

Berkeley Seminar on Envisioning Real Utopias October 2007

SESSION 8, OCTOBER 31. INTERSTITIAL TRANSFORMATION

Question: The question I have concerns the relationship between interstitial strategy and the state. Most of the chapter focuses on interstitial strategies in capitalism. So what sorts of interstitial strategies could work on the state itself. I couldn't think of examples. All of the discussions were about the transformation of the capitalist system, not of the state system.

Response: this is a very interesting point – and you posed this in a way I hadn't really considered. Let's work backwards from interstitiality to the locus of such activity. Interstitiality presupposes the idea of a system. It makes no sense to talk about this if you have a radically individualist view of society – if society is just a collection of individuals doing their activities. Interstitiality is always with respect to some concept of a system – it is activities within the interstices of a system. If a system is totalizing with everything tightly fit together, then there is little room for interstices: everything is governed by a coherent “logic” of the system.

With this definition, then within any social system context we can talk about interstitial activity as long as there are rules and powers that impose constraints on the parts. There is interstitial activity within a university, but there are spaces in which students on their own initiative can create new practices and institutions – study groups, networks, etc. – new learning spaces. And it is possible under certain circumstances that these alternative spaces could take over the academic life of a department. Interstitial activities could become transformative strategies. Within the state, then, the state is itself a set of organizations, and apparatus, a system, and there are certainly spaces and cracks and disjunctures within it, and so there are interstices within the state which could allow for interstitial actions and potentially strategies.

Mike Levien: Maybe we should think of interstitiality within relations rather than systems – think about this as alternative relations based on different values. Interstitiality is based on extending relations based on noncapitalist values that go against the capitalist logic.

EOW: I think this is basically the same point. Once you introduce the notion of logic and structure of relations you are talking basically about a “system”. System just means the systematicity of connections, but does not imply an organic functionalist system.

Back to the state: So, we can think about interstices within the state, not just in the spaces of the society or economy allowed by the state. If this is the case, then the slogan for interstitial “ignore the state” does not seem to fit this really. This blurs the distinction a bit between interstitial transformation and symbiotic transformation.

Jennifer Seminatore: It would be helpful to have examples of how to change the state from within the spaces in the state.

Mike Levien: community land trusts would be an example. The most successful example are decommodified land trusts that underwrite housing coops. In Vermont the affordable housing activists put pressure on state government to put a tax on real estate transactions to fund affordable housing land trusts and conversation land trusts. All of this money in a trust allows for a well funded land trust supported by the state.

EOW: This is not really an interstitial transformation inside the state. This is using symbiotic reforms to facilitate interstitial reforms. There is a problem in the society – affordable housing is a problem recognized by many people – but this solves this in a particular way.

Mike: In an anticapitalist way.

EOW: precisely: the state is essential to making this anticapitalist interstitial strategy possible.

Mike: But your definition of symbiotic is really just using the state for interstitial purposes. The symbiotic strategies are also within the society. When you enhance unions or anything else you are transforming the system. Symbiotic strategies use the state and they are interstitial.

EOW: Are all symbiotic interstitial? Not all interstitial strategies are symbiotic, but perhaps there is a sense in which all symbiotic strategies for social transformation are interstitial in the sense that they are possible within the gaps of the “system”. I don’t know if we are disagreeing here. In the general sense of “interstitial” as something that happens with a system that is not subordinated to the logic of the system, then symbiotic transformations are in that sense symbiotic.

Mike: In the example I sited there were sympathetic actors in the state who introduced the changes.

Jennifer: Would campaign finance reforms be an example?

EOW: Maybe. But let me reformulate this a little. Within the problem of interstitiality within capitalism we can talk about this because we know very well what the capitalist logic is. This makes it possible to specify what sorts of new institutions violate that logic. We know what it means for land to be organized in a capitalist way and we can postulate anticapitalist ways of doing this. So with respect to the state one way of thinking about interstitiality is to think of the state as a “capitalist state” not just a “state in capitalist society.” Theorists of the capitalist state argue that there are properties of the capitalist state that we can list that makes this state capitalist. Therborn’s book is the best on this. He develops a typology of forms of the state along 11 dimensions and then distinguishes capitalist, feudal and socialist states across these 11 criteria. For example, all states have a public/private distinction, but these are different across the different forms of the state. The idea then would be to introduce noncapitalist elements inside of the capitalist state. Porto Alegre is an example – introducing a new form of representation (direct participatory democracy) into the form of the state in contrast to ordinary atomized citizen-voter representation. Direct democracy of participation in problem solving is a noncapitalist form. This is why direct democracy plays such a minor role inside of capitalism. Porto Alegre interjects a socialist state form inside of the Brazilian capitalist state. This would be an “interstitial strategy” interior to the state. We can think of other

