

Chapter 2

The Tasks of Emancipatory Social Science

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Envisioning real utopias is a central component of a broader intellectual enterprise that can be called *emancipatory social science*. Emancipatory social science seeks to generate scientific knowledge relevant to the collective project of challenging various forms of human oppression. To call this a form of social *science*, rather than simply social criticism or social philosophy, recognizes the importance for this task of systematic scientific knowledge about how the world works. The word *emancipatory* identifies a central moral purpose in the production of knowledge – the elimination of oppression and the creation of the conditions for human flourishing.¹ And the word *social* implies the belief that human emancipation depends upon the transformation of the social world, not just the inner life of persons.

To fulfill this mission, any emancipatory social science faces three basic tasks: elaborating a systematic diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists; envisioning viable alternatives; and understanding the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of transformation. In different times and places one or another of these may be more pressing than others, but all are necessary for a comprehensive emancipatory theory.

DIAGNOSIS AND CRITIQUE

The starting point for building an emancipatory social science is identifying the ways in which existing social institutions and social structures systematically impose harms on people. It is not enough to show that people suffer in the world in which we live or that there are enormous inequalities in the extent to which people live flourishing lives. A scientific emancipatory theory must show that the explanation for this suffering and inequality lies in specific properties of institutions and social structures. The first task of emancipatory social science, therefore, is the diagnosis and critique of the causal processes that generate these harms.

Diagnosis and critique is the aspect of emancipatory social science that has often generated the most systematic and developed empirical research. Consider Feminism, for example. A great deal of feminist writing centers on the diagnosis of existing social relations, practices and institutions in terms of the ways in which they generate various forms of oppression of women. Studies of labor markets have emphasized such things as sex-segregation of jobs, job evaluation systems which denigrate job attributes associated with culturally defined feminine traits, promotion discrimination, institutional arrangements which place mothers at a disadvantage in employment, and so on. Feminist studies of culture demonstrate the ways in which a wide range of cultural practices in the media, education, literature, and other institutions have traditionally reinforced gender identities and stereotypes in ways that oppress women. Feminist studies of the

¹ In a personal communication Steven Lukes noted that the word “emancipation” was originally connected to the struggle against slavery: the emancipation of slaves meant their freedom from bondage. More generally, the idea of emancipation was connected to liberal notions of freedom and achieving full liberal rights rather than socialist ideals of equality and social justice. In the twentieth century the left appropriated the term to refer to a broader vision of eliminating all forms of oppression, not just those involving coercive forms of denial of individual liberties. I am using the term in this broader sense.

state have examined the way in which state structures and policies have systematically reinforced the subordination of women and various forms of gender inequality. All of this research is meant to show that gender inequality and domination are not simply the result of “natural” biological difference between men and women, but rather are generated by social structures, institutions, and practices. A similar set of observations could be made about empirical research inspired by the Marxist tradition of emancipatory theory, by theories of racial oppression, and by radical environmentalism. In each of these traditions much of the research that is done consists in documenting the harms generated by existing social structures and institutions, and attempting to identify the causal processes which generate those harms.

Diagnosis and critique is closely connected to questions of social justice and normative theory. To describe a social arrangement as generating “harms” is to infuse the analysis with a moral judgment.² Behind every emancipatory theory, therefore, there is an implicit theory of justice, some conception of what conditions would have to be met before the institutions of a society could be deemed just.

Underlying the analysis in this book is what could be called a *radical democratic egalitarian* understanding of justice. It rests on two broad normative claims, one concerning the conditions for social justice and the other for political justice:

1. Social justice: *In a socially just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives.*
2. Political justice: *In a politically just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things which affect their lives. This includes both the freedom of individuals to make choices that affect their own lives as separate persons, and their capacity to participate in collective decisions which affect their lives as members of a broader community.*

Both of these claims are fraught with philosophical difficulty and controversy, and I will not attempt here to provide a fully elaborated defense. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to clarify the meaning and implications of these two principles and explain the grounds on which I believe they provide a foundation for the diagnosis and critique of social institutions.

Social Justice

The conception of social justice which animates the critique of capitalism and the search for alternatives in this book revolves around three ideas: human flourishing; necessary material and social means; broadly equal access.

