SESSION 9, NOVEMBER 2. SYMBIOTIC TRANSFORMATION

Abigail: Are symbiotic strategies always limited to what capitalists are willing to accept? Ultimately do you see the merger of the three types of transformations as the key?

EOW: One way to think about the puzzle we are trying to solve here is to suppose that you happen to live in a world in which existing structures of domination are very coherent and stable and even though there are periodic crises and dislocations the system has a huge amount of adaptability and flexibility that adjusts. This is Gramsci's hegemonic capitalism. And yet this world imposes tremendous harms. So what do you do when those are the realities. If in addition you had a theory you believed in about the future state of the system which gave you a high level of confidence that the system would become more fragile, then you do not have to mainly orient your strategies to the current levels of stability. You could orient your strategies towards a future world of system-vulnerability., It is noteworthy that Marx never gave a time scale to his predictions – still there was a sense that the time scale was not that far off. If you accept his views then you don't have to ask the question: How do you transform a system that is both oppressive and massively stable with huge reprodu8ctive capacity. Marx didn't have to answer that question. His question: how do you build a capacity in that context *knowing that this context will not persist*. That is the setting for these three strategic modes. So we live in a world with robust systems of reproduction. I don';t know how to directly confront this. I don't see how to move from a war of position to a war of maneuver by an act of will. So what do we do without giving up on the moral ideal and the strategic goal of making another world possible? These are a really tough set of things to package together. How do we do this without being seduced by wishful thinking?

The idea of symbiotic transformation is an attempt at getting some edginess into a reformist program: trying to interject system-transformation potentials into a reformist strategy. The assumption is that transformations of existing relations that have an emancipatory aspect to them are more likely to be stable and sustainable if they also make the system function more smoothly and effectively for powerful interests. This is not the same as an even stronger claim which says that transformations are most stable only when they are optimal for ruling classes. I am not saying this. On the reverse-J shape of the symbiotic strategy space the optimal strategies for capitalists are the extreme left had side, but this can be ruled out. There are two equilibria – low road and high road – and the idea is that you can close off the low road and pave the high road. Elites would like to be on the left had side of the reverse-J and therefore would like to institutionalize a set of rules that make it hard to move to the social empowerment equilibrium. The logic of the symbiotic transformation is that if for contingent historical reasons you can create a barrier that moves the system to the better equilibrium, then you can stabilize these gains.

They accept the reforms because of the institutional rules that exclude parts of the curve. This does not depend on the *good will* of the elites: there is still the power and confrontation and victories and defeats. Just as "People make history but not just as they choose" applies to ruling groups reproducing their power as to opposing groups challenging that power. So, enlightenment may matter because elites needs to believe that they will do just fine on the second best equilibrium and they may not believe this – they may operate with stupid theories about what is tolerable for them. The reluctance of the US Capitalist Class to get behind universal health insurance is an example. This reluctance seems more about ideology than interests because this would be good for US capitalism.

So, to get to the core issue: Yes, these are all about transformastions that are *compatible* with a robust capital accumulation on the grounds that this makes those transformations more stable. Then the question is: can these also have the effect of shifting the terrain of future conflicts.

Another way of asking this is: which kind of capitalism is most likely to be transformable to a tipping point of socialist social empowerment beyond capitalism through some combination of three strategies? One in which we continually try to make it work as well as possible under socially empowered possibilities within the system – a capitalism like Sweden say – or is it like US capitalism: the most inhumane, the least regulated, etc. You could make a reasonable bet either way. It could be that the nastiest capitalism will be the most transformable, or the most benighn will be the most transformable. I think the intuition here is whether you feel that the main obstacles are (a) how deep are the grievances against capitalism, or (b) how much transformation is needed, what the practical tasks are. A capitalism which has the most prefigurative elements, with the thickest civil society, with the most social empowerment – even if this makes capitalism work better – will be the most transformable. But it could be that a capitalism with the most angry and harmed population will be the most transformable. If you believe this, then symbiotic transformations might be counterproductive.

Ofer Sharone: There are two issues here: one is just transformation and the other is transformation to a real socialism of social empowerment. It may be that intensified grievances without symbiotic transformations might increase the probability of transformation, but in a different direction. Maybe a thick civil society makes transformation less likely, but if you get it it will be the transformation we want. We can imagine things worse than capitalism.