ways. [Post-seminar Note: I think this is a case where the reform in question is interstitial, but the strategy was not an interstitial strategy. An interstitial strategy is one in which a new institution or practice or relation is done without state authorization. When a welfare office forms direct ties with a poor community this would be an example. The Participatory Budget was enacted through the Mayor's office and was a state procedure (even if not ratified through a charter amendment or law).] Another example: take the professionalization of the bureaucracy of a Weber type than this is a feature of the capitalist state, and the deprofessionalization would be an interstitial transformation.

Mike: Wouldn't erosion of professionalization be a case of eroding the coercive power of the state --- Anarchists see the professional bureaucracy as a feature of state domination as such.

Jennifer Seminatore: This would be an example of not just transforming the state from one kind of state to another but transforming the state itself, dissolving the state itself.

EOW: Yes, so an anarchist interstitiality would want to erode state capacity whereas a socialist interstitiality would not want to lower state capacity. Socialist states would not have lower capacity or even lower coercive capacity. The actual level of coercion might be less, but it wouldn't necessarily want the capacity eroded. A socialist state might want a great capacity for monitoring and enforcing certain rules, and this requires coercive capacity. Consider global warming rules: a socialism of social empowerment would not imply a weak state with little coercive enforcement capacity. It would be democratically accountable. The anarchist view would be that at best this is a necessary evil but in general it would not be worth the cost. Anyway, my main point here is that to really develop the interstitiality interior to the state you need a clear sense of what social empowerment within state institutions mean and then you want to see what kinds of transformations within the state are possible in these terms. The classical Marxist view is that only very limited transformations of this sort are possible. The only way of accomplishing such transformations is to dismantle the capitalist state – smash the state.

Lina: Are you talking about firms and organizations when you talk about interstitial transformation? Are these new institutions outside of existing organizations?

EOW: I was trying to distinguish two types of interstitial strategy – those within firms, within capitalist organizations – like health and safety councils of workers within a firm. Those are interstitial within a capitalist organization. Setting up a producer coop is setting up a different kind of organization. This is not an interstitial strategy interior to a capitalist firm, but a different kind of organization.

Lina: what about interstitial organizations in the cultural arena? Civic associations and interstitiality – social movements to transform society? Are these interstitial organizations?

EOW: In one sense the very act of forming a social movement association is doing something which is interstitial – these are noncapitalist associations with a voluntary nonmarket logic, so they are interstitial. But this is not necessarily an interstitial strategy.

Lina: What if associations of civil society manage to transform people's ideas about the world and this leads people to try to change the world?

EOW: When social movements and associations are formed, there are, again, two ways this can affect ideologies, norms, consciousness: One is just as a by product of interstitial activity, but not a strategy. Suppose you form an interstitial organization like the Boys & Girls Clubs. This is an interstitial activity, but it is not a strategy for challenging and transforming the dominant hierarchical structures of the society. Still, these could have transformative effects by making people less self-centered. These could be interstitial activities that have cumulative transformative effects. But another way is for interstitial organizations and social movements could be a broader strategy for changing people and making them more able to engage in social transformation. This is what social movements often try to do: transform participants in ways that transforms the scope of participation.

I think the way to think about this is to see a spectrum that goes from interstitial activity to interstitial strategy: some activities have noncapitalist logics but are not at all part of a transformative strategies; others are oriented towards constructing noncapitalist forms. Different countries and places have different contexts for social empowerment. In the US there is a very deep tradition of voluntary association that goes from simple do-goodism to more radical counter-hegemonic strategies. This is really our strong suit – where we can create models that might be useful elsewhere where civic traditions are not so vibrant. This is not a binary in which an activity has to make a choice between being like the YMCA or a landtrust community movement to transform real estate markets. Lots of associations mix these strategic components with interstitial activity.