² It is, of course, possible for someone to agree that contemporary capitalism generates harms and human suffering and still also argue that this is not an injustice. One might believe, as many libertarians do, that people have the right to do what they want with their property even if alternative uses of their property would reduce human suffering. A consistent libertarian could accept the diagnosis that capitalism generates large deficits in human flourishing, and yet argue that it would be a violation of individual liberty and thus unjust to force people to use their property in ways other than of their choosing. Nevertheless, most people believe that when institutions generate systematic and pervasive harms in the lives of people, that such institutions are likely also to be unjust. This of course still does not mean that people who acknowledge the injustice of capitalism will necessarily want to change it in any fundamental way, since there are other things besides justice which people care about.

“Human flourishing” is a broad, multidimensional umbrella concept, covering a variety of aspects of human well being.³ It is like the idea of “health”, which has both a restrictive meaning as the absence of diseases that interfere with ordinary bodily functioning, and an expansive meaning as robust physical vitality. The restrictive meaning of human flourishing concerns the absence of deficits that undermine ordinary human functioning. This includes things like hunger and other material deprivations, ill-health, social isolation, and the psychological harms of social stigma. This is a heterogeneous list – some elements refer to bodily impairments, others to social and cultural impairments. But they all, through different mechanisms, undermine basic human functioning. A just society is one in which all people have unconditional access to the necessary means to flourish in this restrictive sense of satisfaction of needs for basic human functioning.⁴

The expansive idea of flourishing refers to the various ways in which people are able to develop and exercise their talents and capacities, or, to use another expression, to realize their individual potentials. This does not imply that within each person there is some unique, latent, natural “essence” that will grow and become fully realized if only it is not blocked. The expansive idea of individual flourishing is not the equivalent of saying that within every acorn lies a mighty oak: with proper soil, sun and rain the oak will flourish and the potential within the acorn will be realized as the mature tree. Human talents and capacities are multidimensional; there are many possible lines of development, many different flourishing mature humans that can develop from the raw material of the infant. These capacities are intellectual, artistic, physical, social and moral and spiritual. They involve creativity as well as mastery. A flourishing human life is one in which these talents and capacities develop.

The idea of human flourishing is neutral with respect to the various ways of life that can be constructed around particular ways of flourishing. There is no implication that intellectual capacities are more worthy of development than physical capacities or artistic capacities or spiritual capacities, for example. There is also no supposition that in order to flourish human beings must develop all of their capacities: people have many different potentials, and it is impossible in general that all of these potentials can be realized, regardless of the access to material and social means.⁵

³ Philosophers discussing egalitarian conceptions of social justice have used a variety of terms to identify the source of their moral concern: happiness, welfare, wellbeing, flourishing. There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these, and in practice it may not matter a great deal which is used to anchor a discussion of justice. I prefer “flourishing” because it is a broad idea of wellbeing and because many aspects of flourishing refer to objective properties not just subjective states.

⁴ The restrictive sense of flourishing elaborated here corresponds closely to Amartya Sen’s notion of “capabilities” and basic functioning. In his analysis, societies should be judged not on the basis of how much income they generate per capita, but on the extent to which they provide basic capabilities to all. See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: the Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) for an elaboration of the idea of flourishing as a core ideal of the good society.

⁵ The multidimensionality of the idea of flourishing also means that there is no bottom-line metric that would enable one to always say unambiguously something like “person X is flourishing more than person Y”, since any given life is likely to combine flourishing and deficits along different dimensions. This is like the problem in talking about how healthy a person is in physical terms: one person has chronic back pain, another has asthma. Who is “healthier?” One can specify this question with respect to particular tasks and contexts and perhaps provide an answer – asthma does not impede the ordinary functioning of sitting at a desk and back pain does not impede the

Crucially, to develop and exercise these potentials requires material resources and appropriate social conditions. The importance of material resources for human flourishing is obvious. Certainly without things like adequate nutrition, housing, clothing, and personal security it is difficult for most people to flourish in either the restrictive or expansive sense. But the development of intellectual, physical and social capacities requires much more than simple material necessities. It requires access to educational settings within which learning takes place and talents are cultivated, not just in childhood, but throughout life. It requires access to work settings where skills can be developed and exercised and activity is to a substantial extent self-directed. It requires communities which provide opportunities for active participation in civic affairs and cultural activities.

