Preface

The Real Utopias Project

Erik Olin Wright

'Real Utopias' seems like a contradiction in terms. Utopias are fantasies, morally inspired designs for social life unconstrained by realistic considerations of human psychology and social feasibility. Realists eschew such fantasies. What is needed are hard-nosed proposals for pragmatically improving our institutions. Instead of indulging in utopian dreams we must accommodate to practical realities.

The Real Utopias Project embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is founded on the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. Self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful forces in history, and while it may be Polyannaish to say 'Where there is a will there is a way', it is certainly true that without 'will' many 'ways' become impossible. Nurturing clear-sighted understandings of what it would take to create social institutions free of oppression is part of creating a political will for radical social changes to reduce oppression. A vital belief in a utopian ideal may be necessary to motivate people to leave on the journey from the status quo in the first place, even though the most likely destination may fall short of the utopian ideal. Yet, vague utopian fantasies may lead us astray, encouraging us to embark on trips that have no real destinations at all, or worse still, that lead us toward an unforeseen abyss. Along with 'where there is a will there is a way', the human struggle for emancipation confronts 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions'. What we need, then, are 'real utopias': utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions which can inform our practical tasks of muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change. These are the goals of the Real Utopias Project.

The idea that social institutions can be rationally transformed in

ways that enhance human well-being and happiness has a long and controversial history. On the one hand, radicals of diverse stripes have argued that social arrangements inherited from the past are not immutable facts of nature, but transformable human creations. Social institutions can be designed in ways that eliminate forms of oppression that thwart human aspirations for fulfilling and meaningful lives. The central task of emancipatory politics is to create such institutions. On the other hand, conservatives have generally argued that grand designs for social reconstruction are nearly always disasters. While contemporary social institutions may be far from perfect, they are generally serviceable. At least, it is argued, they provide the minimal conditions for social order and stable interactions. These institutions have evolved through a process of slow, incremental modification as people adapt social rules and practices to changing circumstances. The process is driven by trial and error much more than by conscious design, and by and large those institutions that have endured have done so because they have enduring virtues. This does not preclude institutional change, even deliberate institutional change, but it means that such change should be piecemeal, not a wholesale rupture with existing arrangements.

At the heart of these various perspectives is a disagreement about the relationship between the intended and unintended consequences of deliberate efforts at social change. The conservative critique of radical projects is not mainly that the emancipatory goals of radicals are morally indefensible – although some conservatives criticize the underlying values of such projects as well – but that the uncontrollable, and usually negative, unintended consequences of these efforts at massive social change inevitably swamp the intended consequences. Radicals and revolutionaries suffer from what Frederick Hayek termed the 'fatal conceit' – the belief that through rational calculation and political will, society can be designed in ways that will significantly improve the human condition. Incremental tinkering may not be inspiring, but it is the best we can do.

Of course, one can point out that many reforms favored by conservatives also have massive, destructive, unintended consequences. The havoc created in many poor countries by World Bank structural adjustment programs is such an example. And furthermore, under certain circumstances, conservatives themselves argue for radical, society-wide projects of institutional design, as in the proposals for 'shock therapy' as a way of transforming command economies into free-market capitalism. Nevertheless, there is a certain apparent plausibility to the general claim made by conservatives that the bigger

the scale and scope of conscious projects of social change, the less likely it is that we shall be able to predict ahead of time all the ramifications of those changes.

Radicals on the Left have generally rejected this pessimistic vision of human possibility. Particularly in the Marxist tradition, radical intellectuals have insisted that wholesale redesign of social institutions is within our grasp. This does not mean, as Marx emphasized, that detailed institutional 'blueprints' can be devised in advance of the opportunity to create an alternative. What can be worked out are the core organizing principles of alternatives to existing institutions, the principles that would guide the pragmatic trial-and-error task of institution-building. Of course, there will be unintended consequences of various sorts, but these can be dealt with as they arrive, 'after the revolution.' The crucial point is that unintended consequences need not pose a fatal threat to the emancipatory projects themselves.

Regardless of which of these stances seems more plausible, the *belief* in the possibility of radical alternatives to existing institutions has played an important role in contemporary political life. A good argument can be made that the political space for social democratic reforms was, at least in part, opened up because more radical ruptures with capitalism were seen as possible, and that possibility in turn depended crucially on many people believing that radical ruptures were workable. The belief in the viability of revolutionary socialism, especially when backed by the grand historical experiments in the USSR and elsewhere, enhanced the viability of reformist social democracy as a form of class compromise. The political conditions for progressive tinkering with social arrangements, therefore, may depend in significant ways on the presence of more radical visions of possible transformations. This does not mean, of course, that false beliefs are to be supported simply because they are thought to have desirable consequences, but it does suggest that it is important to seek firm foundations for plausible visions of radical alternatives.

