Berkeley Seminar on Envisioning Real Utopias
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SESSION 1, OCTOBER 15. EMANCIPATORY SOCIAL SCIENCE

At the outset of the seminar I explained the context of this three week nine session seminar in Berkeley: I am finishing a book on which I have been working for a very long time. I feel the stakes in this book are pretty high and I feel more anxiety that it be really good than I have felt about my work for a long time. At the beginning of a career when you are first defining your intellectual identity and credibility, the stakes in what you publish seem quite high. Then, in the heart of one's career things ease up – each piece adds to a body of work, the shape of a reputation, one's place in the intellectual world, but no one piece seems to matter that much. Now, while I don't see myself near the end of my career yet, still this book has the character of trying to be a Big Statement as the culmination of long period of work. This is the kind of piece that scholars sometimes write in their 60s: trying to make a major synthetic statement on fundamental issues. And the fear is that it comes off as pretentious, self-important, self-referential. The anxiety is that behind one's back people say that they are disappointed, that they expected much more, that the book didn't deliver on its promises. So, I am eager to figure out where the gaps are, where the arguments aren't clear. I don't imagine that I can fill all those gaps, but I would like to identify them. I then added a little note on the trap of perfectionism: It is a mistake to really worry about a piece of work like this being "perfect", beyond criticism. That is a trap that sometimes very talented scholars fall into: because they know better than anyone else where there are flaws in their work they keep working on it in the hope of eliminating all weaknesses. The result, sometimes, is that things are delayed for years or never get published. It is better, I think, to acknowledge the limitations, point them out to readers and see any given piece of work as part of an on-going conversation. Still, I want this book to be as good as possible, and that is why I am here: for you to help me figure out where it needs more work, clarifications, new arguments.

Some of the interesting issues raised in the first discussion:

We began with a question about the nature of the obstacles to an emancipatory project, and especially why the idea of envisioning fundamental alternatives seems so out of fashion, even silly or naïve to most people. How did we become so cynical, a student asked.

I replied by drawing out the distinction between too reasons why people might reject the idea of alternatives: cynicism and hopelessness. Cynicism comes from the feeling of having been lied to, that nice sounding claims about politics or radical change and alternatives are a scam. A general cynicism about politicians in capitalist society can infuse a cynicism about all political possibility. And in the case of the historical examples of political projects under the banner of socialism and communism the sense of these being fakes, or not being what they claimed, generated massive cynicism in those societies. Hopelessness, on the other hand, can come from a belief in the overwhelming power of the forces arrayed against social change, of the unchallengeable strength of the "powers that be".

As the discussion proceeded other ingredients were added: One student raised the issue of people's beliefs that capitalism actually worked very well and that failures were the result of individual deficiency, not social structural issues. The ideological stance that social structures don't really exist or that they don't explain anything – everything is the result of individual responsibility and choices – is quite prevalent. In order to entertain the possibility of alternative forms of society one has to in the first instance believe that this is a relevant idea. I noted that this was the central point of my chapter on "What's so bad about capitalism?" – showing that the harms people experience in their lives are generated by mechanisms and processes intrinsic to capitalism.

Another thread of this part of the discussion examined the fact that many people actually do very well in capitalism. I made the point that the idea of radical democratic egalitarianism as an emancipatory alternative to capitalism appeals to people who are oppressed and disadvantaged within capitalism on the basis of their interests, but that for the most privileged people in capitalism the appeal is more on the basis of their moral sensibilities. Radical egalitarianism can be defended on the grounds of social and political *justice* and on the grounds that it serves one's own interests – one's life will go better under those conditions. In response one student said that in fact the lives of many very well paid people would go much better under a socialist alternative (as specified in radical democratic egalitarian terms of "social empowerment"). He had been a corporate lawyer before going to graduate school and now studied high paid engineers. These people may earn a lot of money and have a high material standard of living, but they are expected to work 70 hours a week and lived harried lives, often doing work that is pretty meaningless. The possibility of their "flourishing" is diminished by the specific pressures and alternatives they face within capitalism.

[Note: I think it might be good to add some discussion of these themes in the preface of the book by exploring the various reasons why people might reject the very idea of an emancipatory alternative to capitalism. An initial inventory would include:

- Cynicism

- hopelessness in the face of overwhelming power

- specific beliefs about how the world works: individualistic explanations for deprivations; the naturalness and inevitability of competitive markets

- Complacency because of affluence

I touch on this a little in the preface and in some places of chapter 1, but a somewhat more extended discussion might be helpful in launching the argument of the book.]

Given that there is this mixture of cynicism, hopelessness, and various kinds of beliefs about the inevitability of capitalism, how can this taken-for-grantedness of the world as it is be challenged? And what is the role of intellectuals in this?

I said that we would discuss the specific problem of strategies of transformation in the third week of the seminar. So here I only made a few remarks on these issues. I began by saying that sometimes I think that the main problem we face in convincing people of the possibilities of alternatives is that we do not have sufficiently convincing arguments for the viability of such alternatives. But then I observe that people are

prepared to believe all sorts of completely outlandish things on the basis of no evidence whatsoever. Religion is the best example: believe in heaven and hell is not based on careful reasoning and empirical evidence. The afterlife is a vision of a radical alternative to the existing world – alternative to life itself – without evidence. Still, I continue hold to Enlightenment ideals of reason and rational argument, and I do think that making a compelling argument about the feasibility of alternatives can matter a lot. This is why I write books on these problems.