Question: What about plain ordinary socialist parties – which are they, are they symbiotic or interstitial when they try to get into positions in the state to expand the scope for interstitial empowerment.

EOW: I would say this is an interstitial strategy that is using a symbiotic tactic. The tactic uses the state but in order to create greater space for interstitial institution building.

Mike: Part of making this space for interstitial change is restricting its capacity for violence. In struggles in India of land and dams one of the objectives is to role back the state, to block its capacity for violence. This is what is needed. In your examples you still have a state with violent capacities that will use those capacities for capital accumulation. You are staying that you want to preserve those capacities.

EOW: Neutralizing the capacities of the capitalist state for violence may be essential to create space for other sorts of transformative activities, but that is not the same as saying that we want to transform the state into a socialist state in which we have in our strategic armory an interstitial strategy – which would mean transforming state forms into socialist ways. This is not just planning capacity of the state since that can be statist, not socialist, but things like the participatory budget. I would still argue that the issue of blunting the coercive capacity of the capitalist state is not the same as modifying it in a socialist direction. A socialist state still needs coercive capacity because it needs the capacity to enforce its rules. One might decide that it was worth disabling the coercive capacity of the capitalist state even if this undermined the capacity of the protosocialist state. I don't see why inherently we want a socialist state with lower coercive capacity. It might be less coercive, but it why would have less coercive *capacity*. [Post-discussion note: This is getting pretty convoluted and opaque. It is odd to be talking about the coercive capacity

of a would-be socialist state in the context of trying to transform a capitalist state since we are so very far from anything remotely like a socialist state. I think Mike was basically right that a socialist state understood as a form of radical democratic-egalitarian political institutions would be less coercive even if it also had greater regulatory capacities, but those capacities would be less grounded in coercion as such. I was trapped in my initial formulation and lost track of some of the point here when I kept insisting that the capacity for coercion would remain the same. Mike is right to use the term “coercion” as using real violence and thus as something more restrictive than administrative capacity.]

Jorge: I do not think coercion is inherently bad; it depends on what is used for and who controls it.

Dimitri: If interstitial strategies start outside of the structures but then try to stably engage the state, then do they cease to be interstitial. Do they then become symbiotic.

EOW: Mike made the point that all symbiotic strategies are interstitial since symbiotic strategies strengthen social power within capitalism which means a noncapitalist logic within capitalism and thus this is interstitial. One could use the language this way, but I am not sure that this clarifies the strategic logics. When social movements say that we have been butting our heads against a wall trying to get a city to fund a women’s health clinic without any success so let’s just get on with it and build the clinic on our own, this seems very different from protesting the city, winning city council elections and getting the city to set up a women’s health clinic even if this had a community board of directors connected to it. These are different kinds of strategies. The latter is symbiotic: it solves a problem and expands social power; the former is interstitial because the movement itself builds the counter institution. So, I think we need to focus on the strategies involved here. I don’t know how much of a difference this makes, but I think when you look around the world you see a big difference when movements say let’s not bother with the state and do this on our own. This is often linked to a worry about the state taking over.

Abbigail: what are the implications of of having this projects and letting the state get off the hook? Shouldn’t the state be required to do this? Doesn’t letting this fall on the shoulders of communities support the neoliberal mantra of everyone doing things for themselves?

EOW: You are right. There is in the current period a deep ambiguity in interstitial activities because of the ways they seem like devolution and decentralization as advocated by the World Bank – which really amounts to privatization and a retreat of the state. Interstitial strategies look a lot like privatization and a withdrawal of public resources. These look a lot like simply delivery less services; social empowerment becomes illusory and expressive politics. That is why something like the tax support land trust controlled by community boards combines symbiotic and interstitial and this might be more stable. The form of resource acquisition is state coercion – a transfer from capital accumulation to social accumulation. This might be the best way to stabilize the interstitial and make the symbiotic more socially empowered.

Abbigail: I am confused about the distinction between tactics and strategies. What about land invasions and things like that?

