

INTERROGATIONS, SESSION 7, OCTOBER 29
ENVISIONING REAL UTOPIAS SEMINAR
RUPTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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In chapter 8, you emphasize the unfeasibility of a ruptural transformation to bring about socialism. Despite this practical unfeasibility, the concept still holds great appeal for many activist groups seeking to effect social change. In some ways, it holds appeal as a means almost as much as it serves to move such groups towards an end. For instance, for young people who feel powerless to challenge neoliberal expansion, armed social movements, gangs, etc are increasingly appealing in themselves. This vengeful drive may be distasteful, but I think it has to be reckoned with. Take Southern Mexico, for example, where increasing government brutality and popular disaffection with a nonviolent approach are leading increasing numbers of young people to join armed movements. I think we have to speak to the attraction and continuing presence of ruptural transformation as a driving idea for social activists. The idea of “smashing the state” can mobilize and energize people behind a collective project. If a society-wide ruptural transformation is unfeasible, how, also, do we capitalize on the conceptual power of ruptural transformation? **[Of course a lot of what is attractive is aggression as such rather than actually ruptural transformation. A good part of the motivation in using violence is not instrumental to some goal, but is expressive; the linkage of violence to transformative goals then has the character of a post hoc rationalization.]**

Second, I am concerned about your assumption that we are dealing with “developed capitalist countries with functioning liberal democratic institutions.” In most of the world, that is only partially – if at all – the case. Indeed, the places most ripe for ruptural transformations are not the developed capitalist countries but places where government institutions provide little if any support for ordinary people in the form of law, education, health, democratic access, etc. **[There are three distinct issues here: 1) under what conditions are attempts at ruptural transformation most likely to occur, 2) under what conditions are they most likely to succeed in generating a rupture, and 3) if a rupture occurs, under what conditions is it most likely to actually lead to a democratic egalitarian transformation. I agree that ruptural attempts are most likely in third world contexts, and probably that ruptural breaks are also most likely there. It is not at all clear, however, that under those conditions they are most likely to lead to democratic egalitarian outcomes. Part of the problem is precisely that the revolutionary-violence that accompanies ruptural strategies in those historical conditions may make democratic egalitarianism almost impossible.]**

Finally, though you mention it, you do not provide examples or in depth analysis of how ruptural transformation can still be expected on a small scale. For instance, in class, you mentioned the way the health care systems in Britain and Canada were both created in ruptural ways. Certainly, there must be some ruptures to enable us to break with old

systems, rather than mere interstitial transformations. At the end of the chapter, I would like to see you draw out more of the ways ruptural transformation can be seen on a small scale. You might also return to the claim you made at the beginning of the chapter, that understanding the logic of ruptural transformation and its limits helps clarify alternative strategies, explaining how and in what circumstances that might be the case. **[You are absolutely right here: institutional rather than systemic ruptures do seem an essential part of the statist-socialism pathway, and we know that this has happened successfully in many instances: old institutional structures are destroyed and new ones constructed in a temporarily quite condensed way. This probably does cause some transition troughs, but because of the limited scope of the transformation these may not have the unraveling character of larger scale transformations.]**

