

Alternative typologies of strategic logics

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One of the tasks of the book *How to be an Anti-capitalist for the 21st Century* is developing a conceptual map of alternative strategies for responding to the harms of capitalism. This is a specific instance of the more general problem of concept formation: how to give theoretical precision to the criteria needed to distinguish the variations in some phenomenon. In my work over the years I have engaged in this task of concept formation for a variety of different problems: concept of class; the problem of alternatives to capitalism; alternative approaches to class analysis. The methodological issue here is to begin with a list of types of something and then try to figure out what underlying dimensions or principles provide a way or giving theoretical coherence to the list.

So far – as of May, 2016 – I have adopted three different typologies in my effort at exploring the problem of strategies of anti-capitalism. The first was presented at the Wheelwright Lecture in Sydney in July, 2015, and subsequently published in *Jacobin* in December 2016. I developed the second typology at the end of 2015 in response to some criticisms of the first typology. And the final typology emerged out of further considerations after presenting the second typology while preparing for my trip to Sydney. I do not consider this third version as entirely stable yet, so I welcome whatever criticisms and additional formulations anyone might have.

In the following pages I have included the text from each version of the chapter that discusses the relevant typologies and a brief comment on what problems in the typology provoked a reconsideration.

Typology I

Historically, anti-capitalism has been animated by four different logics of resistance: *smashing* capitalism, *taming* capitalism, *escaping* capitalism, and *eroding* capitalism. These often co-exist and intermingle, but they each constitute a distinct way of responding to the harms of capitalism. These four forms of anti-capitalism can be thought of as varying along two dimensions. One concerns their relationship to the problem of transforming capitalism: strategies can either envision transcending the structures of capitalism or simply neutralizing the worst harms of capitalism. The second dimension concerns the primary target of the strategy: strategies can either primarily work through the state and be directed at macro-levels of the system, or strategies can be directed at the micro-level of the system and focus directly on the economic activities of individuals, organizations, and communities. Taking these two dimensions together gives us the typology below.

		Orientation towards capitalism	
		Neutralizing harms	Transcending structures
Primary target of strategy	Macro-political	<i>Taming capitalism</i>	<i>Smashing capitalism</i>
	Micro-social	<i>Escaping capitalism</i>	<i>Eroding capitalism</i>

Comment

I discussed this typology in various presentations and gradually began to see two problems:

(1) There were anti-capitalist struggles that were not adequately represented – they didn't really fit any of the categories: Worker resistance on the shop floor; strikes; consumer boycotts; activist lawyers; and many others. I initially wanted to call all of these "alleviating the harms of capitalism", but that didn't seem right, and anyway not all that different rhetorically from "taming". Eventually I settled on calling these "resisting capitalism."

(2) Some of the actual policies that appear in "Taming capitalism" could also be thought of as eroding capitalism – they diminish the degree of dominance of capitalism and thus reduce the capitalisticness of the system. Eroding therefore didn't seem really to be only micro-social.

Typology II

Different strategies of social transformation are embedded in different understandings of what precisely a strategy is thought capable of achieving. More specifically, strategies vary in terms of how encompassing and ambitious the primary goal of a strategy is thought to be.

One way of thinking about the ambitiousness and scope of any strategy, including anti-capitalist strategies, is through the metaphor of society as a game. Strategies in response to the harms generated by social systems can be directed at what *kind of game* should be played, at what precisely should be the *rules* of a given game, or at the *moves* within a fixed set of rules. Think about this in terms of a sport: Different games give athletes with different physical characteristics different advantages and disadvantages, and thus they have interests in playing one kind of game over another. Suppose we lived in a world where only one sport is allowed to be played: American football or basketball. Clearly, if basketball becomes hegemonic, heavy athletes becomes marginalized. Once playing a particular game, occasionally the rules themselves are called into question, and changes in the rules can also favor athletes with different attributes. For example, the change in the rules of basketball that allowed players to touch the rim of the hoop, which in turn made dunking possible, added to the advantages of height. And finally, given a set of fixed rules, the players of the game then adopt specific training regimes and strategies in their plays within the game. Dynamically, what can then happen is that players invent all sorts of new strategies and ways of training designed to exploit specific opportunities within the existing rules of the game. In time these altered moves in the game begin to change the feel of the game in various ways. Sometimes these changes are seen as eroding the spirit of the game by spectators, players, or “the powers that be” that govern the rules of the game. This can trigger changes in the rules which are then imposed as constraints on all players. Changes in the height of the pitching mound or strike zone in baseball to alter the balance of power between pitcher and batter, or changes in the rules about defenses against the pass in American Football are familiar examples. Rules are altered to address what are seen as problems in the balance of power among players in the moves of the game.