A just society is one in which everyone has broadly *equal access* to these conditions. “Equal access” is a criterion for equality that is similar to the idea of “equal opportunity.” The difference is that equal opportunity would be satisfied by a fair lottery in which some people ended up with ample means to live a flourishing life and others lived in abject poverty so long as everyone had exactly the same chance of winning the lottery in the first place, whereas the “equal access” criterion is inconsistent with a lottery.⁶

Equal access does not imply that everyone should receive the same income or have identical material standards of living, both because the “necessary means” to flourish will vary across people and because some amount of inequality is consistent with everyone still having equal access to the *necessary* means to live flourishing lives.⁷ Nor does the radical egalitarian view imply that everyone would in fact flourish in a just society, but simply that any failures to do so would not be due to inequalities in access to the necessary social and material resources needed to flourish.

ordinary functioning of breathing on a smoggy day. But there is no way of rendering these two conditions commensurable on a one-dimensional healthiness scale in a way that would provide a simple answer to the question “who has greater health”? Nevertheless, in spite of this problem one can talk about the ways in which a given society promotes or impedes wellness, and it therefore is possible to use health-promotion as an evaluative criterion for institutions. Because of this multidimensional complexity, it is entirely possible that a given institutional arrangement promotes human flourishing in some respects and impedes it in others. This, in turn, may make it problematic to unequivocally proclaim that human flourishing would be enhanced by a particular change in institutions. This does not, however, mean that the idea of human flourishing is not an appropriate value for evaluating institutions. It just means that the evaluations may not always be simple and unequivocal.

⁶ Equal opportunity is also associated with the idea of “starting gate equality” which suggests that so long as everyone has equal opportunity up until they are adults, then if some people squander their opportunities, their subsequent lack of access to the conditions to live a flourishing life would not constitute a failure of justice. “Equal access to the necessary social and material means to live a flourishing life” suggests that ideally people should have life-long access to the means to live a flourishing life. While there may be pragmatic constraints on this ideal, and of course there are complex issues bound up with incentives and “personal responsibility”, the ideal remains that all human beings should have such access.

⁷ The point here is similar to the normative rule, as expressed by William Ryan, of “Fair Shares until everyone has enough; Fair Play for the surplus” (*Equality*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) p. 9. “Enough” can either refer to the necessary means to securely satisfy basic needs (in which it corresponds to what I have termed the restrictive sense of flourishing) or enough to live a flourishing life in the more expansive sense. The idea expressed is that once this condition is satisfied, “fair play” rather than fair shares should become the operative principle of justice.

This conception of social justice does not simply concern class inequalities; it also condemns inequalities based on gender, race, physical disabilities, and any other morally irrelevant attribute which interferes with a person's access to the necessary material and social means to live a flourishing life. This is why the inclusion of *social* means is crucial, since disrespect, discrimination and social exclusion based on status attributes can constitute as serious impediments to flourishing as economic inequality. The radical egalitarian conception of social justice proposed here, therefore, includes what Nancy Fraser has called the politics of recognition as well as material distribution.⁸

While the conception of flourishing proposed here does not privilege particular ways of flourishing, it is not neutral with respect to those cultural conceptions of the "good life" which inherently deny some categories of people equal access to the conditions to flourish. A culture which designates some ethnic or racial or caste groups as unworthy of having access to the material and social means to develop their human capacities is unjust. This conception of social justice is also violated by cultures which insist that the highest form of flourishing for women is to be attentive wives serving the needs of their husbands and dedicated mothers raising children. Women can certainly flourish as dedicated mothers and attentive wives, but a culture which pressures women into these roles and restricts the ability of girls to develop other capacities and talents violates the principle of equal access to the material and social means to live a flourishing life. Such a culture supports an injustice by the standards proposed here.⁹

The radical egalitarian conception of social justice is not restricted to the nation state as the only appropriate social arena for egalitarianism. The principle that all people should have broadly equal access to the necessary social and material means to live flourishing lives applies to *all* people, and thus at its deepest level it is a global principle for humanity. It is unjust that a person born in Guatemala has much less access to the material and social conditions for living a flourishing life than a person born in Canada. As a tool for criticism, therefore, the egalitarian ideal can be directed at any social unit within which access to resources is structured through rules and powers. A family can be criticized as unjust when members have unequal access to the means to live flourishing lives available within the family; and global institutions can be criticized as unjust when they enforce rules which sustain such inequality on a global scale. In practical terms most discussions of social justice focus mainly on the problem of justice within

