

1. What got you interested in “real utopias”. Is this interest related in any meaningful way with your works on classes and class structures?

I have, in a way, been interested in “real utopias” from the very beginning of my academic career. In 1970, in order to avoid being drafted into the army during the Vietnam War, I was enrolled in a seminary in Berkeley, California (students studying in religious seminaries were given a draft deferment and so seminary enrollments rose dramatically in the late 1960s). As part of my studies, I organized a student-run seminar called “Utopia and Revolution.” We discussed a very wide range of ideas connected to this theme -- the prospects for the revolutionary overthrow of American capitalism and the ramifications of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” as well as the potential for a countercultural subversion of existing structures of power and domination through living alternative ways of life. So, the problem of thinking about broad visions of radical alternatives to existing structures was one of the things that brought me to sociology from the start.

Once I began my graduate studies in sociology in 1971 (after the system of conscription changed to a lottery), my work shifted focus to the problem of reconstructing Marxism as a theoretical framework for approaching the problem of emancipatory social transformation. There were two reasons for this shift. First, I felt the possibility of social emancipation depends in important ways on scientifically well grounded theoretical knowledge. Marx was right in “saying philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point however is to change it”; but it is equally true that we cannot change it unless we have powerful, robust knowledge about the nature of the world we want to change, the real possibilities immanent within that world and the obstacles to realizing those possibilities. The Marxist tradition is the most elaborated body of ideas for constructing the necessary kind of emancipatory social science. Second, I wanted an academic career, and in order to be a Marxist in the American academic system I felt it was important to create more space for Marxism as a legitimate terrain on which to do scholarship. I wanted to carve out a research agenda that would be recognized by the mainstream of the discipline of sociology as serious scholarship while at the same time contributing to the strengthening of Marxism as a strand of emancipatory social science. Class analysis seemed like the ideal focus for these two objectives. I embarked on two decades of theoretical and empirical work in class analysis, therefore, because I felt that this would help clarify this pivotal aspect of Marxism and thus be a contribution to reconstructing the Marxist tradition of social theory and it would help create more space for Marxist ideas within academic institutions. The ultimate purpose, however, was always to contribute to a theoretical framework relevant to emancipatory social transformation, and real utopias is an integral part of that.

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2. The term “real utopias” might strike unfamiliarized readers. How can a utopia become real? Another striking thing about your “real utopias” is that they are very real. Should we look more carefully for utopian elements in ordinary looking social phenomena?

The term “real utopia” is meant to be a self-contradictory expression, but this is not in the spirit of linguistic provocation, but as a way of capturing the inherent tension between our moral aspirations for a world free of oppression and the practical constraints we face in actualizing those aspirations because of the brutal constraints of social reality. I am especially interested in distinguishing two kinds of real constraints we face, which I refer to as *limits of achievability* and *limits of viability*. The former refer to what we can actually accomplish in practice in the world today because of the reality of political forces, balances of power, ideological confusions, and all the other things that impact on our practical struggles for change. The latter refer to the limits of possibility on what kinds of institutions would be viable, stable, sustainable if they existed. I like to speak of the “snap your fingers” test: these are institutions which, if you could get there you could stay there. This means that they do not generate preserve side effects and unintended consequences which would destroy their own conditions of possibilities. “Real Utopias” occupy the zone between the limits of achievability and the limits of viability. They are *real* because they would work if we could get their; they are utopian because they embody emancipatory ideals.

With this idea in mind, the big problem is: how do you study such possibilities? I have adopted two kinds of strategies – exploring theoretical models of institutional alternatives and looking for empirical cases that prefigure in one way or another utopian elements. The debates around market socialism and unconditional basic income are examples of the former, the study of participatory budgeting is an example of the latter.

The empirical side of this perspective, therefore, does involve looking for the utopian moment within the existing social reality, but I would not quite say it was simply looking for utopian elements within “ordinary looking social phenomena.” There are, of course, emancipatory values embodied in everyday practices – friendship, kindness, altruism, reciprocity, and so on all embody the values that are also animate concerns about social justice and human emancipation. The real utopias idea, however, is not so much just about emancipatory values in everyday life, but about prefiguring emancipatory institutions. I therefore look for institutional innovations which, before they actually happened, people would have said “that’s not possible”.

3. In one of the chapters, you summarize very accurately what is wrong with capitalism today; do you use the term utopia as short for anti capitalist? Should anticapitalist movements be more aware of the need of practical utopian thinking?

Real utopia is not merely “anticapitalist” for two reasons: First, capitalism is not the only structure of oppression that must be transformed to create a world of human flourishing. Our vision of the alternative to existing structures of power, privilege and

inequality, therefore, cannot simply be an alternative to capitalism. It must also imagine alternatives to gender inequality and oppression, ethno-racial inequality and oppression, sexual oppression, and much else. Capitalism is critical in this configuration of oppressions, but these other aspects of oppression are not merely derivative from capitalism. Second, “anticapitalism” is a posture that identifies the source of harms, but does not affirm the principles of an alternative. And it is not enough to simply proclaim the alternative as the negation of everything that constitutes the institutional structures of capitalism. We need a positive theory of alternatives and a positive articulation of the institutional principles that animate its practical design.

