

INTERROGATIONS, SESSION 9, NOVEMBER 2
ENVISIONING REAL UTOPIAS SEMINAR
SYMBIOTIC TRANSFORMATIONS

Abigail Andrews

My central concern with chapter 10 is that by embracing the strategy of “solving a problem for capitalists,” symbiotic transformation buys into pre-set capitalist rules and limits. Regarding class compromise as mutually beneficial - which it certainly may be in some cases - disregards the way power relations constrain the options for mutually beneficial solutions. The power holders ultimately determine where they are willing to compromise and not, and typically they are only willing to compromise in areas of less import to their operation and persistence. What about in the places and times in which capitalists are not and will not become willing to compromise? You mention towards the end of the chapter that in these arenas, social movements must emerge to wage struggles over power, saying, "Closing off the disempowered alternative is a question of struggles over power, not just enlightenment" (15). Doesn't the assertion that more ruptural struggles will be needed undermine the claims you make about the power of symbiotic transformation? How do we reconcile the need for combative struggles with the argument that it is strategically unwise to promote tactics that directly threaten capitalists due to capital flight, etc? In the end, isn't a symbiotic strategy always limited and even destined to remain within the confines of those changes amenable to the capitalist power holders? Is symbiotic transformation a stepping stone to a different kind of transformation (perhaps preparing the conditions for broader ruptures, as we discussed Monday)? Must it be practiced simultaneously with the other forms of transformation? What kinds of social democracy can it lead to on its own? I also am really looking forward to hearing your further comments (as you suggested in class) on how the nexus of these three forms of transformation provides the most hopeful strategy. I'd like to see that laid out more explicitly and extensively in the text as well. **[These are all excellent and poignant issues. Your arguments point to the inherent problem with symbiotic strategies – but I would add it is only an “inherent problem”, not inherently a “fatal flaw.” The reverse-J curve structure of positive class compromise is meant to show that while capitalists prefer the low empowerment option, they can tolerate the high empowerment possibility – and this is what makes possible the “struggle to close off the low road” option: there are possibilities of winning victories in power struggles which block the “low road” – block in the sense of making it too costly. The point about seeking symbiotic reforms is that once achieved they can constitute a more stable equilibrium than reforms which simply impose costs and constraints on capital without there being any compensating positive effects. What I call “negative class compromises” will be more unstable and tend to unravel over time. But your worries are valid – and in part that is why hegemonic structures and hegemonic.]**

Ofer Sharone

I know it is merely an example of a larger point about symbiotic possibilities, but I am trying to get a better understanding of the paradoxical result that under some conditions it makes sense for unions to restrain wages. The stated condition is when wages would get pushed up faster than the rate of productivity "thus stimulating inflation." I understand that inflation would rise if wage increases were passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices, and that this could hurt the economy. But why would a union accept that this is the only way for wage increases to be paid for and not, by contrast, through an internal redistribution of wages from over-paid executives to under-paid hourly workers (or from shareholder dividends to workers)? If internal re-distributions occur the firm is paying out the same total amount in wages and dividends so presumably no inflation results. Are there conditions where internal redistributions are not feasible and raising prices is inevitable? Or is my crude economic analysis missing some other key factor(s)?

[In the Social Democratic positive class compromise cases the inequality within firms is relatively small – there isn't that much redistribution that would be possible anyway within firms. Remember that even today in European Firms the ratio of top executives to ordinary workers salaries is typically in the range of 20:1 rather than 400:1 as in the US, and in the past it was more like 8:1 or maybe even less. But more to the point, whatever distributional settlement is made in terms of within firm wage differentials there is still the problem of the rate of growth of wages over time and their relationship to productivity and robust conditions for capital accumulation. Workers value long run stability and security, and it is a good trade-off for them to restrain wages if they get that as the quid-pro-quo.]

Zachary Levinson

In the sphere of exchange, Erik argues, "individual capitalists need to be prevented from defecting from the wage restraint agreement...and individual workers (and unions) need to be prevented from defecting from the agreement by trying to maximize wages" (5). What regulative entity would fulfill this need? I assume you are referring to the need for state intervention in markets here, hence your apparent aversion to an anarchist model. How would such a regulative mechanism work without state planning? I am by no means suggesting here that regulation is equivalent to comprehensive planning, but I'm wondering what sort of regulations would suppress capitalist/worker maximization of individual interest and who would ultimately control the enactment of such regulations?

[This regulation typically occurs through peak bargaining of Union Federations and Employers Federations – the so called tri-partite corporatism of centralized union system. The state is involved, but it does not issue regulations so much as mediates the bargaining and enforcing various kinds of rules of the game that stabilize the process.]

In the sphere of production, you rightly point out that short-term economic loss and long-

term authority and status loss would likely inhibit capitalists from considering cooperative advantages. If capitalists would presumably be content to limit the associative power of laborers, i.e. maintain the status quo, what sorts of catalysts might drive capitalists past this short-term trough? More importantly, how to convince them of the mutual benefits of cooperative institutions? Or is this not a rational choice issue altogether? If not, what kind of institutional mechanisms might serve to catalyze capitalist cooperation? **[Capitalists are typically “convinced” of this because of the power of labor to disrupt – these favorable equilibria are the result of struggles and victories, not mainly enlightenment.]**

I'm unclear from this chapter—especially considering Figure 10.9—as to whether you think institutional barriers can be dismantled. You posit that "episodically opportunities arise for serious challenges to those institutionally-imposed limits of possibilities" (15). Only then, you seem to argue, can "confrontations and mobilizations" effect institutional reorganization (rupture lite?). And yet in a previous class—correct me if I'm wrong—you seemed to denigrate the idea that social conditions may "ripen" in the future, allowing for ruptural transformation. Why is the case different when considering symbiotic transformation? Why would you consider systemic barriers immutable, but institutional barriers variable over time? What is the role of revolutionary—symbiotic revolutionary, that is—praxis in accelerating institutional change? **[This is a nice point – why are some kinds of limits more challengable than others? Can we give a rigorous specification of the distinction between what might be called limits that define specific “rules of the game” and limits that determine “what game is being played”? In some contexts this can be identified, for example, to the distinction between changing constitutions and changing laws, but since some of the elements of constitutions are actually more like laws, and some laws really do establish fairly fundamental features of the system-logic this contrast will not always work.]**
