

**Notes from discussion in Erik Olin Wright Lecture #1:
A Framework for Emancipatory Social Science
Middle East Technical University
Monday, November 12, 2007**

Question: In your approach to knowledge it is not clear whether history fits in at all. Society closes down options that were viable in the past but because of the path take they are not viable any longer. As far as I can see the dimension of the future figures in your argument, but not the past, especially after I heard your argument about historical materialism and Marx's approach. Marx said that we had to know the limits imposed by history in order to understand what is possible by the future. So, what about path dependency?

Response: First about Marx: Marx basically believed that capitalism erased previous history. He did not believe in path dependency. Once capitalism was in place they erased the past. It didn't matter how you got there. Once the laws of motion of capitalism were there, it would generate a specific dynamic trajectory into the future. I think there is a certain truth in Marx's strong views on this, but that path dependency does matter in certain specific ways. Path dependency arguments are often prisoners of myopia: there are lots of things that we think can't happen because of the path on which we are, but then we are massively surprised by unexpected events and new possibilities. No one in 1985 in Russia would have thought that 2007 in Russia was possible. No one would have thought that the peaceful exit of the Ukraine was possible. I think path dependency is often overstated. I don't know what the future really holds and that capitalism has erased many of those path constraints. But also, path dependency doesn't mean that particular viable alternatives that could not be generated within the existing path are not future possibilities. Things like the Quebec social economy with its very interesting institutional innovations from the Quebec Provincial government or the participatory budget in Porto Alegre could not have been created in most parts of the world, but once these exist as models and designs, they can be copied in many more. The innovations are to be explained by the specific historic conjunctures and paths available in these places. The path-constraints on copying are weaker than the path-constraints on innovating. It is possible because of our reflexivity and understanding of our situations, that we can copy institutions even if we could not have invented them.

Question: The idea of oppression is key in your account of emancipation, but there are many kinds of oppression besides economic oppression – ethnicity, race, gender, and so on. These other oppressions are not in the analysis. These all seem to bear tremendously on strategy for transformation. These divisions can in practical terms undermine class based strategies of transformation. In Turkey there is almost a civil war in the Kurdish part of the country and this undermines class-based struggles in Ankara.

Response: Absolutely. So while I argue that I want to focus on capitalism as the *object* of our transformation this does not imply that the main obstacles we face are capitalist obstacles. It could be that ethnicity and religion, for example, are the main obstacles to

challenging capitalism. They are obstacles in that they generate forms of conflict that weaken challenges. In the US racism is the single most important cleavage of the working class that has weakened workers struggles. In the absence of racism the US working class would have been much more cohesive and powerful. The third task, therefore, requires an analysis of the sources of social cleavage.

That being said, the normative foundations I laid out at the beginning – the radical democratic egalitarian conception of social justice – invites struggle over all forms of exclusion, all divisions. The DE perspective includes social means to flourish, and the egalitarianism is for universalistic inclusion, not just class-based. I would approach these other oppressions from the same foundation and then see how this bears on the specific mechanisms of other divisions. Furthermore, many of these other divisions get their bite from their connection to class.

Question: I understand the five pathways idea, but all and all there is a great emphasis on social power in civil society. The transformation of capitalism will come mainly from civil society. What if the actors in civil society are self-interested or authoritarian? What if civil society is clientelist, with patronage dependency and the like?

Response: These are well founded sources of skepticism. My argument is that transcending capitalism in a way that will lead to a democratic egalitarian alternative embodied in the normative principles requires a reorganization of the economy rooted in the economy. That is the thesis. That does not imply that the state will not play a significant role in shaping the ways in which social power is exercised. So, just as the state regulates the capitalist economy in such a way that capitalist competition obeys the rules of property rights, so that capitalists don't steal from each other, etc. – i.e. there is a set of rules that are designed to reinforce the integrity of economic power, property rights – so in a social socialism the state would have a set of rules that would reinforce the integrity of social power. It would be submitted and regulated by a set of rules that would push it in a democratic and egalitarian way. This is what we already do, sort of, with respect to democracy in the rules that govern the behavior of parties and other associations in the political arena. The problem is basically how to subordinate forms of concentrated power to the “will of the people”, which is what social power means. This requires state rules. This is what separates this from anarchism. Still, I see there being no guarantees. I am not saying that humanity and justice will triumph. The point is that the possibilities of struggling for these normative ideals are greater to the extent that there is an effective subordination of state power and economic power to social power.

Question: Doesn't your analysis require agents that are in a sense already emancipated? Don't the subjects involved in this process have to be already disinterested, concerned with the general good?

Response: In hope that I am not assuming that people are already emancipated in order to push forward on a pathway. I see emancipation as endogenous to the practices in which people engage. Porto Alegre is an example of this: in the participatory budget assembly most participants were not social justice activists willing to bracket their self-interest. There were critical activists of course, but the key idea is that a new form of public

deliberation was created which allowed for new practices which in turn transformed the participations. This was a messy process. The Assemblies were a messy combination of consensus formation and deliberation on the one hand, and bargaining and arm twisting on the other. My core idea is that a city in which these kinds of institutions are present is a better setting in which social subjectivities will be formed in the right kind of way than in a city which is hierarchical and exclusionary. The participation teaches an ability to listen and consider broader circles of interests. Whether or not this opens up possibilities of system-level transformation, I don't know. I don't see an alternative as a better prospect. We know having a strong centralized authoritarian party seizing power and using the state to transform society does not work to produce emancipated citizens,

Question: In your exposition you sometimes seem to use emancipation, social empowerment, and transformation interchangeably, but it seems that it is quite possible to have social empowerment without transformation or emancipation. This needs clarification.