Ofer Sharone

I agree that a ruptural transformation is not a plausible strategy, but I am not sure whether the “material interests” argument is the most persuasive. First, even when broadly defined to include leisure and quality of work, it still seems a narrow conception of human motivation and nature, and one that is in tension with the implicit conception in earlier chapters. Chapter 1 implicitly suggests that we are flourishing-seeking beings and chapter 2 outlines all the ways in which capitalism undermines flourishing. So in Chapter 8 why not assume that people will support a rupture with capitalism if they believe it will enhance their capacities to flourish? Beyond broadly defined material interests this would also include, for example, the benefits of living in vibrant communities, and engaging in participatory democratic structures among others. **[I agree that these are pivotal motivations and certainly it is hard to imagine any robust transformation beyond capitalism through whatever means as not being animated by these motivations as well. Still, the question is how durable would such motivations be over how long a period of time in the face of economic decline and disruption, since this decline and disruption would also have an impact on lots of other values people really care about. This is especially problematic, I think, given the uncertainty that would accompany the disruption.]** But even beyond individual-level flourishing, why should we assume that personal interests however defined trump moral concerns? Don’t millions of working class Republicans consistently vote against their material interests and are motivated by moral commitments? Finally, even if we assume that “material interests” are primary, what’s beneath the assumption that people will react to the short-run material conditions (the “trough”) as opposed to perceived long-run benefits? People are often willing to withstand all kinds of hardships if they believe it is in the furtherance of a worthy future goal. This is the core of the “pioneering” spirit. Even if the golden age will not be reached in time for the pioneers themselves to enjoy, making it happen for their children or grandchildren can be a very powerful motivation. The pioneering spirit will not take hold, as you suggest, but not because people are driven by their short-run material interests. I think there is a better argument that is hard to articulate about how citizens of a capitalist society, without significant interstitial forms of social-economic organizations, would have no basis upon which to feel confident that they will be more likely to ultimately flourish under

Socialism. Without some visible and viable alternative in the making, it is hard to imagine where the necessary pioneering spirit would come from. This is a slightly different argument than a material interest calculation. It is that as long as people have no direct and positive experiences with institutional alternatives to capitalism any appeal of socialism would be abstract and therefore more vulnerable to weaken under difficult, even if short term, economic hardships. **[These are all valid responses – the whole issue, then, hinges on how strong and robust these moral concerns are and how confident people are that they will be realized through staying the course on the ruptural strategy. Since socialism is about reorganizing power relations over economic activities, and since at least some of the desirable consequences of socialism depend upon it working pretty well, a sharp economic decline would undermine confidence in the outcome. It would also, I think, undercut some of the non-trough effects of a rupture. Take participatory democracy: to the extent that economic systems are disrupted and productivity declines, strains on participatory institutions would go up as well.]**

Dimitri Seals

This chapter is in some ways a perfect example of the careful use and testing of theories of the future. How do progressive movements adjudicate between long-term strategies – for instance, how do they decide to devote resources to the pursuit of ruptural, interstitial, or symbiotic strategies of change? This chapter seems to suggest an answer: they should wrestle with tough questions about the future – about whether capitalism will improve material welfare over time and about upcoming shifts in popular support for socialist projects – complicated questions that require thinking through changes in the organization and practices of capitalist firms, through immigration flows, demographic trends, and much more. If the book uses future-thinking to analyze and critique the three brands of socialist transformation, why is there such a sustained dismissal of **future-thinking** in chapter 7? **[I think I do not have any objection to future thinking in a general way. The problem is with fairly strong efforts at a theory of the future, a theory which really predicts the dynamic trajectories. The transition trough argument is a prediction of an “if...then” variety: if a rupture occurs, then there are several plausible trajectories in the near future after this under democratic capitalist conditions. Those predictions also depend upon a very thin counterfactual of the trajectory under capitalism. Basically the “thinking” lays out the spectrum of possibilities under alternative assumptions. I think that sort of thing is possible. And of course, a stronger theory that would actually demonstrate the likely trajectory into the future. My counterfactual capitalist trajectories are simple extrapolations, not strongly driven by a dynamic theory.]** Certainly, grand theories of the future are dangerous to the extent that they encourage their true believers to lazily wait for their predictions; but these theories have already fallen out of favor. Shouldn't the task be to construct – and to help others construct – flexible theories of the future (including branching hypothetical models like the ones in this chapter – “if X happens, then we do A, but if Y happens...”) rather than to proscribe them altogether? **[I agree with the desirability of theories of the form if X happens, then we should do A, but if Y**

happens we should do B, etc., but these are not really theories of the future; they are simply strategic theories of the conditions under which different strategies are likely to work.]