⁸ "Recognition" refers to the social practices through which people communicate mutual respect and validate their standing as moral equals within a society. See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3, May-June 2000. The issue of material distribution and moral recognition are, of course, interconnected, since the denial of respect ("misrecognition" and stigma) can reinforce material disadvantages, and class inequalities themselves also impose harms of disrespect. For a discussion of the interconnection of class and recognition, see Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

⁹ The claim that some cultures systematically support certain forms of injustice is a particularly controversial aspect of the radical democratic egalitarian conception of justice being proposed here, for it implies a critique of the core values linked to certain cultures. Some people regard such critique as implying a Eurocentric or "Western" bias. I would argue that while it may be historically the case that the kinds of universalistic conceptions of human flourishing I am advocating are linked to Western culture, such universalism is not a uniquely Western trait, and a theory of justice linked to such universalism does not merely reflect the parochial perspective of Western individualism. Furthermore, by the standards I am defending here, Western cultures also, in certain key respects, support injustice, especially through the endorsement of coercively enforced private property and strong versions of competitive individualism.

the bounded social entities we call “nation states” since these are the social units within which political agency for social change remains largely concentrated, but this practical constraint does not define the core principle itself.¹⁰

It is, of course, not a simple matter to specify the institutional arrangements which would in practice satisfy this criterion for a just society. Any attempt at doing so would have to contend with a range of difficult issues: How is the moral conviction about the just *distribution* of access to resources balanced against pragmatic considerations of *producing* the social and material means for flourishing? Some talents will contribute more than others to creating the social and material conditions for human flourishing. Should these kinds of talents be encouraged over others through the use of various kinds of incentives? And, if so, doesn't this violate the equal access idea? Some talents are more costly to develop than others, and since in the aggregate there is likely to be a budget constraint on the resources available for the development of talents, this may make it impossible to give everyone equal access to the necessary means to develop whatever talents they might want to develop. Equal access to the means to flourish thus may not mean equal access to the necessary means to cultivate whatever talents one wants to cultivate. A full philosophical defense of the ideal of equal access to the conditions to live a flourishing life would have to contend with these, and other, problems. But whatever else is entailed by this ideal, it certainly implies access to the necessary means to satisfy basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and health, as well as the means to develop and exercise some of one's talents and capacities and the means to be a full participant in the social life of the society in which one lives. We do not live in such a world.

Political Justice

The second normative principle underlying the diagnosis and critique in this book concerns individual freedom and democracy. These two ideas are linked here because they both concern the power of people to make choices about things which affect their lives. This is the core principle: people should control as much as possible those decisions which affect their lives. “Freedom” is the power to make choices over one's own life; “democracy” is the power to participate in the effective control of collective choices that affect one's life as a member of the wider society. The democratic egalitarian principle of political justice is that all people should have equal access to the powers needed to make choices over their own lives and to participate in collective choices that affect them because of the society in which they live.

This egalitarian understanding of freedom recognizes the central liberal ideals of individual rights and autonomy, ideals which seek to minimize the extent to which individuals are subjected to external coercion. It differs from standard liberal formulations by also emphasizing the egalitarian principle that all people should have equal access to powers needed to make choices over their own lives and not simply be equally protected from coercion by others. This corresponds to what Philippe van Parijs has called “*real* freedom for all”.¹¹ Real freedom implies

¹⁰ It is important to clear on this point: the moral universe for egalitarian ideals is global – humanity as a whole – but the struggles for these ideals are deeply shaped by the practical constraints of different arenas for agency.

¹¹ Philippe van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

that people have actual capacities to make choices that matter to them, and this requires that they have access to the basic resources needed for acting on their life plans.¹²

The democratic dimension of political justice concerns equal access to the political means necessary to participate in collective decisions over issues that affect one's life as a member of a society. This affirms not simply that in a democracy there should be formal political equality – all people should have equal legal access to the means of political participation – but that democracy needs to be empowered in ways which enable people to collectively control their common fate. Mostly, in contemporary society, people hold a fairly restrictive view of democracy. On the one hand, many issues of crucial public importance are not seen as legitimately subjected to democratic decision-making. In particular, many economic decisions which have massive affects on our collective fate are seen as “private” matters to be made by executives and owners of large corporations. The demarcation between “public” and “private” is anchored in a relatively strong conception of private property which significantly insulates a wide range of decisions over economic resources and activities from intrusive democratic control. On the other hand, even for those issues which are seen as legitimate objects of public control, popular democratic empowerment is quite limited. Electoral politics are heavily dominated by elites, thus violating democratic principles of political equality, and other venues for popular participation are generally of largely symbolic character. Ordinary citizens have few opportunities for meaningfully exercising the democratic ideal of “rule by the people.”