Response: I don't mean these as interchangeable. Empowerment is the means and emancipation is the goal. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Without social empowerment it is hard to see how social emancipation is possible, but it does not guarantee it. Transformation is a general term for the strategies of change needed to create social empowerment. Strategies of transformation can be used for all sorts of things – putting a religious elite in power for example – so it does not necessarily imply social empowerment. So transformation refers to strategies, empowerment refers to creation of institutional conditions, and emancipation refer to the goals.

Question: When you talk about logics of transformation and possibilities you focus on historical experiences. So what is the way forward? The examples are important but are backward looking in a way. They are not so very different from what exists since they are examples in the cracks of the system. What does it mean to move beyond the system?

Response: I do not have an answer to the question: how to we actually move beyond a capitalist hybrid to a socialist one. I have answers to moving towards this – how to strengthen the social component of the configuration. I don't have any answer to the question, how do we cross a tipping point to generate a whole new configuration, a hybrid in which the social is dominant. I cannot specify the conditions for rupture or shift in the totality. What I am proposing is a menu of concepts and ideas that can be deployed in the practical contexts of struggle for transformation. The advantage of the full menu is that it helps people see that disconnected things are part of a common project: Wikipedia and the landless movement in Brazil are parts of a common transformative vision of social empowerment and the erosion of concentrated forms of capitalist power. I do not know how to fit these strategies together into a formula.

Question: You have a grand proposition, that if we move along these pathways we would have a more democratic egalitarian society that fulfilled the ideals of social justice.

Response: Not quite. The proposition is just a little different: if we could move along these pathways we would be *in a better position* to achieve those ideals, but not that moving on the pathways in and of itself generates social justice.

Question: If you accept that, if you empower social power against state power and economic power you will move towards a place that is closer to a radical democratic egalitarian position. Do you have such a proposition in your mind.

Response: When you rephrased it you dropped one word from my formulation. Here is a simple version that means the same thing: if you democratize the state and democratize the economy you can more effectively struggle for social justice than when this is not the case. The struggle for social justice is facilitated by democracy: the context is better. I have confidence in the context, not the outcome.

But the kinds of power that arise spontaneously from social power can themselves have oppressive forms and result in less social justice, nonegalitarian outcomes. In that case, don't you need to formulate what it means to have collective social power that will lead to a democratic egalitarian society? Don't we have to have a way of distinguishing between positive collective social actions and negative ones? Don't we have to think about institutions that will check or control the negative forms?

Response: One of the reasons why I feel the state is important is just for this reason. I want to subordinate the state power to social power, but not abolish it. The state and only the state can create universalist rules that enable social power to effectively subordinate the state in a self-repocding way. As we know in the history of capitalism we know it was a long and arduous process by which the economy moved from a capitalism of organized coercion and banditry to one of peaceful commerce. This is maintained through the state. This is what we mean by a capitalist state: a state that has successfully created the rules through which capitalism can function without destroying its conditions of existence. The same is true for social power: for social power to be a sustainable structure of relations in which both state power and economic power were subordinated to social power, and the operation of social power would not destroy its own conditions, there would have to be state enforced rules of social power. And of course it is uncertain that the right rules would be created. Just as we have forms of capitalism that fail in this respect – capitalisms that become kleptocracies and fail to have rules that make stable capital accumulation possible -- you could have forms of social empowerment that would be degenerative and become something other than a sustained social socialism. My expectation is that the most likely degeneration is something like authoritarian statism. If you had a form of exclusionary social power in civil society that installs rules of exclusion and domination over excluded categories through social power, the most likely outcome is a statist project in which state domination enacts these exclusions. There are no guarantees. There should be no illusion that a process of social transformation that continually pushes for enhanced capacities in civil society and enhanced capacities of communities for self-organization necessarily leads to a democratic egalitarian socially just world. But I do think this is more likely: the struggles for justice would face weaker obstacles where social empowerment is greater.

Question: Does Gramsci figure in your analysis?

Response: He gets pretty good play. One way of thinking about this is that Gramsci makes reference to the war of position in contrast to the war of maneuver and argues that in Western societies the war of position is primary, but he does not really elaborate that idea systematically. My book in a way could be seen as a theory of the war of position in Gramsci's terms.

Question: Can you choose one pathway over another? Can you say which are more likely to generate emancipation? Which is the best way?

Response: I consider the five pathways a menu, a typology of the different ways in which social power can be enhanced. The question then is under what conditions is it appropriate to emphasize one or the other. I think at the moment the social economy is a particularly expansive pathway. The whole open source movement and the attack and erosion of intellectual property rights are all examples of social economy pathway. This is a particularly vibrant pathway even if this is not generally recognized. All of these pathways are alive. The belief that the statist pathways are off the historical agenda is generated by neoliberalism which argues that the state can no longer play these roles, but that is an ideological position, not a scientific one. Social democratic statist regulation and even elements of statist socialism are both still important and will at some point see a resurgence. But I cannot give a general prioritization of these pathways.