

Sociology 621
Lecture 4
January 30, 2017

Transformation

I. Why we need a theory of transformation

Marx famously declared in the 11th thesis on Feuerbach, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” There are a number of important things to think about in this famous slogan:

- The sentence only makes sense if it is seen as implying human agency in creating change. Emancipatory transformation is unlikely to occur simply as an accidental by-product of human action: it requires conscious strategy, and this means having some kind of theory of the consequences of one’s action for the transformation one wants. This is sometimes referred to as the problem of the relationship between theory and practice. As the social psychologist Kurt Lewin said, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.”
- The statement is at least in part directed at intellectuals, and producers of ideas and interpretations. The statement suggests that these kinds of people should not simply interpret, but try to change the world. But I don’t think this means that they should necessarily mainly do things like engage in protests, or man the barricades. I think the implication here is that the production of ideas should be directed towards the problem of change.
- This raises the key problem of how knowledge or ideas could contribute to changing the world. What can they do? We will discuss this more when we get to the section of the course on ideology. But here I would raise three main points:
 1. To have a coherent Strategy requires having a theory with at least these elements: (a) an account of the obstacles to transformation; (b) having an understanding of what is needed to overcome those obstacles; (c) having a serious theory of the consequences – including side-effects – of different kinds of actions.
 2. Learning from mistakes: there needs to be a systematic way of learning from past efforts. Learning the wrong lessons is a chronic problem. Vignette about the student from Grenada in the 1980s.
 3. These tasks are made difficult by the dual role of Marxist theory as the framework for a revolutionary ideology as well as for a science of social transformation. “**Charismatic wishful thinking**” is in a deep tension with the capacity of a theory to understand the obstacles to social transformation and learning from experience. However difficult it is, we need to try to develop a style of work that simultaneously sustains a healthy critical skepticism about what we think we know while not embracing ideological cynicism

II. What kind of theoretical framework do we need? Paradigms, frameworks, agendas

OK, we need a *theory of transformation*. But what kind of theory? How ambitious should it be? How comprehensive? Increasingly in social theory people have become suspicious of what is sometimes called “Grand Theory” or “Grand Narratives” – very ambitious efforts to develop comprehensive theories of society and history. There was a time in my own work when I framed the theoretical goals of my work on Marxism this way: to contribute to the reconstruction of a comprehensive social scientific paradigm. I have now pulled back from this. I now think that what is important is to develop a clear and systematic *theoretical framework* that establishes a pretty comprehensive set of concepts and a logically connected agenda as a way of organizing the specific theories we develop to solve problems. This kind of theory is a kind of **pragmatist compromise** between the ambitions of a paradigm and the fragmentation of a more purely empiricist research practice.

III. Elements of a theory of transformation

The agenda of a theory of transformation that I have proposed is built around four interlinked components:

- A theory of *social reproduction*: an account of the obstacles to emancipatory transformation.
- a theory of the *gaps and contradictions of reproduction*: how, in spite of these obstacles, there are real possibilities of transformation.
- a theory of *the underlying dynamics and trajectory of unintended social change*: the future prospects of both obstacles and possibilities.
- A theory of *transformative strategies*: “what is to be done?” in light of the account of obstacles, possibilities, and future trajectories.

A. SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

This element is the centerpiece of most critical theories of society. In the most extreme versions the theory of social reproduction can come close to a theory of despair: the forces that sustain the existing structures of domination and oppression are so powerful as to block all possibilities of challenge and transformation. Think, for example, of some of the writing of Herbert Marcuse, for example in *one dimensional man*, in which all acts of resistance simply become affirmations of the system’s capacity for repressive tolerance.

Some issues:

1. **Contrast: Passive reproduction vs active reproduction.** Passive reproduction is very close to Bourdieu’s idea of *habitus*, and also to conventional sociological ideas of *socialization*. The key idea is all of the ways in which the way we go about living our lives in a mundane way contributes to reproducing the social relations within which we live. Active social reproduction refers to all of the ways institutions are designed reproduce social relations. Much of what Marxists call “the superstructure” has this character.