A society, of course, is massively more complex than a sport. No society is ever really organized around a single, coherent set of rules; rather, societies consist of many intersecting and even contradictory rules. Some of these are enforced by the state; some are embedded in social norms and enforced through a variety of informal practices within social life. Still, the metaphor of capitalism as a game with variable rules that constrain possible moves is a useful one and will help give clarity to the different currents of anti-capitalism.

Figure 1 shows the connection between the different levels of the system and the strategic logics of anti-capitalism. Smashing capitalism directly targets the game itself. This is the arena of revolutionary versus counter-revolutionary politics. Taming capitalism treats the game itself as given, but tries to modify the rules of the game. This is reformist versus reactionary politics, social democracy versus neoliberalism. Both escaping capitalism and resisting capitalism seeks to advance the interests of those harmed by capitalism by taking advantage of moves possible under existing rules of the game. Escaping capitalism does this by avoiding politics and building enclaves as insulated as possible from the harmful effects of capitalism; resisting capitalism involves actions directed at centers of power to protect the interests of those it harms.

Eroding capitalism is a strategy that tries to weave together all three strategic targets. The ultimate objective is transcending the game itself, displacing capitalism from its position of dominance by an alternative democratic, egalitarian, solidaristic economic structure. But to accomplish this, it rejects the possibility of a direct confrontation to overthrow capitalism. The issue here is not some abstract principle against a ruptural transformation, but the belief that a ruptural strategy can't accomplish this

goal any plausible conditions. If the dominance of capitalism is to be displaced, it must be eroded by moves in the game which build alternative economic relations embodying emancipatory values. But to do this also requires changes in the rules of the game in which capitalism itself operates. Capitalism needs to be tamed in a way that expands the possibility and stability of forms of noncapitalist activity embodying emancipatory values. What is needed is a way of linking the bottom up, society-centered strategic vision of anarchism with the top-down, state-centered strategic logic of social democracy. We need to tame capitalism in ways that make it more erodible, and erode capitalism in ways that make it more tamable.

Figure 1. Strategic Logics of Social Emancipation

		Target of Strategy		
		<i>The Game itself</i>	<i>Rules of the game</i>	<i>Moves in the game</i>
Strategic Logic	<i>Smashing</i>	x		
	<i>Taming</i>		x	
	<i>Escaping & Resisting</i>			x
	<i>Eroding</i>	x	x	x

Comment

This typology does seem to tap into some fairly fundamental theoretical ideas about the nature of systems and the ways strategies can vary in the scope and ambitiousness of their targets. But there were still issues that didn't seem quite right:

- (1). I didn't like that escaping and resisting were both given the same conceptual status here.
- (2). Escaping does, in a way, involve changes in the rules of the game *for those who "escape"*. That is the whole point: they try, in a sense, to play by different rules by escaping the dominance of capitalism. So, while this is a "move" within the broader game of the society, it doesn't really seem best to think of this as a move *within capitalism* as such.
- (3) There are all sorts of other interesting conceptual issues opened up by the game/rules/moves triplet. In particular, the ecosystem description of an economic system implies that there are multiple games being played at the same time, each with their own rules-of-the-game. The ecosystem itself also has meta-rules, which impose constraints on each of the games within it – this is what it means to say that capitalism is dominant. All of this is way too complicated for the purposes at hand.

Typology III

The four forms of anti-capitalism – smashing, taming, resisting and escaping -- can be thought of as varying along two dimensions. One concerns the *goal of strategies* responding to the harms of capitalism: strategies can either envision *transcending the structures* of capitalism or simply *neutralizing the worst harms* of capitalism. The second dimension concerns the *primary locus of strategies*: strategies can either primarily directed at gaining access to state power, or located in civil society. Taking these two dimensions together gives us the typology in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Typology of Anti-Capitalist Strategies

		<i>Goal of Strategy</i>	
		Neutralizing harms	Transcending structures
<i>Primary locus of strategy</i>	The state	<i>Taming capitalism</i>	<i>Smashing capitalism</i>
	Civil Society	<i>Resisting capitalism</i>	<i>Escaping capitalism</i>