Radical democracy, in contrast, argues for an expansive understanding of democracy. The ideal of political equality of citizens requires strong institutional mechanisms for blocking the translation of private economic power into political power. The scope of democratic decision is enlarged to all domains with important public consequences. And the arenas for empowered citizen participation extend beyond casting ballots in periodic elections.

Radical democracy is both an ideal in its own right – people should have the right to participate meaningfully in decisions which affect their lives – and an instrumental value – the realization of the radical egalitarian principle of social justice in terms of human flourishing would be facilitated by radical democratic institutions of political power. The combination of the radical egalitarian view of social justice and the radical democratic view of political power can be called *democratic egalitarianism*. This defines the broad normative foundation for the diagnosis and critique of existing institutions and the search for transformative alternatives in this book.

VIABLE ALTERNATIVES

The second task of emancipatory social science is to develop a coherent, credible theory of the alternatives to existing institutions and social structures that would eliminate, or at least significantly mitigate the harms and injustices identified in the diagnosis and critique. Social alternatives can be elaborated and evaluated in terms of three different criteria: *desirability*,

¹² Egalitarian distributions of material resources thus have two distinct justifications: Social justice requires equal access to the necessary material means to live a flourishing life; political justice requires equal access to the necessary material means for real freedom. These two rationales for an egalitarian distribution of material resources are connected insofar as real freedom itself contributes to human flourishing.

viability, and *achievability*. As illustrated in Figure 1, these are nested in a kind of hierarchy: not all desirable alternatives are viable, and not all viable alternatives are achievable.

-- Figure 1 about here --

Desirability. The exploration of *desirable* alternatives, without the constraints of viability or achievability, is the domain of utopian social theory and much normative political philosophy. Typically such discussions are institutionally very thin, the emphasis being on the enunciation of abstract principles rather than actual institutional designs. Thus, for example, the Marxist aphorism to describe communism as a *classless society* governed by the principle “to each according to need, from each according to ability,” is almost silent on the actual institutional arrangements which would make this principle operative. Liberal theories of justice similarly elaborate and defend the principles that should be embodied in the institutions of a just society without systematically exploring the problem of whether sustainable, robust institutions could actually be designed to carry out those principles in the pure form in which they are formulated.¹³ These kinds of discussions are important, for they can contribute much to clarify our values and strengthen our moral commitment to the arduous business of social change. But purely utopian thinking about alternatives may do relatively little to inform the practical task of institution building or to add credibility to challenges of existing institutions.

Viability. The study of *viable* alternatives asks of proposals for transforming existing social structures and institutions whether, if implemented, they would actually generate in a sustainable, robust manner, the emancipatory consequences that motivated the proposal. A common objection to radical egalitarian proposals is “sounds good on paper, but it will never work.” The best known example of this problem is comprehensive central planning, the classic form in which revolutionaries attempted to realize socialist principles. Socialists had sharp criticisms of the anarchy of the market and its destructive effects on society and believed that a rationally planned economy would improve the lives of people. The institutional design that seemed to make this possible was centralized comprehensive planning. As it turned out, there are a range of “perverse” unintended consequences of comprehensive central planning which subvert its intended goals, both because of the information overload generated by complexity and a range of problems linked to incentives. Another example of the viability problem is the proposal for a generous unconditional basic income, a proposal we will discuss in chapter 6. Suppose everyone were given, with no conditions or restrictions whatsoever, a monthly stipend sufficient to live at a socially respectable standard of living. There are many reasons why from the moral standpoint of radical egalitarian views of social justice, this could be seen as a desirable alternative to