2. **Tendency towards functionalism:** A key theme within many studies of social reproduction is the ways in which active social reproduction contributes to passive reproduction: institutions are designed in such a way as to socialize people in particular ways so that their daily actions reproduce relations. As we will see, this often gets very close to a functionalist analysis.
3. **Fundamental proposition of social reproduction:** *Social structures and institutions that systematically impose harms on people require vigorous mechanisms of active social reproduction in order to be sustained over time.* This is an important idea: harms and oppressions would generate strong, active, transformative resistance unless some counter-mechanisms exist. This is not a trivial claim, and indeed it is implicitly rejected in lots of contemporary social theory. It implies some pretty strong general claims about the human condition and human nature:
 - Human condition: these harms are real
 - Human nature: universal character of motivations and capacities
 - Implication: *The absence of challenges to oppression, therefore, requires an explanation.*
4. **Contrast: Order vs transformation.** Social reproduction as a solution to the problem of order vs the problem of transformation
5. **Substantive mechanisms**
 - Coercion
 - Institutional rules – “rules of the game” of elections, courts, labor markets, careers, etc.
 - Ideology
 - Interests – harnessing the interests of subordinate classes to the ruling class
6. **And two configurations of these mechanisms:**
 - *Despotic* configuration: coercion and rules are central; ideology and interests reinforce coercion & rules
 - *Hegemonic* configuration: ideology and interests are central; coercion and rules support the effectiveness of these.

B. GAPS AND CONTRADICTIONS OF REPRODUCTION

1. *Complexity and inconsistent requirement for social reproduction.*
2. *Strategic Intentionality and its ramifications.* Key issue: institutions are generated through struggles and effective solutions to functional problems depend on theories/knowledge.
3. *Institutional rigidities and path dependency.* Key issue: difficulty in institutions responding to changed conditions for reproduction. This problem can become quite acute because of the complexity of vested interests bound up with particular institutional configurations even when those institutions become suboptimal. This was a significant part of the crisis of Absolutism in the French Revolution.
4. *Contingency and unpredictability*

C. THE UNDERLYING DYNAMICS AND TRAJECTORY OF UNINTENDED SOCIAL

If it is the case that emancipatory transformation requires long-term strategies, and strategies involve expectations about future states of the system, then it would obviously be extremely useful to have good theories of the trajectory of the system into the future. The theory of social reproduction elaborates the obstacles to transformations; the theory of contradictions identifies opportunities in spite of those obstacles. What we would like to know is how the large scale obstacles & opportunities for transformation change over time – in particular, what their likely trajectory is into the future?

In very general terms, the large-scale historical trajectory of social change is the result of two interacting processes:

- the cumulative *unintended by-products of the actions* of people operating under existing social relations
- the cumulative *intended effects of conscious projects of social change* by people acting strategically to transform those social relations

The analysis of all historical cases of large-scale transformations can be framed in terms of these two processes. We will examine some later in the semester. The transformation of gender relations is a good example. What we really would like, however, is a theory that was strong enough to give us a credible prospective account of trajectories into the future. This is what classical Marxism attempted to do – create what can be called a theory of the historical dynamics of the future. This is what we will be exploring in the next couple of weeks.

D. STRATEGIES OF TRANSFORMATION

Figure 8.1 Three Models of Transformation: ruptural, interstitial, symbiotic					
Vision of trajectory of systemic transformations beyond capitalism	Political Tradition most closely associated with logic of transformation	Pivotal collective actors for transformation	Strategic logic with respect to the state	Strategic logic with respect to the capitalist class	Metaphors of success
<i>Ruptural</i>	Revolutionary socialist/communist	Classes organized in political parties	Attack the state	Confront the bourgeoisie	War (victories and defeats)
<i>Interstitial metamorphosis</i>	Anarchist	Social movements	Build alternatives outside of the state	Ignore the bourgeoisie	Ecological competition
<i>Symbiotic metamorphosis</i>	Social democratic	Coalitions of social forces and labor	Use the state: struggle on the terrain of the state	Collaborate with the bourgeoisie	Evolutionary adaptations