If material interests include “leisure as well as consumption, quality of work as well as earnings,” do they also include quality-of-life issues like crime and safety, education, public works, etc.? If so, the argument about the transition trough becomes more complicated; proving that “supplier chains, systems of distribution, credit markets, pricing systems and many other pivotal elements of economic integration would be deeply disrupted” is only half the battle. A suddenly-socialist national government could potentially make up for economic disruption by significantly increasing investment in public services, as many have tried to do – in fact, this is probably their best political strategy. If material interests do *not* include quality of life, it seems like a crucial set of variables are left out of this chapter’s model. **[You are right that if a ruptural socialist government could make up with public investments for the disruption in the market economy so that there was a net improvement of the experienced quality of life, then the transition trough in private economic consumption would not have the bite it has. Basically this is arguing that the statist-socialist path can have such a direct and immediate positive impact on quality of life that it neutralizes the problems in the rest of the economic system. This stance has some plausibility I think in those economies in which public goods are so completely dreadful that small improvements make a big difference. This was the case in Cuba for example (although it was also significant that the economic structure was pretty simple so that the disruption was limited. And further, of course, the transition was not under democratic conditions.) The problem is that a lot of the production of public goods and investment in public goods would itself be dependent upon the continuing productivity in the market economy, so it might be hard to successfully invest a lot in the public sector in the face of market collapse.]**

Jorge Sola

First of all, I appreciate your effort to think the different paths of social transformation (in your terms: ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic ones). The old-school “reform or revolution” dilemma has still certain weight in the radical political culture, while the radical political practice has actually little to do with such exclusive dilemma. We are not forced to choose one of these in a definitive and absolute way, but rather we can combine different strategies depending on the changing circumstances (times, countries, forces, domains, etc.). Therefore, in order to do so, it is proper to make the predicable working, the pros and cons of each path of transformation clearer.

However, there are some disappointing or unsatisfactory points for me in this chapter.

1- It may be a very personal perception, but I don’t like the first lines of the chapter, where it seems that you must apologize to the reader for writing on revolution. I am not

sure whether it is necessary, or even proper, or not. **[This may just reflect the ideological climate in the US where there is so little credibility to the whole idea of revolutionary breaks.]**

2- With regard to the footnote 2, I absolutely agree: “this does not imply that coercion would not be part of a ruptural strategy”. Furthermore, coercion is also a part of whatever symbiotic strategy and it would be also a part of the normally working of the State under what you call socialism.

3- In responding the possible rejoinders, you turn to historical evidence, but you don’t refer to any historical revolutionary process. Indeed, it seems that there have ever been no revolutionary attempts under the three assumptions you raise at the beginning. The one case could be Chile in the 70’s, but it was not the Transition Trough but a coup d’état supported by USA which put an end to the so-called “Chilean Way to Socialism”. It would be interesting to analyze how the Chilean social movements struggled against the politically-induced trough in this time, through exactly what you call social empowerment.

Other interesting case to analyze could be the current Chavez’s government in Venezuela. I don’t know whether is correct to term this process as revolutionary, but what seems clear is that it is benefiting the working class’ material interest in the short term. **[Of course Venezuela has access to a very particular aspect of the market economy that has not been disrupted by its domestic changes: the world oil market. It is certainly the case that if a revolutionary government had access to virtually unlimited cash from a natural resource to purchase things on the global market, then the transition trough could be avoided.]**

4- However, you note twice that your analysis is limited to “developed capitalist countries”. Is not this restriction quite restrictive and even a bit western-centric? **[It is certainly restrictive. I agree that it would be good to lay out these kinds of scenarios under alternative conditions. The transition trough problem is, of course, a problem everywhere, but it is especially acute because of the problem of complexity in developed capitalist contexts. I don’t think the issue is so much a Western-centric one, however: these are problems that would emerge wherever the curves had the shapes posited in the chapter.]**

5- It seems to me that you underestimate the historical importance of revolution as a mobilizing myth. The idea of revolution changed the many people’s perception of what was possible and encouraged them to struggle for another possible world much time before this slogan were in fashion. Of course, I know that this myth became dangerous, useless or simply boring sometimes. That is why I appreciate you non-dogmatic approach. But after reading the chapter I think this approach is partial and no very convincing, perhaps this topic requires more than 7 pages.

