

INTERROGATIONS, SESSION 8, OCTOBER 31
ENVISIONING REAL UTOPIAS SEMINAR
INTERSTITIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Jen Seminatore

First, a point of clarification: Is the primary distinction you draw between interstitial activities and strategies that the latter are attempting to intentionally alter the dominant system? **[Yes: the term “strategy” is being used to describe actions that have a transformative goal, whereas activities as such may just be adaptive. Of course one could also say that adaption to conditions is a “strategy” that people adopt to cope with economic problems, make a living, live their lives. In that sense any intentional action is a strategy for something. I am using the term “strategy” in a more restrictive sense here.]**

Second, you discuss several strategies for interstitial strategies to open up spaces in capitalism. I realize that interstitial activities are defined by their extra-state nature, but is it possible to have interstitial strategies that open up spaces for radical transformation of the state itself? **[That is a very interesting issue. I think one would have to say yes, although this may blur the contrast between interstitial and symbiotic strategies (but blurring can be a good thing....). The idea of interstitiality is that in any system – and the state is both part of “the” system, and is itself “a” system – there are spaces where activities are possible that are not governed by the dominant power relations and logics of the system. There are interstices within families, within organizations, within economies, within societies, and within states. When social workers employed by the state engage in practices that transform a welfare office and increase collaboration with clients, this could be described as an interstitial activity within the state. When they do this as part of a strategy of expanding the democratic spaces within the state, then this would be an interstitial strategy. I suppose we could pursue this even more systematically by thinking about the ways one unit or agency or level in the state might autonomously engage in building up capacities and forms of action counter to the dominant forms of bureaucracy and domination within the state. These could be interstitial strategies in the sense I have used the term.**

How promising would this sort of thing be as part of a broader strategy of transformation? I guess it seems like the state is likely to regulate its internal practices with more vigilance than it regulates the society at large and thus deeply contrary interstitial institution building is less likely to develop within the state than within civil society and within the economy. But this is an empirical question – we should think of examples.

Jorge Sola

1. You relate what you call “revolutionary anarchist” strategic vision to the idea of “war of position” proposed by Antonio Gramsci. I agree and think it is very proper to consider Anarchism as one of the multiple traditions of Socialism. Furthermore, I wonder if it was or not the strategy of the biggest Marxist party that has ever existed in Western world: the German SPD before I World War. Even if one part of its strategy was a symbiotic one, the most important was the interstitial strategy: they accomplished a complex and strong social fabric of newspapers, schools, clubs, libraries, social economy, and so on in the gaps and spaces within a capitalist society. **[That is very interesting – I kind of knew this, but I had not connected these kinds of social-infrastructure work of socialist parties with interstitial strategies directed at transforming capitalism through social empowerment. But of course, these activities do have this character.]**

Apart from its historical interest, we can take this case to check some potential consequences that such strategy could provoke. On the one hand, the institutionalization of interstitial strategies can end up consolidating bureaucratic structures. The SPD case is quite clear; in fact the famous book of Robert Michels, where he raised the idea of the “oligarchic iron law”, was about this party. **[But I wonder to what extent the interstitial strategies themselves actually added to the bureaucratic oligarchical tendencies of the SPD. They could have been a break on such tendencies, which would have been even stronger if the party had been purely a political machine.]** On the other hand, one run the risk of forget the political goals and end up concerning just about the very means. It happened partially in SPD, where apart from the revolutionary rhetoric, the idea of a ruptural change (be either a good or a bad idea) was given up. The evolution of some cooperatives, as Mondragón, raises similar problems.

2. I haven’t understood clearly your opinion on “revolutionary anarchist” strategy. Do you think it is as non plausible as the ruptural transformation you discussed on the previous chapter? To me, we can imagine that interstitial strategies are able to change radically the scenario for a potential ruptural transformation. This possible and more favourable scenario, therefore, drives us to have a less assertive and more open idea of the future plausibility of the ruptural transformation. **[I agree – I think the version that seems implausible is the second model where interstitial strategies by themselves erode dominant relations to the point of a tipping point metamorphosis.]**

3. There are political practices which are not ruptural (in the sense you use the concept), but neither seems interstitial (again, as you define it), insofar as they are not exactly allowed: the illegal occupation of houses or lands, the civil disobedience against some laws, the wild strikes in factories, etc. While it is true they don’t challenge capitalism as a whole, they challenge the property rights or the State authority, even if it happens just in a small scale and a concrete terrain. How should we understand these practices and strategies? **[Some of these are more like tactics that could be in the service of any one of the three strategies I outline. Land invasions, for example, can be the tactic to acquire land for interstitial institution building. Civil Disobedience can be the tactic to provoke symbiotic breakthroughs – as in the civil rights movement.]**

