about steps of transformation. This is not about the trajectory of unintended consequences. The strategy thinking you described is certainly important, but this is the logic of transformation in the fourth part of the theory, not the trajectory problem in the third element of the theory. Remember what the character of the dynamic problem is: Marx predicted the future course of capitalism because he had accounted of the cumulative effects of the unintended consequences of workers and capitalists operating within capitalist relations and the dynamics of the accumulation process. This generates a dynamic with a particular form which makes it possible to predict the trajectory: more and more intense crisis; larger working classes; more solidarity and homogeneity. This is the kind of theory that would help with a long term strategy.

The part that turns out to be really hard is not the static account of unintended consequences, but the dynamic quality of unintended consequences. Marx had a brilliant simplification of capitalism to generate these theorems, but they are not satisfactory.

Ofer: You say it is hard to know anything about the future, but you do say that it is possible to know something *negative* – that an emancipatory future will not come from unintended consequences alone, it won't happen by accident. Why?

EOW: Interesting point. You are right that I am pretty convinced that social emancipation can only happen by design, not by accident. It may be that the conditions which make it possible happen by accident, but those conditions by themselves will not generate a democratic egalitarian social order. I guess I am like a “creationist” who believes that “intelligent design” is needed for this kind of human arrangement to be possible.

Ofer: Why do you think this?

EOW: This is a kind of entropy/complexity argument. This kind of institutional arrangement needs fine tuning and won't happen by chance. I don't think that this outcome is like a biological evolutionary process. This is intelligent design for emancipatory social futures. This is something fundamentally different about social change and biological change.

Jennifer: No, not really, because there is no idea of progress in evolution. If you have an end you would like to achieve in biological evolution you need intelligent design for that.

EOW: I guess it is still true in some ways that aspects of emancipatory transformation happen as unintended consequences --like the deep transformation of gender. This was to a significant extent the cumulative unintended consequence of other processes. Still, very quickly conscious, deliberate effort was added to this – and this was important to facilitating the actual emancipatory effects. David James' wonderful work on the transformation of Southern agriculture and the destruction of segregation has this form: Sharecropping was a kind of class structure which used racial domination as a systematic way of reproducing these class relations. American Apartheid in the form of Jim Crow was institutionalized as a solution to a class problem, not mainly a race problem. The destruction of sharecropping then made possible a successful assault on those racial institutions.

Ofer: Did the actors at the time know this? Did they know that the structural conditions had opened up new possibilities? I imagine that people may not have known that these new conditions existed.

EOW: I think they knew some of this – they saw local elites as more amendable in some places, the resistance softer, but probably this was discovered. This is similar to themes that Claus Offe discussed in his analysis of negative selection and filtering in the design of institutions. This raises a big methodological problem: how do you observe things that don't happen because of an institutional design. This is the theory of nonevents, nondecisionmaking. The idea is that the design of institutions is biased to systematically exclude things from happening. This is closely tied up with agenda setting power which is a crucial form of power. Anyway, after looking at lots of different strategies for studying this, Offe concludes that the pivotal way to empirically study such filters and

negative selections is to struggle against the limits and see what happen. Some things that haven't happened jus haven't happened yet rather than couldn't happen because of negative selection.

So probably the only way you can really know if conditions are "ripe" is by challenging the conditions. Of course, if you fail it is very hard to know if the reason for failure was lack of ripeness or flaws in strategy. This is always a problem: what lessons to learn. This is an important role for research and intellectuals: figuring out the right lessons to learn from struggles against limits. This is not so much to tell people what to do as to help people learn from what they have done. Radicals often learn the wrong lessons. Sectarian movements sometimes have the quality of never learning from their failures because they never blame the strategy.

One last thing: Michael has been fairly critical of this chapter. He dislikes my separation of reproduction and the contradictions, but even more is critical of the functionalist quality of the discussion of reproduction. He doesn't like the formulation in which I say that these structures would be transformed in the absence of specialized mechanisms of active reproduction. This is too functionalist in his view. I frame the issue here as the contrast of a theory of reproduction and the problem of order in sociology: the counterfactual to effective reproduction in sociology is chaos (the war of all against all), whereas in my argument the counterfactual to effective reproduction is transformation – the effective struggle of those harmed by the institutions. This is a functionalist argument for the active mechanisms: I say that these institutions are designed to prevent changes, to protect existing power and privilege. This has a functionalist affinity to the older base/superstructure argument.