We now live in a world in which these radical visions are mocked rather than taken seriously. Along with the postmodernist rejection of 'grand narratives', there is an ideological rejection of grand designs, even by those still on the left of the political spectrum. This need not mean an abandonment of deeply egalitarian emancipatory values, but it does reflect a cynicism about the human capacity to realize those values on a substantial scale. This cynicism, in turn, weakens progressive political forces in general.

The Real Utopias Project is an attempt at countering this cynicism by sustaining and deepening serious discussion of radical alternatives

to existing institutions. The objective is to focus on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of basic social institutions rather than on either general, abstract formulations of grand designs, or on small reforms of existing practices. This is a tricky kind of discussion to pursue rigorously. It is much easier to talk about concrete ways of tinkering with existing arrangements than it is to formulate plausible radical reconstructions. Marx was right that detailed blueprints of alternative designs are often futile exercises in fantasy. What we want to achieve is a clear elaboration of the *institutional principles* that inform radical alternatives to the existing world. This falls between a general discussion of the moral values that motivate the enterprise and the fine-grained details of institutional characteristics.

In practical terms, the Real Utopias Project is built around a series of workshop conferences sponsored by the A. E. Havens Center for the Study of Social Structure and Social Change at the University of Wisconsin. The general format of these conferences consists of selecting a provocative manuscript which lays out the basic outlines of a radical institutional proposal and then inviting fifteen to twenty scholars to write essays which in one way or another address this paper. These essays have ranged from short, point-by-point critiques of specific arguments to longer papers developing one or more of the themes of the focal manuscript. The papers are then circulated to all participants well in advance of the conference so that the discussions of each paper are informed by the arguments raised by the entire group. After the workshop, participants have an opportunity to revise their papers before they are published as a collection in the Real Utopias Project series. All royalties from the Real Utopias Project books go into a fund to support future conferences and books. As of 1994, three conferences have been organized on this format:

1. *Basic Income Grants* (1991), organized around a manuscript by Philippe van Parijs. This conference explored the proposal that all income transfer programs of the welfare state be replaced by a simple, universal, unconditional income grant system. The papers from this conference were not published as a collection, although the themes are presented in a volume edited by van Parijs under the title *Arguing for Basic Income*, Verso, London 1993.

2. *Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance* (1992), organized around a manuscript by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers. The central issue of discussion was the potential for enhancing both the effectiveness and the democracy of democratic capitalism by institutionalizing a pervasive governance role for nonstate, quasi-voluntary

secondary associations. Some of the papers from this conference were published in a special issue of *Politics & Society* (December 1992). The entire set of papers appears as the first volume of Verso's Real Utopias Project series.

3. *Rethinking Socialism* (1994), organized around John Roemer's book, *A Future for Socialism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1994. This conference explored Roemer's proposal to create a form of market socialism in which there were two kinds of money – dollars for the purchase of commodities and coupons for the purchase of shares in firms. The core of the proposal is that (a) these coupons initially are equally distributed to all adults and then used to buy shares, which are subsequently traded on a coupon-share market; (b) coupons cannot be sold for dollars, so that dollar wealth cannot be converted into coupon wealth, and coupon wealth cannot be directly converted into dollar wealth; and (c) share ownership, denominated in coupon values, gives people property rights in the dollar profits of firms in the form of dividends. A subset of the papers appears in *Politics & Society* (December 1994), and the entire set as the second volume of Verso's Real Utopias Project series.

The specific plans for future conferences and volumes in the Real Utopias Project will depend in significant ways on the availability of the critical, focal manuscripts on specific topics. Currently we would like to organize future conferences on the following general themes:

1. *Efficient Redistribution in Advanced Capitalism*. This conference will be based on an essay written by Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis, which argues that in order to revitalize an economic strategy on the Left, the Left needs to focus on the redistribution of a wide variety of assets rather than on state provision of services and redistribution of income. Such asset-based redistribution, they argue, can form the core of a politics of decentralized, enhanced democratic reforms. Such an approach requires dropping the traditional left-wing aversion to using the market and institutions of private property in the service of democracy.

2. *Reconstructing Gender and the Family*. Feminist theoretical discussions generally have not systematically engaged the problem of institutional design for realizing emancipatory values. At this conference we hope to explore the range of institutional proposals that have been formulated by different traditions of feminism and subject them to the same kind of scrutiny accorded proposals for feasible socialism.

3. *Institutions for a Sustainable Environment.* Radical environmental discussions typically focus on how people should behave and on what norms should govern human engagement with the environment, but not on the institutional designs which would encourage such behavior or sustain such norms. However, the environmental movement, just as much as the movement for radical democracy and economic equality, needs an understanding of how institutions would have to be organized in order to accomplish a sustainable environment.

