

Comments by Nazanin Shahrokni on Erik Olin Wright's lecture, "Emancipatory Social Sciences", Oct. 23rd, 2007, with initial responses by Erik Wright

Questions:

Through out the presentation, I was thinking about modernization theories which have provided the scientific basis for "emancipatory" attempts aimed at civilizing/modernizing (moral purpose) third world countries. Is this considered emancipatory social sciences? Modernization theorists have "diagnosed" the "problem" in the third world (developing) countries; they have come up with "alternatives" (which seemed- at least in the beginning- "desirable", "viable" and "achievable") and have had their theories of transformation. But obviously when we talk about "emancipatory social sciences" we are not referring to such attempts. Then what are we referring to? **[EOW: This is an interesting challenge. A libertarian normative critic of the welfare state, backed by neo-liberal economic theory, could also claim to being a variety of emancipatory social science. "Shock Therapy" in the dismantling of the command economies of the Soviet block have all of these elements" a diagnosis and critique of the existing statist institutions; a vision of a viable alternative (free market capitalism); and a theory of transformation. Since an emancipatory social science is one that is normatively anchored in some conception of human flourishing and oppression, then it is certainly possible to have an emancipatory social science that is not a form of radical democratic egalitarianism.]**

This is the reason I came up with the question I asked at the talk about the plurality of moral purposes.

First, emancipatory social science is considered to have a "moral" purpose. How do we solve the conflicts caused by the plurality of moral purposes? "Desirability" for whom? At the talk Prof. Wright responded to this question by saying that he does not believe the issue of the plurality of moral purposes to be a serious problem simply because "we can sit and talk about them." A statement which resembles Habermas's public sphere wherein people try to persuade one another. But then the criticisms which are directed against Habermas's public sphere could be directed towards Prof. Wright's notion of "sit and talk". How many people will sit and talk? Obviously we cannot have "all" the people to "sit and talk" which means that there is unequal access to the practice of "sitting and talking" about a utopia which is to bring us "equal" access to opportunities!! How do you select those who are involved in these talkings? What if there is a disagreement? Who's to resolve it? The social scientist who is designing the utopian system and society?

[EOW: My "sit and talk" imagine does not presuppose either that this results in a consensus or even that there would emerge stable coalitions within some kind of process of deliberation and compromise. I just think this is probably the best we can do in resolving the problem of a pluralism of moral purposes. I also think that the prospects of muddling through are no quite a dim as one might imagine given how sharply polarized is the public rhetoric of moral difference. There are a number of issues here:

1. It can be possible for people with very different moral groundings to nevertheless agree on the “rules of the game” of public deliberation, and this can open up a pretty large space for collectively problem-solving.
2. a lot of apparent moral conflict actually reflects more confusion than antagonism, and deliberation can help mark out zone of action and potential compromises.
3. There is a distinction between the sit-and-talk problem in the transformation of existing institutions of power and inequality, and the sit-and-talk problem within the democratic egalitarian arrangements of the emerging, new institutions. In Porto Alegre it was the activists in the workers party after winning an election who decided on the initial design of the participatory budget, but once created, the new institution evolved in response to an exceptionally open and dialogic/pluralist process. There was very wide-spread self-organization of associations around various identities and interests, but they were forced to participate in an egalitarian-democratic process. Of course not all interests and identities had equal weight, but the process was very open.
4. One of the core arguments for democratic egalitarian structures and institutions is that it makes these problems more tractable. The idea is not so much that in and of themselves democratic egalitarianism insures “human flourishing” and a reconciliation between alternative conceptions of the good, but that it creates the most favorable setting within which such issues can be resolved.]

It was obvious from the talk that Prof. Wright is trying to avoid an “elitist” approach to emancipatory projects and hence he criticized “the elitist approach to democracy and political decision making” but what about emancipatory social sciences? Perhaps Michael Burawoy’s notion of public sociology would fill in the gap here in the sense that these emancipatory projects *should* be based on a *dialogue* with the publics.