Roi Livny: So you have to consider both which alternative you are going to and what strategies you are using to get their. The way of transformation may preclude some destinations. A violent revolution may make some destinations impossible.

EOW: This is another twist: namely the issue of violence. The strategies we have been talking about are what you want to build, but not the means used to accomplish it. The ruptural strategy I discussed actually is not via violent revolution. And protests, strikes, etc. can be violent and lead to symbiotic transformation. This is the issue of tactics: protests can be nonviolent disobedience or Molotov cocktails. One way to convince capitalists that the symbiotic equilibrium is acceptable is the fear of violent resistance. This could raise the costs of capitalists seeking their optimal solution. Symbiotic

strategies could be the result of violent resistance to capitalists that force them to accept the zone of the curve within which the symbiotic equilibrium is located. Something enforces the "limits of possibility" on the curve that I call "institutional limits". These can be limits enforced by the state – as in US labor law which makes it very tough for unions to go beyond those limits without changing the rules because of the state enforcement (or the state stopping to enforce rules as in the NLRB). So the state can be a pivotal actor imposing limits. But popular protests and disruption could be the key for this.

Zachery [*note: for the record, sometimes I wasn't sure if the speaker was Zachary or Dimitri, so there may be some misattributions.*]: You say that episodically circumstances arise in which these institutional rules and limits can be transformed. But can these circumstances be strategically created? Can agency generate the conditions for transforming limits?

EOW: I use the word "episodic" to mean the "not just as they choose" part of the equation. Activists work away in the trenches, trying to mobilize communities, and nothing seems to be happening, and then for reasons that may be unclear, suddenly things seem to become possible that weren't before. Various trends and actions come together and generate some sort of tipping point. Retrospectively people see that this was indeed the result of things that they did, or their actions. If they had not been working in social movements and attempting to build networks and strengthen local trust and capacities, then the tipping point would not have trigger the upsurge. But still the conjuncture was not itself the result of strategy as such. This is an issue: you can have far sighted active ist thinkers who do have a sense of how to make episodes more likely and thus they are not entirely "behind the backs", but generally the windows of opportunity are something that happen.

Take the Porto Alegre case. There was an election in which the Workers Party wins in 1988, almost by accident. They had been struggling for a long time without a lot of success. They were deeply connected to social movements. Linked both to the poor and the working class, the landless movement and the labor movement, so they were a distinctive kind of leftist party. It had been doing this since the 1970s, under the dictatorship. It was building as the democratic opening occurred. Then because of divisions in the traditional parties they managed to win the election with only about 35% of the vote. It was a first past the post election which they won kind of by accident. If there had been a run-off system – which there could have because it is, after all, more democratic – they would not have won. So, they won by accident and then had the opportunity to embark on a symbiotic process of transformation. Cities in Brazil were deeply corrupt with city budgets used for clientelistic purposes. That is what would have been expected: that the neighborhoods with the strongest presence of the workers party would have received the biggest benefits. This is what was expected. And then the intellectuals of the party scratched their heads and tried to figure out what to do that they would have an enduring imnpact. They were romantic Trotsyists around visions of permanent revolution and dual power. They had these grand visions and then faced practical tasks and through a very creative process imagined a new institutional device and tried it out experimentally – the participatory budget. This was consistent with the city charter and this turned out to be quite an exciting and interesting and empowering institutional innovation. This is all by "accident" in the sense that you cannot go back two

years earlier and say that they had this strategically figured out as a way of institutionalizing their vision. The innovations were improvisations. Now, of course, this is part of the menu that Left progressive movements have when the episodic transformations become possible. This is how I think we should think about the problem, and about our role as sociologists too: we need to enrich the menu of strategies of transformation that can be the jumping off point for experimental innovation and improvisation when the opportunities arise. Research can play an important role in enhancing this capacity.

Ofer: I have a question of the middle part of the curve where the increasing social empowerment correspondents to positive compromise of interests. Does this apply to all forms of social empowerment?