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4. At some point of your synthetic criticism of capitalism you say that “*capitalism has generated sufficient material wealth that even with no further economic growth no person would have to be poor in developed capitalist countries, and basic needs could be met for everyone even in third world countries*”. One of the main political successes of neoliberal regimes has been to abolish this sense of material possibility of redistribution. Should we make an effort in order to show that there are more than enough resources to finance alternative social schemes?

This is absolutely a priority. The tragedy of the neoliberal era is not simply the obliteration of revolutionary visions of human emancipation, but the dramatic erosion in the belief in the viability of even modest ameliorative reforms that make life better for ordinary people. There are no real economic constraints in the United States in eliminating poverty; the constraints are entirely political and ideological. That does not mean that these are not real constraints, but this is no a question of the economically necessary levels of inequality required for capitalism to function.

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5. Conservative positions tend to deactivate utopian positions by saying that any utopian project will have unintended consequences and can be self defeating. How can we avoid this criticism and the fear of change that it conveys?

Everything has unintended consequences. Neoliberal reforms had unintended consequences. Social democratic redistributions have unintended consequences. And to be sure, unintended consequences can be self-defeating. But also doing nothing has unintended consequences and this too can be self-defeating. Capitalism is a deeply contradictory self-destructive system which, if left to its own devices, would destroy itself. That is why institutions have developed over the past hundred and fifty years or so to transform capitalism in quite fundamental ways in order to neutralize and counteract its self-destructive unintended consequences.

The real utopian problem, in these terms, is to think about transformations that contain dynamic learning and experimenting. Some people have referred to this as “democratic experimentalism”. A blue-print utopian imagines that we can figure out the design of

self-sustaining institutions in advance and simply implement these designs. Some Big Bang images of revolutionary transformation have something like this in mind. That is not a real utopia; it is a fantasy. The idea of real utopias, then, is to imagine utopian destinations grounded in emancipatory ideals, but also the pathways and trajectories towards those destinations that involve on going experimentation and learning.

Fundamentally this means putting the problem of democracy at the very center of envisioning real utopias, for it is only through deepening democracy that this kind of trajectory of iterative learning and experimentation would be possible.

6. You point out that social science has got a role to play in the process of detecting and developing real utopias, which role is this?

If learning and experimentation are central to real utopias, then we need to have a way of *learning the right lessons* from our experiments. It is very easy to learn the wrong lessons from problems and setbacks. And we need to have a way of disseminating best practices and figuring out the appropriate adaptations to new circumstances. All of this requires serious social science: knowledge about how these institutional designs and innovations work in practice, what dilemmas and contradictions they face, what obstacles need to be overcome. Many things are counterintuitive, so having experimentation proceed on the basis of pure intuition often generates poor inference. Since social science is really hard to do well, this does mean that there will need to be well trained “experts” involved in these processes, and it is important that their expertise be appreciated and not ridiculed by political activists. But it is equally important that experts with rigorous social science knowledge not act as superior know-it-alls that can simply dictate the best way of doing things. Social science is rarely so well-honed and precise that experts really have definitive answers. What we need are experts capable of entering into deep dialogue with ordinary people engaged in social change, we need democratically committed experts whose expertise can be translated in intelligible ways that can enter into democratic deliberation over institutional transformation.

7. You are very critical of the positions that you call “the long term non-sustainability of capitalism” and more generally the classic theories on the inevitability of socialism. What are the main points of these criticisms?

It is a bit involved to lay out the arguments of these criticisms, since it involves showing why I think the specific theoretical arguments developed by Marx and others to show that in the long term capitalism destroys itself are not convincing. Let me just say this: It is one thing to say that capitalism is a contradictory system that contains inherent tendencies towards periodic crisis and instability. I have no problem with this claim. Marx, however, made a much stronger claim about the long-term trajectory of capitalism as an economic system: the tendency is for crises to become more or more

severe over time; for periods of stability and recovery to be shorter and shallower; for depressions and disruptions to be deeper and longer. This claim was rooted in the theory of the long-term tendency for the aggregate rate of profit to fall. If this were true, then eventually the aggregate rate of profit would be so low and crises so intense, that the system itself would become very fragile and, as a tendency anyway, unsustainable. This was an important claim, because if it were true that capitalism destroys its own “conditions of existence”, then we know in advance that eventually there will be some alternative to capitalism. This makes the case for socialism much simpler.

I do not think that there are solid theoretical foundations for these claims about the long-term self-destruction of capitalism. I am not saying the opposite -- that we have a solid foundation for the belief in the permanent sustainability of capitalism. I simply do not think our theories of the future are strong enough for any credible predictions about these trajectories. The implication is that we cannot ground our theory of socialism on a theory of the laws of motion of capitalism that predict its demise. The theory of socialism needs to be based on a positive theory of its viability and desirability.