In order to solve the problem of conflicting moral purposes, and in order to make the “utopian” project of “envisioning real utopias” both “viable” and “achievable” (I take the “desirability” of the project for granted!!) we should limit in to small scale utopias. In other words, we should envision our utopian society to be composed of many small utopias¹ which are aimed at different/diverse publics. Therefore, by limiting the scale you might be able to solve the problem of “accessibility” of the “sit and talk” process and hence the problem of “conflicting moral purposes”. After all reaching consensus in small groups/communities is much easier. **[EOW: But some degree of larger scale institutional design is still needed for vibrant small-scale local real utopias to be vibrant and sustainable: the macro-structural context can block any local experimentation.]**

But then again upon a closer analysis of the project another problem arises. Let’s assume that we established the idea that there should be a plurality of utopias (ends), the question then would be what if there are conflicting strategies? **[EOW: A plurality of ends does**

¹ This would perhaps resemble Durkheim’s utopian society which is composed of diverse professional groupings each with its own unique “collective consciousness”.

not inherently mean a plurality of *real utopias* in the sense I am using the term. A radical democratic egalitarian design of institutions is consistent with a very wide range of ways of life being fostered. It may not be compatible with all ways of life, but it is consistent with a variety of “ends” in the sense of the ends valued by particular individuals or communities. Remember that the pivot of the institutional designs involves a change in power relations – this is the core of the agenda – rather than a stipulation of particular ways of flourishing or particular ways of life. This was not emphasized so much in the talk, but it is in the book. The agenda is framed against a critique of capitalism as a specific structure of power, and the proposals are anchored in a radical democratic egalitarian restructuring of power relations over the economy – a specific way of rethinking the problem of socialism.] Prof. Wright mentioned that utopias could be achieved through ruptural, interstitial, or symbiotic strategies. What if one “public” decides to adopt a ruptural strategy and the other a symbiotic? In other words, what if one “public”’s utopia is achieved only through “destroying” the means with which the other “public” can reach its utopia? **[EOW: My exploration of ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic *strategies* is with respect to a particular vision of “real utopia”, not all possible utopian visions. I pose the problem this way: if we want to challenge and transform capitalism and its class structures in the direction of a radical democratic egalitarian economic structure – which I identify with a ‘social’ socialism – then what strategies are likely to be effective to this end. Of course a ruptural strategy could be the optimal strategy for certain kinds of alternatives to existing institutions. Fascism is served by rupture to be sure. But the problem I address is narrower.]**

I am not trying to play with words here. These are the problems that could arise in practice (and I have seen it happen!). I don’t think they should prevent us from envisioning utopias but they should at least help us “evaluate” our utopias before hand so as to reduce “unintended consequences”.

Second, was the question of social justice and “human flourishing through the realization of their potentials.”² I repeat the same question I asked at the talk: Who’s to decide about the potentials that need to be realized? How would you measure the realization of potentials or their existence in the first place? What is the limit? How many of my potentials should be realized?³ **[EOW: My concern is in eliminating the gross inequalities and form of domination that interfere with people having equal access to the social and material *means* to realize potentials. This is a first order problem. A second order problem is: once these basic gross inequalities of access have been eliminated or dramatically reduced how do we deal with the problem that some potentials take many more resources to develop than others, that some people may *want* to flourish in ways which interfere with other people’s flourishing, etc. These are, to be sure, difficult problems and they pose problems and trade-offs. But I don’t think worrying about those problems implies that social justice requires**

² This notion of social justice was very similar to Marx’s realm of freedom (not surprisingly) and I think it was also mentioned during the talk as well.

³ I think the answer to this question depends on one’s notion of “human nature”. Do human beings have infinite or limited potentials?

removing the gross inequalities in access to the material means to develop one's talents and potentials. As to the initial question "Who is to decide about the potentials to be realized?" I think the fundamental answer is: "Each person figures this out in the course of living their own lives, subject to the resource constraints that come from living in a society of interdependent people.]