As for the specific role of intellectuals, I said that the really core commitment that I had was towards taking the democratic component of the democratic egalitarianism very seriously, and this meant a rejection of "vanguardism" in the old left sense and for the role of intellectuals as the know-it-all leaders of the revolution. The role of intellectuals is to enhance the quality of dialogue and deliberation around these political and social questions. It is really hard work being a serious intellectual. It takes time and energy to develop the skills of careful thinking. This is what we can bring to social movements and popular struggles: a sharply honed capacity to analyze and explain. Perhaps this will enhance the learning capacity of movements. But this must always be dialogic and must involve careful listening as well. We are not bearers of some absolute truth with certainty, but of critical capacities and provisional knowledge about specific issues.

This understanding of intellectuals is an element in a broader idea about strategy and transformation, namely that we should try to embody in our practices for building an alternative world the ideals we hope to create in that world. If we want to create a world organized around radical democratic egalitarian principles, then we should embody those principles as much as possible in our practices within the present. We should prefigure the alternative in our strategies. This principle, however, is not derived from some absolute philosophical claim that somehow our means cannot contradict our ends. There may be times and places in which, for example, a highly disciplined, hierarchically organized movement is the only feasible way of challenging a structure of domination and oppression. Perhaps – although the historical evidence is not very encouraging that this actually works for purposes of human emancipation. But in any case, in the present historical context it seems to me it is only if democratic practice a democratic egalitarian approach to the use of their critical capacities that they will seriously contribute to emancipatory possibilities.

Another theme posed in the seminar was the relationship between what I call political justice and social justice. Is there a priority of the former over the latter? And did why I think that a deeply democratic political system would lead to a socially just society? I explained that my claim was not really that democracy would lead to social justice, but rather than the more deeply democratic was a political system the more favorable would be the conditions for struggles over social justice. Think about systems in which there are not only socially unjust inequalities, but that these are embodied in the political system as well making that system less democratic. This means that people with privileges and advantages are well positioned to defend these politically, and this makes movements in the direction of social justice more difficult. Democratization means reducing the political power advantages over collective decisions of those with economic

and social privileges. This does not at all ensure a movement towards social justice, but it is a more favorable terrain.

This does not imply, however, that there is exactly a *priority* for political justice over social justice. It is not really that you have to achieve that first and only then can you make progress towards social justice. Social justice is also a condition for advancing on the front of political justice. The two affect each other and the struggle must encompass both.

One student asked about the labels used to describe the emancipatory project: Socialist? Anarchist? Communist? I replied that this was indeed a difficult problem. My mother though that the word "socialism" was a problem, that it would put off people who would otherwise share the values and ideals for which I was arguing. This may be an especially acute problem in the US where socialism is a more suspect idea than in many other parts of the world, but still this is a real issue. I have decided to continue to use "socialism" as the central language for the emancipatory ideal (along with radical democratic egalitarianism) because, first, my views are so deeply embedded in the long historical tradition of socialism debate stretching back a century and a half, and second the root term "social" in socialism so closely anchors the core idea of my argument.

Toward the end of the seminar I asked the class a question about my use of the idea of "flourishing" in my formulation of social justice. I define a socially just society as *a society in which all people have roughly equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives.* In many places where I have discussed these ideas some people have had problems with my use of the term "flourishing" here on the grounds that it somehow embodies a specifically Western view of human value. There are other words one could use in here, other terms about the human condition which are used in discussions of social justice: welfare, wellbeing, happiness. There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these. I adopted flourishing because it seems the most encompassing umbrella expression for capturing the ways a life goes well. And also it has a somewhat more objective character: it may be easier to make judgments about a persons access to the means to realize their potentials than the means to be happy or the means for their wellbeing. In this way it is close to Sen's notion of "capabilities," but I prefer it to capabilities because the idea of capabilities suggests a narrower or more limited aspiration. "Capabilities" seems to refer to basic functioning rather than this more expansive idea of really flourishing.

But doesn't flourishing imply culturally-based value judgments about whether or not a given situation is one in which one lives a flourishing life? What about a woman living in a highly patriarchal relationship where the husband makes all the decisions and she is subordinated to him, but accepts these values and fulfills her role enthusiastically and skillfully and experiences her life as meaningful. How can you say that she does not have access to the social and material means to live a flourishing life? How do you know she would flourish more under radical democratic egalitarian conditions? I said that those were very tough questions and that I really did not have completely convincing, foundational arguments. I have two intuitions here. The first is this: If it were possible (which it is not) for a person to live their lives under both conditions – the highly inegalitarian and restrictive conditions of the traditional patriarchal family and the conditions of the radically egalitarian democratic family – then most people would

choose the latter and recognize that their lives were more fulfilling and flourishing under the egalitarian conditions. This, then, is an intuition about the development of our capacities and satisfaction of our deeper needs – that these will occur in a more robust and expansive way under democratic egalitarian conditions and that if people could live their lives under both conditions they would recognize this. The second intuition (which I didn't elaborate much in the seminar) is that as an empirical matter, the highly patriarchal, authoritarian relation is more like to be actively abusive and harmful to people than the democratic egalitarian relation. Of course defenders of authoritarian inegalitarian patriarchy claim that it is respectful and that in their assigned roles everyone feels validated and lives meaningful lives, but I think this is to a large extent rationalization and myth. This means that even in terms of the real values of such societies their institutions violate their values.

In any case, one of the reasons I use flourishing as my standard is that it can be a very encompassing idea, including the realization of our potentials intellectually, physically, artistically, spiritually – it need not specify any hierarchy of value among alternative aspects of the realization of which human potentials. One student added that it would be good to expand this list further and include in flourishing the realization of our potentials as members of communities and families. I think that is certainly right.