¹³ Moral philosophers argue that *ought* implies *can* – there is no moral imperative to do the impossible – and thus, at least implicitly, arguments about what would constitute a “just society” – a desirable alternative to the present world – require that viable institutions could in principle be constructed to actualize those principles. In practice, however, very little attention is given to these issues in most political philosophy. John Rawls, for example, argues that his “liberty principle” is lexically prior to his “difference principle” – that is, it has absolute priority and must be fully satisfied before the difference principle kicks in. He does not ask if this is possible in real institutions: perhaps a world in which the liberty principle was given this kind of absolute priority would be unstable and self-contradictory in practice. Furthermore, some violation of the liberty principle may be a necessary condition for making substantial headway on the egalitarian goals of the difference principle, so some kind of “balance” between the two principles would be both superior morally and more stable sociologically. These are the kinds of issues addressed in discussions of viability.

existing processes of economic distribution. Yet there are skeptics who argue that a generous basic income is not a viable alternative to the existing world: perhaps it would create perverse incentives and everyone would become couch potatoes; perhaps the tax rates would have to be so high that it would stifle economic activity; perhaps it would trigger such resentment towards people who lived entirely on the basic income by those who combined the basic income with labor market earnings, that an unconditional basic income could not be politically stable. The discussion of the viability of alternatives explores these kinds of issues.

The viability of a specific institutional design for realizing emancipatory goals, of course, may depend heavily on historical context and various kinds of side conditions. For example, a generous unconditional basic income may be viable in a country in which there is a strong culturally-rooted work ethic and sense of collective obligation, because in such a society there would be relatively few people who decide to consume the basic income without any reciprocal contribution, but not viable in a highly atomistic, selfish consumerist society. Or, a basic income could be viable in a society that already had developed over a long period a generous redistributive welfare state based on a patchwork of targeted programs, but not in a society with a miserly, limited welfare state. Discussions of viability, therefore, also include discussions of the contextual conditions-of-possibility for particular designs to work well.

The exploration of viable alternatives brackets the question of their practical achievability under existing social conditions. Some people might argue: what's the point of talking about some theoretically viable alternative to the world in which we live if it is not strategically achievable? The response to the skeptic is this: there are so many uncertainties and contingencies about the future, that we cannot possibly know now what really are the limits of achievable alternatives in the future. Think about the Soviet Union in 1987. No one thought that the destruction of the Soviet State and a transition to capitalism would be achievable within a few years. Perhaps we can say something about what sorts of changes we can struggle for right now, what kinds of coalitions are formable and which are unformable under existing conditions, what sorts of political strategies are likely to be effective and ineffective in the immediate future. But the further we look into the future, the less certain we can be about the limits on what is achievable.

Given this uncertainty about the future, there are two reasons why it is important to have as clear-headed understandings as possible of the range of viable alternatives to the world in which we live, alternatives which, if implemented, would stand a good chance of being sustainable. First, developing such understandings now makes it more likely that, if in the future historical conditions expand the limits of achievable possibility, social forces committed to emancipatory social change will be in a position to formulate practical strategies to implement the alternative. Viable alternatives are more likely to eventually become achievable alternatives if they are well thought out and understood. Second, the actual limits of what is achievable depend in part on the beliefs people hold about what sorts of alternatives are viable. This is a crucial point and fundamental to sociological understandings of the very idea of their being "limits of possibility" for social change: social limits of possibility are not independent of beliefs about those limits. When a physicist argues that there is a limit to the maximum speed at which things can travel, this is meant as an objective constraint operating independently of our beliefs about speed. Similarly, when a biologist argues that in the absence of certain conditions, life is impossible, this is a claim about objective constraints. Of course both the physicist and the biologist could be

wrong, but the claims themselves are about real, untransgressable limits of possibility. Claims about social limits of possibility are different from these claims about physical and biological limits, for in the social case the beliefs people hold about limits systematically affect what is possible. Developing systematic, compelling accounts of viable alternatives to existing social structures and institutions of power and privilege, therefore, is one component of the social process through which the social limits on achievable alternatives can themselves be changed.

It is no easy matter to make a credible argument that “another world is possible”. People are born into societies that are always already made. The rules of social life which they learn and internalize as they grow up seem natural. People are preoccupied with the tasks of daily life, with making a living, with coping with life’s pains and enjoying life’s pleasures. The idea that the social world could be deliberately changed in some fundamental way that would make life significantly better for most people seems pretty far-fetched, both because it is hard to imagine some dramatically better workable alternative and because it is hard to imagine how to successfully challenge existing institutions of power and privilege in order to create the alternative. Thus even if one accepts the diagnosis and critique of existing institutions, the most natural response for most people is probably a fatalistic sense that there is not much that could be done to really change things.