Needless to say there exist different conceptions of "human flourishing". A Muslim woman who wears the veil out of choice might believe that her potentials, her humanity, her "self" will flourish as a result of this practice; whereas a liberal "secular" feminist will interpret this either as "false consciousness" or as "oppression", both of which prevent her from having a flourished "self".⁴ **[EOW: There are two distinct issues in play here: 1) whether flourishing, in the sense of developing one's talents and potentials, is a more important value than some other value, for example, living according to the dictates of an all powerful God; 2) whether particular social arrangements generat inequalities in access to the means of flourishing. I am not arguing here for a meta-value that states that flourishing is more important than any other value. I would argue that denying women education blocks the development of their talents and potentials and that this is a form of social injustice. A Muslim woman who subordinates her will to her father or husband and accepts this as right and good because of religious imperatives is placing other values above flourishing. She might be happy and content, her life might be filled with meaning and purpose. But it is not a life in which she has equal access with her brothers to the means to develop her potentials.]**

In response to my question, Prof. Wright said that the individual will decide for herself and that there are resources that will help her "locate" those potentials. By resources, he meant one's parents for example with whom "you can talk" and "who care about you" and etc. I, however, believe even access to those "resources" are not equal (not everyone has informed parents).⁵ **[EOW: This is indeed an important issue in theories of justice – the role of parents in reproducing inequalities among children – it is raises very difficult issues where competing values really do come into play.]**

It seems to me therefore that in order to reach our utopia we have to first do away with these inequalities. In other words when we think about our utopias it is necessary to think about *removing the inequalities* which are the products of the existing system at the same time as we are building structures to *create equality* among individuals. It seems to be an impossible task to produce "equality" amidst the inequalities which constantly reproduce themselves. What I am trying to say is that the different elements in our system are interrelated and unless we transform all of them at once, inequality in one of these elements will reproduce inequality in others. No?! **[EOW: I think this is too strong a claim. In spite of interconnectedness, we can make significant progress in reducing inequalities in access to the social and material means to live a flourishing life even if**

⁴ I am referring to Saba Mahmood's book "Politics of piety".

⁵ And not all informed parents discover one's potentials "correctly". I can talk about my own experience for this matter.

some inequalities in access remain. And of course, removing inequalities may mean giving extra resources to groups that are disadvantaged in certain respects.]

Third, the question of “ethic of responsibility” still remains. How do we undo the “unknown” and “unintended” outcomes of moving towards establishing our utopia? Prof. Wright mentioned that utopias should be constantly evaluated and improved.⁶ But what if the costs are high? How do we maintain a balance between what Weber referred to as “ethic of absolute end” and “ethic of responsibility” Weber could not answer this question properly. Can we? Where do we draw the line? This question is also related to the question that I raised during the talk about the unpredictability of “all” unintended outcomes from the outset. **[EOW: This is one of the key reasons why the commitment is to deep democracy and not just radical equality: the deep democracy component means that there is a collective capacity to learn from mistakes and experiment with new solutions. Deep democracy is closely tied to a pragmatist concept of movement and problem-solving.]**

Fourth, I think “envisioning real utopias” is itself a utopia. Therefore, our first task should be to see if this project itself stands up to the standards Prof. Wright has set for other utopias (desirability, viability, and achievability). Also I was not sure how this utopian vision is different from preceding utopian visions (which have mostly failed—often after leaving disastrous traces after them). **[EOW: I think the key difference in my approach and other utopian visions is its commitment to democratic experimentalism as a process and its recognition that what we can identify is directions of movement rather than the institutional property of ultimate destinations.]**

⁶ And perhaps a different definition of utopia is given here. Because utopias in the conventional sense are “perfect” societies not in need of “improvement”.