EOW: I cannot really prove this, but I suspect that this is a general curve since disruptive capacity increases more rapidly than collaborative capacity. A small number of people can cause a lot of disruption, but it takes a fairly broad social movement with a fair amount of cohesion to forge the consensus for a positive collaboration with opposing forces. You cannot work out deals with a long time horizon until you have a fairlty broad form of collective capacity. Your ability to throw stones goes up quickly whereas your ability to forge collaborative deals with your opponents rises more slowly.

Ofer: But is there always an upward sloping part? It doesn't seem to me that there is an inherent connection between increasing social power and collaborative solutions.

Zachery: suppose you have stable neighborhood associations that make it easier to have community cohesion and problem solvingg – say like Black Panthers in poor communities – that` does not necessarily enable you to have more collaborative compromise with elites.

EOW: It doesn't necessarily, but still even for the Black Panthers you would need to distinguish between their militancy to mobilize and cause disruption and the bases for their stable power. So the BP are an example of a small militant group that is able to have a big impact because of its internal cohesion and willing to do things, to disrupt things. It is not so clear that it really had a lot of power to accomplish its goals – improving the life of the poor in the ghetto, improve housing, etc. If they had survived long enough and if they had built up that kind of capacity, then it would have stabilized in the form of city councils and community organizations with stable power, and because they could not been easily repressed then they could have struck deals for positive compromises which would have had the character of the upward sloping part of the curve. This would have been bad for elites in some ways, but also good because of improving the functioning of cities. Basically you have to think through what it means to say "what would it take for the Black Panthers to succeed? What would it *mean* for them to be successful?" They were not going to overthrow American capitalism. That was a revolutionary fantasy, but never a possibility. So what would constitute enduring success? What would it mean for them to be "powerful"? I think this means the ability to stably and institutionally make deals.

Ofer: Maybe the ability, but not necessarily the will to do so. You could have an agenda to endlessly fight the capitalist state, not make accommodations.

EOW: Yes, you are absolutely right; that is a terrific point. You could be in this upward sloping part of the curve and have the capacity to make positive compromises and refuse to do so because you are ideologically hostile. The curve shows the potential accommodations but you need not achieve that potential collaboration. I guess what that ideological commitment means is the belief that if you keep fighting you could eventually hit the socialism transition trough – the final segment of the curve – and so you resist the stabilization of the positive class compromise. If you are on the upward part of the curve and think you could go all the way then you might refuse compromise. [Post discussion additional note: the same argument applies to the ruling elites. They may refuse compromises in the upward sloping curve believing that they can fight it out, crush the movements, and move to the more favorable part of the curve – their optimal equilibrium of low popular mobilization and social empowerment. This could either be because of strategic calculation or sheer ideological commitments, believing that such compromises are wrong.]

Ofer: I think there is an implicit argument here that if you have that much power you will be under quite a bit of pressure from your grassroots support to use it for stable gains and that would push you in the direction of positive compromise. That could be made more explicit.

EOW: I think this configuration of problems is a rich arena for research – how movements navigate the use of their power. This is the Piven and Cloward problem in *Poor People's Movements*. They take a very strong position here: whenever poor people's movement accumulate enough power to strike deals, they destroy themselves. Piven argues that the only real power poor have is the power to disrupt, not the power to collaborate. The only way they make gains is by imposing pain on elites. Once they collaborate they promise to behave themselves, and this means having the ability to discipline the grassroots, constrain the activists. Piven says this is a seductive illusion. Piven has been very critical of the idea of symbiotic transformation. Giving up disruptive capacity means losing power, and collaboration will always lead to this.

Ofer's point about ideological commitments of socially empowered social actors and how this affects the possible equilibria is critical. This is what social democracy did over time – they learned that it was possible to collaborate and institutionalize that collaboration. This was a learning process.

Ofer: Does Piven say that movements should never seek collaboration?

EOW: I don't really remember the book well enough to say this for sure. In response to a lecture I gave she took the very strong position, but in the book it might have simply been the claim that disruption comes in cycles of protest, it tends to burn itself because of the difficulty of sustained disruptive mobilization, and that all of the gains come from the disruptive phase of the process. That isn't the same as saying that seeking collaboration is what destroys the disruptive capacity.