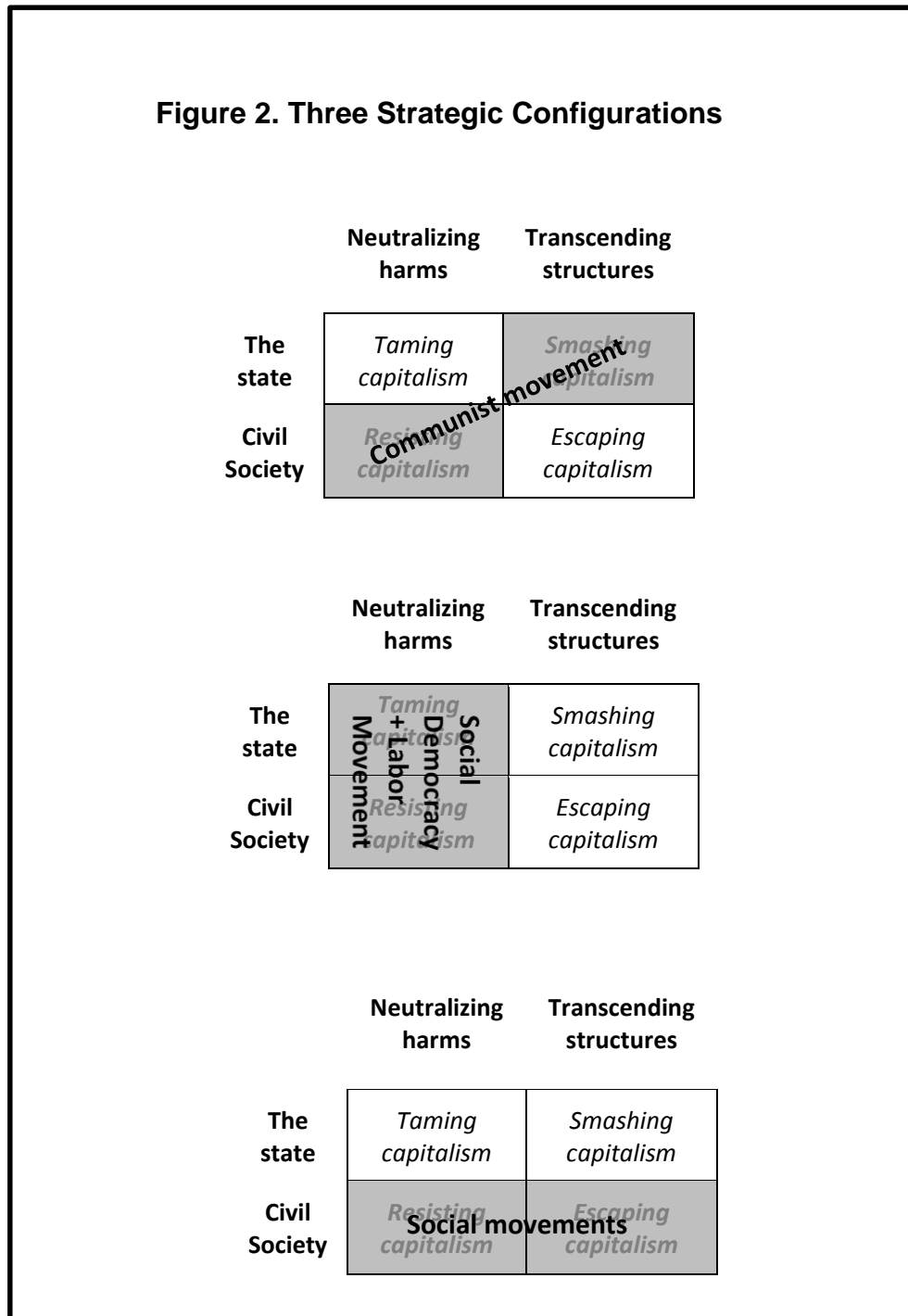
Actual struggles responding to capitalism often combine these different strategic logics in different configurations. Three of these are illustrated in Figures 2.

In the twentieth century, Communist Parties often explicitly advocated combining resisting capitalism with smashing capitalism. Communist militants were encouraged to participate actively within the labor movement on the belief that this was an essential part of building working class solidarity and transforming working class consciousness. The strategy was still ultimately directed towards a system-rupture organized through the control of state power, but an essential part of the process through which this was thought to become eventually possible “when the time was ripe,” was vigorous Communist Party involvement in militant resistance to capitalism within the labor movement.