Such fatalism poses a serious problem for people committed to challenging the injustices and harms of the existing social world since fatalism and cynicism about the prospects for emancipatory change reduce the prospects for change. One strategy, of course, is to just not worry too much about having a scientifically credible argument about the possibilities for radical social change, but instead try to create an inspiring vision of a desirable alternative, grounded in anger at the injustices of the world in which we live and infused with hope and passion about human possibilities. At times, such charismatic wishful thinking has been a powerful force, contributing to the mobilization of people for struggle and sacrifice. But it is unlikely to form an adequate basis for transforming the world in ways that actually produce a sustainable emancipatory alternative. The history of the human struggles for radical social change is filled with heroic victories over existing structures of oppression followed by the tragic construction of new forms of domination, oppression and inequality. The second task of emancipatory social science, therefore, is to develop in as systematic a way as possible a scientifically grounded conception of viable alternative institutions.

Achievability. Developing coherent theories of *achievable* alternatives is the central task for the practical work of strategies for social change. This turns out to be a very difficult undertaking, both because views about achievability are vulnerable to “wishful thinking”, and because of the high levels of contingency of conditions in the future which will affect the prospects of success of any long-term strategy.

As in the case of viability, achievability is not really a simple dichotomy between the achievable and the unachievable: different projects of institutional transformation have different prospects for ever being implemented. The probability that any given alternative to existing social structures and institutions could be implemented some time in the future depends upon two kinds of processes: First, it depends upon the *consciously pursued strategies* and the *relative power* of social actors who support and oppose the alternative in question. Strategy matters because emancipatory alternatives are very unlikely to just “happen”; they can only come about

because people work to implement them, and are able to overcome various obstacles and forms of opposition. The probability of ultimate success, then, depends upon the balance of power of contending social forces consciously attempting to implement and resist emancipatory transformation. Second, the probability of any given alternative being implemented depends upon the trajectory over time of a wide range of *social structural conditions* that affect the possibilities of success of these strategies.¹⁴ This trajectory of conditions is itself partially the result of the cumulative *unintended* effects of human action, but it is also the result of the conscious strategies of actors *to transform the conditions of their own actions*. The achievability of an alternative, thus, depends upon the extent to which it is possible to formulate coherent, compelling strategies which both help create the conditions for implementing alternatives in the future and have the potential to mobilize the necessary social forces to support the alternative when those conditions occur. Developing an understanding of these issues is the objective of the third general task of emancipatory social science: the theory of transformation.

TRANSFORMATION

The third task of emancipatory social science is elaborating a theory of social transformation. We can think of emancipatory social science as a theory of a journey from the present to a possible future: the diagnosis and critique of society tells us why we want to leave the world in which we live; the theory of alternatives tells us where we want to go; and the theory of transformation tells us how to get from here to there – how to make viable alternatives, achievable.

A theory of transformation involves four central components:

(1). *A theory of social reproduction*. A central proposition of all theories of social emancipation is that the structures and institutions that generate the forms of oppression and social harms identified in the diagnosis and critique of society do not continue to exist simply out of some law of social inertia; they require active mechanisms of social reproduction. This proposition is based on a counterfactual argument: since these structures and institutions impose real harms on people, in the absence of some active process of social reproduction, the people harmed by the existing social arrangements would resist these harms and challenge these institutions in ways which would result in their transformation. The relative stability of oppressive structures and institutions, therefore, depends upon the existence a variety of interconnected mechanisms of social reproduction which block or contain such challenge. In order to transform those

¹⁴ To quote (out of context) Marx's famous aphorism: "[people] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 1852 [1977]: 97) The quote is usually taken to mean that social structures impose constraints on human agency, but the actual context of the quote is about the mental conditions of action. The full quote continues: "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits from the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language." (p.97) Even though Marx's point was focused on these kinds of cultural constraints on transforming the world, the more general idea is that collective strategies encounter conditions which are not themselves directly amenable to strategic choice.

institutions, therefore, we must develop a scientific understanding of how this reproduction occurs.

(2) *A theory of the gaps and contradictions within the process of reproduction.* If it were the case that the process of social reproduction was a completely coherent, pervasively integrated system, then there would be little possibility for deliberate strategies of social transformation.