Ofer: I would like to raise a question of the interests of elites. You have stressed their interests in stability. Is that the main thing?

EOW: Not really just that. I argue in the class compromise context that there are lots of other positive interests of capitalists that are helped by collaboration. In production there is a lot of implicit, impacted knowledge on the shop floor that capitalists cannot get access to and which they need to elicit from workers. So, under collaborative relations this may be more productively deployed. So, in any system of exploitation there is the problem of how capitalists manage to elicit the use of that impacted tacit knowledge. One way capitalists can do this is if workers believe that they have a long time horizon with respect to their commitments to the firm, but a long time horizon also constrains capitalists because they cannot flexibly hire and fire workers in responses to short run pressures. So, if workers are not strong enough to block capitalists' myopia, capitalists will engage in practices that hurt their long term productivity. A strong workers movement can block capitalists own weakness of will in responding too quickly to short run pressures. Capitalists cannot individually just opt out of these strong pressures because it is the result of competition, and this is why working class collective power can help capitalists avoid stupid choices.

Dimitri: In the current manuscript it seems that in the end you come down in favor of symbiotic strategies, but you also say that all three of these are relevant and that in different times and places the weight of different strategies will be different. What rules would govern this? Is the threat of ruptural strategies always relevant to forcing the other strategies?

EOW: The threat comes from disruptive power not necessarily ruptural strategy. Disruptive capacity means "if you cross this line I will cause trouble", whereas ruptural strategies mean "if you cross this line I will destroy this institution".

Dimitri: Putting that aside, how should we think about the articulation of these three modes of transformation.

EOW: I would love to be able to say in the conclusion: Here is how we should think of the connection between these three modes of transformation and the five pathways of social empowerment in order to neutralize the ten criticisms of capitalism in the service of the normative goals of social justice and political justice. It would be great to backward link the discussion of strategy with everything that came earlier. I can't do that. The alternative would be to move from a menu of three separate strategies to a menu of configurations of strategies. I have done a little of that already in the Interstitial strategy – where interstitial strategies set the stage for possible ruptures by eroding the dominant institutions. So that is a configurational argument – the cumulative effect of interstitial metamorphosis makes rupture possible. I will try to at least make a gesture at laying out these configurations.

One configuration would be combining completely autonomous interstitial strategy by community activists with political parties thinking about symbiotic transformations that open up more spaces for such community activism. All of that may – or may not – create the conditions for ruptures. I suppose also I would want to talk about the ways in which the cumulative effect of interstitial change makes possible more robust symbiotic strategies because of the ways in which political parties would be linked to those social movements which would inform the agendas of parties. Lot of this just sounds like

vague, abstract talk. I don't feel this has the kind of empirical grounding that I would like it to have.

Dimitri: It seems that you have a lot of empirical examples of how these strategies do fit together. Like the Porto Alegre case in which a ruptural strategy by romantic revolutionaries results in a symbiotic innovation that allows for new interstitial initiatives.

Ofer: What sorts of examples are there of your grad students working on these matters.

EOW: Most of my graduate don't actually work on these problems. I have a philosophy of mentoring in which I encourage students to do whatever is most compelling for them. Most of my students don't work on the problems of radical alternatives and the like. So an example of a recent dissertation under my supervision was Greta Krippner's dissertation of the financialization of the US economy. That was not about real utopias, but about the actual working of the US economy. But some students have worked on these themes. Gianpaolo Baiocci's dissertation on Porto Alegre is one example, and Amy Lang's dissertation of the British Colombia Citizens Assembly is another. Stephanie Luce's dissertation of Living Wage struggles and the importance of socially empowered forms of monitoring after the passage of those city level reforms is also an exaple of a real utopias dissertation.

Jennifer: It seems to me that ruptural is contrasted to the other two strategies, but the others should be put together in some way. Symbiotic and interstitial work together.

EOW: It may not have been clear, but the first order distinction I made was between rupture and metamorphosis as visions of system change, with interstitial and symbiotic as two types of metamorphosis.

Dimitri: Your ruptural reform is more like seize the state than smash the state – more like popular power seizing state power through elections and forcing rapid transformation. Ruptural is state centered. And then you talk about partial rupture and institutional ruptures. But there is a missing space for statist strategies that are seizing the state and nonruptural.