4. *Redesigning the Welfare State.* This conference would return to the issues explored in the earlier conference on basic income, but expand its institutional scope by including discussion of other issues in a reconstructed, progressive welfare state.

5. *Institutions for Global Equality.* This conference would examine the kinds of international trade and investment institutions that could function practically to reduce global inequality. This would be a kind of radical design alternative to such arrangements as GATT and NAFTA.

6. *Reconstructing Universalism in a World of Fragmented Identities.* Classical Marxism, following themes of the Enlightenment, argued that the working class embodied the universal interests of humanity. Ultimately, then, the identity of the working class was not just another particularism, but the core of a universal, human identity. Postmodernists argue that identities are irredeemably fragmented and plural. There are no privileged agents of history, no privileged identities. All there is are particularisms, which are historically articulated in specific ways. We would like to hold a conference that poses the problem of the institutional conditions for renewing more universalistic identities, since some kind of universalism arguably is critical for egalitarian, emancipatory politics.

Introduction

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Few issues occupy a more central place on the political agenda around the world than democracy. In Latin America, military dictatorships have abandoned the direct levers of power in favor of more or less open, liberal democratic regimes. In South Africa, the anti-democratic apparatuses of apartheid have been replaced. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Communist regimes have collapsed, to be replaced with the conventional institutions of democratic representation. And while democratic breakthroughs still seem remote in some parts of the world – in China, in the Middle East, in much of Africa – it is clear that in most of these places pressures for democratic politics are likely to increase in years to come.

This upsurge in democratic impulses in those parts of the world in which democratic institutions have previously either been absent or crippled has not been matched by impulses for a revitalization of democratic forms in the developed, capitalist democracies. Throughout the West the past decade has witnessed an erosion of belief in the capacity of democratic institutions to intervene effectively in shaping social and economic life and help solve our most pressing problems. A common refrain is that government is part of the problem, not the solution. Rather than seeking to deepen the democratic character of politics, the thrust of much political energy in the developed industrial democracies in recent years has been to reduce the role of politics altogether. Deregulation, privatization, reduction of social services, curtailments of state spending – these have been the watchwords, rather than participation, greater responsiveness and more creative and effective forms of democratic state intervention.

In the context of these global political developments, rethinking a wide range of questions about democratic institutions is a matter of urgency. This is as important for the future of those countries embarking on the transition to democracy as it is for those countries with

established democratic institutions. In particular it is important to rethink the problem of the institutional forms through which democratic ideals are realized. As the tasks of the state become more complex and the size of polities larger, the institutional forms of liberal democracy developed in the nineteenth century seem increasingly ill-suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century. 'Democracy' as a way of organizing the state has come to be narrowly identified with territorially-based competitive elections of political leadership for legislative and executive office. Yet increasingly, this mechanism of political representation seems ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, participation, responsiveness to changing needs, and effective forms of state policies.

Perhaps this erosion of democratic vitality is an inevitable result of complexity and size. Perhaps the most we can hope for is to have some kind of limited popular constraint on the activities of government through regular, weakly competitive elections. Perhaps the era of the 'affirmative democratic state' – the state that plays a creative and active role in solving problems in response to popular demands – is at an end, and a retreat to privatism and political passivity is unavoidable. But perhaps the problem has more to do with the specific design of our political institutions than with the tasks they face as such.

This book revolves around a specific institutional proposal elaborated by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers for deepening and extending the democratic state. At its heart, the proposal involves invigorating secondary associations in ways which enable them to be, on the one hand, effective vehicles for the representation and formulation of the interests of citizens, and on the other, to be directly involved in the implementation and execution of state policies. Secondary associations include unions, works councils, neighborhood associations, parent-teacher organizations, environmental groups, women's associations, and so on. They are characterized by their organizational autonomy from the state on the one hand, and their role in politically representing and shaping the interests of individuals on the other. The Cohen-Rogers proposal, then, is to enhance democracy by transforming the ways in which such associations mediate between citizens and states. This poses a range of difficult issues: enhancing the political role for such associations risks undermining their autonomy from the state and turning them into tools of social control rather than vehicles of democratic participation; secondary associations often claim illegitimately a monopoly of interest representation for specific constituencies and any formal role in democratic governance risks

consolidating such monopolistic claims; the shift from a primary emphasis on territorial representation to functional representation risks strengthening tendencies toward particularistic identities, thus further fragmenting the polity. These and many other issues are discussed at length in the papers that follow.

The book begins with Cohen and Rogers's extended presentation of this model of democratic governance. This is followed by a number of wide-ranging commentaries by the participants in a workshop conference held at the Havens Center for the Study of Social Structure and Social Change at the University of Wisconsin in January 1992.