Progressive Social Democracy also involves resisting capitalism, but in this instance combining it with taming capitalism. Here the labor movement was organizationally closely connected to the Social Democratic Party. Sometimes, indeed, this connection took the form of Social Democratic Parties being the political arm of the labor movement. Much of the progressive reformism of Social Democracy came from the influence of the labor movement on Social Democratic politics, and one of the reasons for the decline of anti-capitalism within Social Democracy is the decay of labor militancy in resisting capitalism.

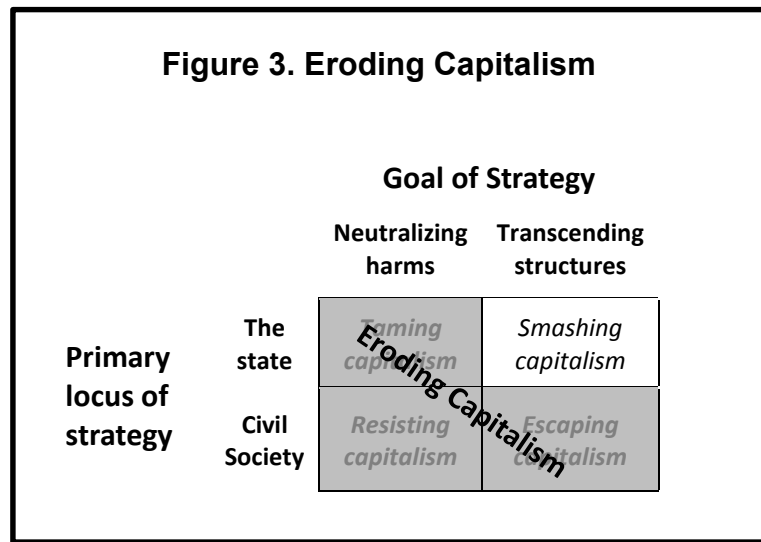
Social Movements responding to the harms of capitalism often only resist capitalism in a defensive response to its depredations, but sometimes this is combined with practices that attempt to build alternatives to capitalist relations. In the 19th century, cooperatives and mutual societies often emerged in the context of resistance to capitalism, and in contemporary times the social and solidarity economy

has also often been fostered by social movements. In some cases, such as the landless peasant movement in Brazil, invading unused land and building alternative forms of economic structures becomes the central tool of resistance itself.



These three configurations were the main strategic responses to injustice and oppression in capitalist societies in the twentieth century. By the end of the century, the first of these had all but disappeared because of the apparent failure of the idea of smashing capitalism. Social

democracy in developed capitalist countries too has declined, if not disappeared, and largely lost its connection to labor militancy. The most dynamic form of anti-capitalism in the first decades of the 21st century has thus been anchored in social movements that continue to pronounce that “another world is possible”. Mostly such resistance to capitalism has been disconnected from an overarching political project directed at state power and thus from political parties. However, in at least some of the movements opposing capitalism in Latin America and Southern Europe, the beginnings of a new strategic idea may be emerging that combines the bottom-up, civil society centered initiatives of resisting and escaping capitalism with the top-down, state-centered strategy of taming capitalism. This new strategic configuration could be termed *eroding capitalism*.



Comment

This typology is a return to the format of Typology I, but with some important differences:

(1) The vertical axis now differentiates between state and civil society rather than between macro and micro contexts of strategy.

(2) *Escaping capitalism* is now identified with transcending structures. This tries to recognize that an escape is in fact building something different. This also allows for things like cooperatives to be counted as a form of “escape”. The term “escape” does not seem completely satisfactory here, but it does convey the idea of creating a structure insulated from the full domination of capitalism.

(3) The typology explicitly recognizes the ways in which concrete strategies on the ground in historical struggles combine different strategic logics. This is important, and I think clarifies the reasoning behind the whole conceptual space. “Eroding capitalism” is now a form-of-combination of other strategies rather than a root strategy. This illustrates a key theoretical move within what might be called the structuralist methodology of concept formation. I sometimes call this “combinatorial structuralism” (it is always nice to have some fancy jargon): a good structural typology generates a set of relatively simple structural forms and then builds complexity through a systemic inventory of forms-of-combination of these fundamental types. This is what the periodic table of elements in chemistry does: all compounds can be represented as systematic forms-of-combination of elements.