Roi Livne

A chapter about ruptural transformation in a book discussing social and economical utopias is absolutely necessary. I agree with this chapter's bottom line that "large-scale ruptural strategies for constructing a democratic egalitarian socialism seem implausible in the world in which we currently live." However, I have some reservations about the way in which this bottom line is reached.

1. It is worthwhile to discuss ruptural strategies just as it is worthwhile to discuss any other strategy to achieve a political change. The question, however, is where and how to do that. A discussion of hypothetical implausible ruptural strategies that will probably not lead to any significant political change, may end up having real unexpected consequences, such as a conservative backlash which will qualify other, more realist, socialist endeavors.

I therefore disagree with some of the arguments Erik raises in support of such discussion. The benefit from ruptural changes' appeal to the younger generation may be minor comparing to the damage that its public discussion might cause. Besides, I am doubtful if the goals set by ruptural strategies are similar to the goals that more realistic strategies mark and am therefore not that convinced by the second argument either. **[The question of whether or not the goals of ruptural strategies are the same as the goals connected to other strategies is an interesting one. This could mean two things: the goals of the actors who support ruptural strategies are different from those who support other strategies, or goals that could actually be served by these strategies are different. I am inclined to agree with you on the second interpretation: I think ruptural strategies will generally result in different kinds of new institutions than will interstitial and symbiotic strategies, but I am not so such about the first interpretation.]** .

2. The chapter's second part aims to prove analytically that ruptural strategies are bound to fail. **[Not quite: bound to fail under the conditions specified in the model – under conditions of democratic government, economic complexity, and widespread entrenched market relations.]** Generally, I find explanations which rely on empirical evidence much more compelling than analytical models; social reality is always more complicated than what models describe and there are hundreds of historical examples of societies that chose not to support ruptural changes. I think it'll be useful to combine some empirical evidence in the analytical discussion.

As far as I understand, the models that Erik presents assume individual and economically rational social actors. However, voting habits, as we all know, are by far more complicated. First, people vote as members of social groups and not as individuals. **[I think this is not quite precise: people individually cast votes and as they do so their choices are shaped by group membership as well as other more idiographic factors. However, since they are in multiple groups, even the group-membership dimension of the vote-shaping process can pull people in different ways. Etc.]** Second, as Erik mentions in page seven, values affect people's voting no less than economical interests. In some countries social

and economic policies are secondary issues in the elections: people vote according to personal affiliation, identities, beliefs and ideology. All these aspects cannot be reduced to economic interests. Under these conditions, socialist movements can gain much power even when their economic policy is less lucrative for many people. **[This is true, and of fundamental importance. Offe and Przeworski both emphasize this: socialists win elections only insofar as they are at least partially able to transform people's interests from narrowly economic interests to broader social interests. But I still think that a socialist party would face considerable difficulties in sustaining its electoral support over time in the face of a prolonged transition trough, since this would not only impact on individual material interests in the narrow sense but in the capacity of a socialist party to advance social goals as well. If people really had confidence in the future trajectory, then the transition could perhaps still be weathered, but given uncertainty, the theoretical complexity of the claims of the bright future of socialism, and the contingency of the conditions which shape the length and depth of the trough, I am not sure that sufficient number of people would remain committed to this path. And remember: this is all under the optimistic assumption that all the socialist government has to contend with is a transition trough triggered by disinvestment and disruption, not by a capital strike or civil war.]**