Emancipatory change might still happen, but only as the outcome of unintended trajectories of change operating “behind the backs” of people. Some theories of society come close to affirming this kind of totalizing view of social reproduction: domination is so pervasive and coherent, that all acts of apparent resistance merely serve to further stabilize the system of domination itself. Such theories may still embody a diagnosis and critique of society, but they ultimately reject the possibility of an emancipatory social science, for they provide no grounds for believing that effective struggles for emancipatory transformation are possible, and thus scientific knowledge cannot contribute to challenging forms of oppression.¹⁵ An emancipatory theory of social transformation needs to examine the cracks in the edifice, the contradictions and gaps in the process of social reproduction, the ways in which social reproduction is prone to failures – in short, the various ways in which the process of social reproduction opens up spaces in which collective struggles for new possibilities are possible.

However, if we take seriously emancipatory social science as a form of *science*, not just *philosophical critique*, then we cannot assume *a priori* that sufficiently sharp contradictions of social reproduction exist to allow for effective emancipatory challenge. The *search* for contradictory processes that open spaces for emancipatory transformation is a central part of the agenda, but the *discovery* of such possibilities depends upon the progress of knowledge.

(3) *A theory of the underlying dynamics and trajectory of unintended social change.*

Emancipatory social science aspires to include not simply a sociological theory of social reproduction and social contradictions, but also a systematic theory of the dynamic trajectory of *unintended* social change. In order to formulate compelling long term projects of social transformation, it is obviously desirable to understand not simply the obstacles and openings for strategies in the present, but how those obstacles and opportunities are likely to develop over time. This was the central thrust of the theory of history – historical materialism – in classical Marxism: it proposed a systematic, coherent account of the dynamic tendencies inside of capitalism which propelled it along a particular trajectory of unintended social change. This trajectory was not itself willed by anyone, it was not the result of a conscious project of generating this trajectory; it was the unintended by-product of the strategies of actors pursuing their goals within the existing structure of social relations. Historical materialism in effect proposed a broad-stroke history of the future. *If* this theory were adequate, it would be of enormous help in formulating long-term strategies for emancipatory transformation since it would give actors a sense of how the obstacles and opportunities for struggles were likely to

¹⁵ The theoretical framework for analyzing power and domination elaborated by Michel Foucault sometimes comes very close to this view of totalizing, untransformable power relations. Resistance happens, but its transformative potential is denied. To a somewhat lesser extent, much of Pierre Bourdieu’s work on social reproduction, with his emphasis on deeply engrained “habitus” (internalized dispositions) offers very little room for strategic challenge and transformation. Social change can happen, and perhaps this might be emancipatory in some historical moments where the match between internalized dispositions and social spaces is disrupted, but this is unlikely to be the result of collective projects of emancipatory transformation.

evolve over time.

As we will see in chapter 4, I do not believe that this classical theory of the immanent tendencies of social change is satisfactory, but I also do not believe that any compelling alternative has been developed. We may have good scientific understanding of the mechanisms of social reproduction and their contradictions, but not of the immanent tendencies of social development generated by the interplay of reproduction, contradictions, and social action. The absence of a compelling theory of the dynamic trajectory of social change is thus a significant gap in emancipatory social science. It means that the formulation of robust projects of emancipatory social transformation necessarily must be formulated with relatively thin knowledge of the likely conditions to be faced in the future. This poses an interesting challenge: any plausible project of emancipatory transformation must adopt a long time horizon, for the kinds of fundamental structural and institutional changes needed for a creating democratic egalitarian society cannot be achieved in the immediate future, and yet our capacity to generate scientifically credible knowledge about social conditions beyond the near future is very limited. There is thus a gap between the time-horizons of scientific theory and the time-horizons of transformative struggles.

(4). *A theory of collective actors, strategies, and struggles.* In the end, if emancipatory visions of viable alternatives are to become the actual real utopias of achieved alternatives it will be the result of conscious strategies by people committed to democratic egalitarian values. The final central component of a theory of social transformation, therefore, is a theory of strategies of collective action and transformative struggle. The theory of social reproduction maps out the obstacles to social change we face. The theory of contradictions helps us understand the opportunities that exist in spite of those obstacles. The theory of dynamic trajectory – if we had such a theory – would tell us how these obstacles and opportunities are likely to evolve over time. And the theory of transformative strategy helps us understand how we can collectively contend with the obstacles and take advantage of the opportunities to move us in the direction social emancipation.

Figures

Figure 1. Three Criteria for Evaluating Social Alternatives