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8. In order to make socialism work politically again, you propose to take the “social” in socialism seriously. How should we understand this?

I argue that there are three forms of power that are important for understanding how economic activities are organized: economic power, rooted in the ownership and control of economic resources; state power, rooted in the control over rule making and enforcing over territory; and social power, rooted in the voluntary cooperation and mobilization of people for common purposes. Social power is very close to associational power – the power that comes from people joining together to achieve their goals. As a slogan one can say that you can get people to do things by bribing them (economic power), but forcing them (state power), or by persuading them (social power). Social power is rooted in civil society, with its networks, communities, social interactions. A socialism rooted in social power, then, is a socialism rooted in civil society and free, voluntary association. I argue that this is equivalent to saying that socialism implies the democratization of both economic power and state power, for democracy means the subordination of power to the “will of the people”.

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9. You propose a good number of economic utopias but also political ones that will deepen democracy, in what sense would this utopias work?

All of the examples I give should be regarded as hypotheses: Most of the examples I discuss are examples of institutional designs for which we have good empirical evidence that they work in practice in limited historical contexts. The hypothesis is that they could be extended and scaled up and would still have positive emancipatory effects. We observe that the participatory budgeting process works in Porto Alegre. The hypothesis is that the basic design principles could be applied throughout the world in

urban government and, with appropriate adaptations, would “work.” We observe solidarity funds in Quebec and I hypothesize that these could be dramatically expanded and extended in ways that would enhance democratic control over investment. What I mean by “would work” is that they would not generate uncontrollable perverse unintended consequences and they would move us in the direction of a more socially empowered economic system.

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10. You have chosen wikipedia as an example of real utopia that works in a thoroughly non capitalist sense. Why have you chosen wikipedia and not other digital cooperative projects such as P2P or Linux?

Other examples would be perfectly appropriate here. I choose Wikipedia because it is so well known and such a part of the intellectual life of the world today, and yet in the very recent past *no one, not even its founders, would have believed that what we have today was possible*. It is such a good example of participatory, egalitarian, cooperative production and distribution. But it is by no means the only example of this kind of collaborative network noncommodified production.

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11. Being a Spanish magazine we can not avoid asking you about the Mondragon Cooperative that you point out as an example of cooperative economy. As you are aware, the status of Mondragon enterprises is controversial. Eroski, mainly, and also Fagor are seen as normal capitalist corporations. Should we change this point of view? And more generally, aren't this cooperative projects threatened by their own success? Beyond the local market contexts, is the growth imperative compatible with non capitalist practices?

I am involved with a group of Spanish sociologists in a comparative study of worker-owned cooperatives focusing on the problem of how the institutions in the environment of individual cooperatives can contribute to the robustness of the cooperative as an economic organization. Generally I regard worker cooperatives as a *hybrid* form which contains both capitalist and social-ist (i.e. socialism as social empowerment) principles. The research problem we are investigating is about the conditions which might help strengthen the social element within the hybrid form.

Now, Mondragon is certainly an instance of such a hybrid. I think it would be a mistake to say that it has become no different from an ordinary capitalist firm. Mondragon, as you probably know, is actually a conglomerate of nearly 300 separate cooperatives which operate under a fairly complex organizational structure called the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation (MCC). The governance structures within the MCC are highly heterogeneous, since this involves both governance within each of the constituent cooperatives and governance of the overall operation of the MCC. Some of these governance practices are highly democratic; others less so. The overall configuration,

however, cannot be reduced to a simple formula which states that it is either simply capitalist or noncapitalist; it is both.

This organizational heterogeneity is precisely why Mondragon is such a fertile empirical case for a real utopias analysis of worker-ownership as a form of what I call *interstitial* transformation. Interstitial transformations always involve building non-capitalist elements into the cracks, spaces, niches that exist within capitalist systems. Sometimes these transformations are also *symbiotic* – that is, they may also complement capitalist forms in such a way as to solve problems for capitalism itself. This symbiotic quality need not, however, imply that the development in question is *merely* serving the needs of capital. The transformation can also expand the space for social power – it can both serve the needs of capitalism and expand the possibility for alternatives to capitalism. This is, in fact, one way of thinking how capitalism developed within precapitalist economies: emerging capitalism developed in the interstices of the feudal economy and often solved certain kinds of problems faced by feudal elites. Capitalism, therefore, developed through both interstitial and symbiotic transformations. Yet it also eroded feudalism. I think that this kind of tension between processes of expanding social empowerment and capitalism is an important aspect of expanding the possibilities of socialism in the long term. And in such a process, worker-owned and governed firms may be an important element, even if those firms also behave in some ways like capitalist firms. That may be messier than people deeply committed to an anti-capitalist emancipatory future would like, but it is a messiness that we have to live with. Another world is possible, but the trajectory to getting there will involve messy hybrids.