Kate Maich

I was quite interested in several of the possibilities for change that Chapter 9 offers, and particularly within the distinction drawn between two types of interstitial transformations. EOW notes, “At various times and places interstitial strategies of workers within capitalist firms and labor markets have gone beyond simple bargaining over wages and other aspects of the labor contract, and have attempted to encroach on more fundamental aspects of capitalist control over production. Factory councils, works councils and other forms of direct worker involvement in the decision-making structure of firms have, from time to time, gained significant influence over working conditions, technology, the organization of work, health and safety regulation, and so on,” (5-6). While no real challenges to capitalists’ dis/investment schemes are posed and there are clear limitations placed upon these types of interstitial strategies within firms, due to the “the fundamentally capitalist character of the organization of production,” EOW argues that they can still function as meaningful shifts within power relations of those firms. However, are they really so much less powerful, or positioned with less of a radical challenge to capitalism, than the interstitial rivals? I suppose that I feel uncomfortable about the fair trade movement being labeled more transformative here than unions, or social movement unionism, in a general sense. I would argue that FT is more aligned with EOW’s earlier mention of organic grocery cooperatives in that FT also caters to an upper-middle class consumer population who can ‘feel good about themselves’ through their progressive ideals and justice-minded consumption practices; while I admire its attempt to problematize the supply chain and support its efforts to pay farmers more money, I worry that FT doesn’t “pose a threat to the system” either. Is it really creating a rival to dominant, powerful organizations? How are these distinctions between these two types of interstitial activities really being created, and how can the strategies paired with other forms of organizing truly ‘pave the route to rupture’? **[I agree with you that interstitial strategies within capitalist organizations need not have less transformative potential than interstitial strategies in the spaces outside of organizations. So, if I expressed more skepticism about this and saw these as inherently less transformative, then I should change the text. Each of these, I think face limits, but there is no inherent reason for one of these limits to be more severe than the other. I doubt if it is possible to say anything very interesting in an abstract, decontextualized way, about the relative potential of different sites of interstitial strategy. The effects will be highly contingent on context.]**

Roi Livne

Interstitial strategy is probably the most prevalent form of action in contemporary social activism. The importance of this chapter is that it manages to connect micro and local socialist endeavors to a broader and more comprehensive vision of social change. The two tracks of change Erik mentions manage to show how local activism can contribute to bigger transformations.

I found two issues in this chapter particularly interesting:

1. It seems to me that there's a contrast between the specific case studies mentioned in this chapter – fair trade organizations, producer cooperatives, etc. – and the more generalized, schematic discussion that previous chapters develop on the state. If I remember well, Zach raised this issue in his interrogation on Wednesday, saying that state interventionist solutions should not be abandoned altogether. States vary across time and space; in certain circumstances they may support such organizations (the kibbutz is a good example for that), in others they may weaken and suppress them. The chapter's last two paragraphs thus seem relevant to our previous discussions. Activism within the boundaries of state-order can be fruitful not only because there are 'gaps' in state structures, but also because the state itself can, at times, create gaps and fractions in capitalist order. **[I think this idea of the state creating gaps is extremely interesting. One additional thought in this respect is to distinguish between the local state and the nation state, since gap-fostering can occur at both scales. And of course there is also the issue of whether states can foster gaps in the global spaces of capitalism, not just the domestic ones.]**
2. I have some reservations about your decision to include the kibbutz in the same category with contemporary radical social organizations. First we must keep in mind that the kibbutz – as I've already mentioned – was supported by government – or quasi-government organizations from its early beginning. It has never been a subversive or alternative social arrangement, but rather a mainstream exclusionary institution. Second, although the official historical narrative is that kibbutzim started employing non-members in the 1980s, some of them actually started relying on external work as early as the 1950s, after the big Jewish immigration from the Middle East and north Africa. Kibbutzim have never accepted non-jews as members and accepted Middle-Eastern and African Jews in numbers that were by far lower than those of European and American Jews.

The kibbutz hasn't really tried to bring about a rupture in the Israeli society. It was – and still is – a status group, which struggles to maintain its own privileged position in the Israeli/Palestinian society. In my opinion, there is no way in which the development of the kibbutz can be considered as an interstitial strategy. **[But it is my understanding that there were elements in the kibbutz movement that saw it as a template for broader social transformation and hoped that Israeli society could eventually be kibbutzied, so to speak. This need not imply that it was seen as a way of bringing about a rupture in "Israeli society", but rather as the core of a metamorphosis of the socioeconomic institutions from capitalism to some form of cooperative/collectivist**

organization. You are right, of course, that most kibbutzim were directly state sponsored/supported after Independence, so they were not quite so interstitial as other kinds of movements: they were more or less integrated into the “system” as one of the institutional elements of socioeconomic organization. I suppose that this is somewhat similar to the way that co-ops get legal supports and various kinds of rules that integrate them into the market economy as well elsewhere in the world. This is an interesting issue to think about: does an interstitial strategy cease to be so when the institutions that are built through such strategies become integrated or absorbed into “the system”? Or does this mean that the interstitial strategy has partially succeeded in its transformative goals, modifying the power configurations of the system itself?