EOW: Land invasions are a tactic. These can result in private landholdings with eventually secure private property rights. So land invasions can result in an expansion of capitalism. You could have private landowners with unused land and it gets taken over by landless peasants who convert into productive land, and then they get titles and it becomes more capitalist. But land invasions could result in worker cooperatives or collective and socially empowered character. That would be using the tactic of a land invasion – violating property rights to physically take control of land – to build social power. You can have an electoral campaign for the women’s clinic; you can have protests and occupations of mayor’s office. But in the end if you accomplish a women’s health clinic under community control you have an interstitial transformation support by a symbiotic transformation. Sometimes tactics are not so easy to distinguish from strategies. You could build the health clinic yourself in order to embarrass the city for its negligence and then getting the city to fund the clinic – using an interstitial action to trigger a symbiotic reform.

Dimitri: Do symbiotic reforms always strengthen the system, solve problems?

EOW: A nonsymbiotic reform is one that makes life better for people but it does not make the system work better. My claim is that nonsymbiotic reforms are going to be unstable and precarious because their continuation depends upon long term mobilization, so whenever a movement weakens counterattack can destroy the reform. So nonsymbiotic reforms – my negative class compromises – are precarious because they are undermined whenever mobilization declines, as it will tend to do eventually. This is what makes symbiotic reforms more stable: elites get something out of them. But of course, they risk cooptation and disempowerment. Interstitial strategies are less vulnerable to that, but they risk nichification, marginalization. No strategy is without risks. We are in a robust capitalism. We are in the Gramscian “war of position” where a hegemonic power in a way can impose these dilemmas and risks on challenges. In any case, nonsymbiotic reforms through the state are the most likely to be undermined because they will trigger counteroffensives. These are the kind of reforms that become pyrrhic victories.

Question: But if you get capitalists working with the masses on projects that do not threaten capitalism might this not just drain social movements of their energies also? How elites think of their interests matters, doesn’t it?

EOW: I take it that Engels will be the exception: that the interests of capitalists can be fairly taken for granted as wanting to preserve capital accumulations and profit-making wealth structures. This may not be a valid assumption. Since there are some very wealthy people who are serious socialists there could potentially be a mass defection of capitalists from capitalism. Since I believe people do have moral capacities, not just material interests, and since moral capacities are critical for transformative struggles, then elites can also have moral engagement. Moral sensibilities can play a role here even for the elite, for the capitalist class. But still, I am skeptical that this will matter a lot in transformative potentials.

Another issue here is the distinction between the interests of actors with respects to ends and means. I do not take it for granted that capitalists have adequate beliefs about what conditions will facilitate their profit making capacity. Capitalists can operate under very bad theories. We have cataclysmic examples of this. In 1929 capitalists believed that

raising tariffs would help restore their profits, but this only made things worse. They support tariffs not out of nationalistic ideologies, but because of bad theories of the means for the ends of the material interests. So one of the things transformative strategies can do is shape the kinds of means that are optimal for capitalists. Whether or not a strong labor movement is a good or bad thing is not given by the goals themselves. Capitalists can have a high rate of profit with a strong or weak labor movement. If we take interests of capitalists for granted, then we also know that capitalists adapt and accept constraints and alternative ways. Capitalists can adapt to constraints. One of the strategies is to impose constraints which result in the more favorable equilibrium.

Mike: In terms of the interests of elites, does this work differently for interstitial change: most associations use foundation money – many of these groups connected to NGOs are dependent on this money. The good motivations of elites can be used interstitially. Examples are land trusts and land reform movements in which elites do contribute. We were connected to people with a lot of wealth that wanted to give a lot of their money away. We did rely on the good motives of elites.

EOW: The evidence of charitable giving is pretty compelling that there are some wealthy people who are prepared to give to progressive purposes. The reason I think that they are more willing to give this money to interstitial projects is that they have more confidence that this will be money well spent. The problem is uncertainty that money put into parties and other progressive forces of struggle is that they fear this will be wasted money, not result in any real results. People are skeptical that the organizations engaged in ruptural transformations will result in real transformations.

Mike: But these gifts can be terribly distorting, really undermine the goals of the organization.

EOW: This can be true even if there are no strings attached. In South Africa I was told about a very successful women's housing cooperative that very successfully mobilized community resources for housing construction. This was very successful and the government began to give grants, but these ultimately undercut their mobilizing energy and lead to the demise of the organization. They became more like a provider of housing rather than a source of mobilizing around housing. The whole dynamic changed and eventually it collapsed. So, it is not always a good thing to get more resources. I don't know the details about what it was that undercut the group, but in any case it was a problem.