EOW: I think that if you seize state power – through elections for example – and do not attempt a rupture, then you have to ask "what will you do with your power?" I think this is the same as a symbiotic strategy.

Dimitri: except it doesn't solve an existing problem of the state. It is putting new voices in power who will fight against the existing power centers.

EOW: You can seize the state and confront capital and then what? What are you going to actually do? If you do things when you have that capacity all of which are fully opposed to the interests of capital and make capital accumulation more difficult then you are pushing towards a rupture. You are saying that you will use power continually to challenge capital until it is defeated. Or you can say: no, we are not pushing for a rupture, but rather to expand the space ofr popular forces but which is still compatible with the dominant classes basic interests. This implies seeking a new equilibrium that will be tolerable for capital.

Dimitri: My only trouble with that is that the flavor for the symbiotic chapter now is that the strategies do not seem to directly challenge capital.

Jennifer: This is what confused me as well. I don't see why symbiotic strate4gies are equated with class compromise.

EOW: It is probably a little misleading as written. Symbiotic strategies need not always work through the state. Workers in a factory can organize a symbiotic strategy that creates a positive compromise equilibrium, a collaborative equilibrium within a factory. It is using the apparatuses of power within the factory – the factory regime in Burawoy's terms, the internal state of the factor – to solve problems and expand workers social power.

Jennifer: I didn't really understand the symbiotic logic as one between elite and popular interests. I thought it was between state and nonstate actors because of the slogan "use the state".

EOW: The core contrast is between negative and positive class compromises: Negative class compromise remains important – winning concessions simply by the ability to impose costs. The idea is that this is precarious because as soon as that capacity declines, then there will be sharp counter-offensive. Positive class compromise is still the result of struggle, but it has a character in which it can stabilize a new equilibrium. By virtue of forcing capitalist firms to have longer time horizons are in a better position competitively, and so they accommodate to the new conditions and do not engage in quick counteroffensives. The symbiotic form need not be limited t the state: whenever there is a conflict between opposing interests in which a collaboration for some positive sum gains are possible, then there can be symbiotic transformations, but this always requires stabilization-rules, which may often be through the state but need be.

I want to go back to the "seize the state" issue. There are these two slogans: *Smash* the state and *seize* the state. "Smash" the state was embedded in a theoretical understanding in which it was believed that the very form of the state prevented its being used for emancipatory purposes. The institutional properties of the state would block transformative potential. An example would be due process rules with full compensation around the seizure of property. Fair compensation and due process is a major obstacle to socializing means of production. So, every capitalist states have these rules built into it – this is not just a "law" or "policy" it is organic to this kind of state – a systemic feature. So, smashing the state implies that there is no way a socialist party could move towards socialism and obey those rules, and it cannot just change the rules constitutionally because they are too deeply built into the state. So, to go beyond the rules means "smashing" them.

Zachary: Don't you think the idea of "dual power" you talked about is a different way of thinking about this – supersession of the state rather than smashing. Superseding the state? Isn't this sort of between smashing and seizing. Wasn't Porto Alegre more like this?

EOW: That may be right. There was a building of a new state institution that constituted a new power principle, which displaced power from the city council to the participatory budget. That was not really smashing and then building, but seizing and building and through this transform power relations. This did not erode the city councils ordinance

capacity, however, so much of the old state was still in place, just reconfigured with a new element inserted. The legislative function got split into two representational modes – electoral and direct/delegational representation. There was thus a seizure of power to create a symbiotic transformation which then evolves over time.

An interesting issue I haven't mentioned is the question of whether the participatory budget process should be made a formal law. It was not introduced via ordinance. Now there is an interesting debate over this. The advantage of not having an ordinance is that it allows for much more flexible experimentation and learning-by-doing and modifying as you go. A good example was the introduction of the thematic assemblies to make the process more appealing to the middle class. This was easy to try out because the new assemblies did not have to go through a formal political process and become a law. But on the other hand the process is more vulnerable to being dismantled if it is not built into the formal machinery of law. So far they have preferred the informal tacit law strategy.