

## *Chapter 7*

### *Elements of a theory of transformation*

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The set of real utopian proposals we have examined in the previous two chapters does not constitute a comprehensive blueprint for a society beyond capitalism. Many other institutional transformations would be necessary for the construction of a robust, socialist economy, let alone for a society within which radical democratic egalitarian emancipatory ideals could be realized outside of economic structures as well. Nevertheless, if the full array of institutional proposals we have examined were implemented in a serious and pervasive way, capitalism would be profoundly transformed. While some of the proposals, taken individually, might be considered only modest movements along a particular pathway of social empowerment, taken collectively they would constitute a fundamental transformation of the class relations of capitalism and the structures of power and privilege rooted in those relations. Capitalism might still remain a component in the hybrid configuration of power relations governing economic activity, but it would be a subordinated capitalism heavily constrained within limits set by the deepened democratization of both state and economy.

Even if one accepts this vision of social empowerment as both *desirable* and *viable*, the question remains: how could this possibly be *achievable*? A skeptic might argue thus: If indeed these institutional arrangements constitute central components of a viable movement in the direction radical democratic egalitarian emancipatory ideals, then the creation of these institutions would be massively opposed by elites whose interests would be threatened by such changes. And, so long as capitalism remains the dominant component in the economic structure, those elites would have sufficient power to block or subvert any serious movement along the pathways of social empowerment.

This, then, is the fundamental problem for a theory of transformation: in order to advance democratic egalitarian emancipatory ideals it is necessary to radically extend and deepen the weight of social empowerment within economic structures in capitalist societies, but significant movements towards real social empowerment is a threat to the interests of powerful actors who benefit most from capitalist structures and who can use their power to oppose such movements. How, then, can significant movement on the pathways of social empowerment be accomplished? To answer this question we need a theory of emancipatory social transformation.

A fully developed theory of social transformation involves four interlinked components: a theory of *social reproduction*, a theory of the *limits and contradictions of reproduction*, a theory of *trajectories of unintended social change*, and a theory of *transformative strategies*. In this chapter we will briefly sketch each of these agendas. I will not attempt to thoroughly explore any of them; this would be the task of book in its own right. Rather, the purpose is to set the stage for a discussion of alternative modes of emancipatory transformation in the following three chapters.

## Social reproduction

The term “social reproduction” in sociological theory is used in a variety of distinct ways. Sometimes it refers to the problem of intergenerational reproduction of social status: social reproduction is primarily about the ways in which parents transmit status to their children, through socialization, education, wealth transfers, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes social reproduction is used as a contrast to “production”: reproduction refers to those activities that reproduce people over time, particularly the caring and nurturing activities performed especially by women, in contrast to activities that produce goods and services.<sup>2</sup> Here I am using the term to refer to the processes that reproduce the underlying structure of social relations and institutions of a society. While this certainly involves mechanisms for the intergenerational transmission of status and includes the problem of reproducing people on a day-to-day basis, in the present context I will use the concept to refer to the reproduction of social structures.

All forms of emancipatory social theory contain at least a rudimentary account of social reproduction. Sometimes this can be quite simple, emphasizing the ways in which powerful and privileged actors use coercion to maintain their advantages. But more characteristically theories of social reproduction involve complex accounts of how the subjectivities and mundane practices of people are formed in such a way as to help stabilize social systems.

Social reproduction in capitalist society takes place through two sorts of interconnected processes which can be termed *passive reproduction* and *active reproduction*. Passive reproduction refers to those aspects of social reproduction that are anchored in the mundane routines and activities of everyday life. This is social reproduction of “the dull compulsion of everyday life.”<sup>3</sup> People go about their daily life with ingrained habits and dispositions, a sense of the naturalness and taken-for-grantedness of the social world that comes simply from living in it. This passive aspect of social reproduction is not the result of specialized effort and consciously constructed institutions designed for the purpose of social reproduction. Passive social reproduction is simply a by-product of the ways in which the daily activities of people mesh in a kind of self-sustaining equilibrium in which the dispositions and choices of actors generate a set of interactions that reinforces those dispositions and choices.<sup>4</sup>

Active social reproduction, in contrast, is the result of specific institutions and structures which at least in part are designed to serve the purpose of social reproduction. This includes a wide variety of institutions: the police, the courts, state administration,

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<sup>1</sup> Citations: Bourdieu, etc.

<sup>2</sup> This use of the term “social reproduction” is especially prominent in feminist literature. citations

<sup>3</sup> find source of this phrase.

<sup>4</sup> Much of Bourdieu’s analysis of social reproduction concerns various aspects of what I am here calling passive reproduction. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* identifies the ways in which individuals acquire unconscious dispositions which enable them to function smoothly within a structure of relations. This constitutes the basis for a process of social reproduction to the extent that these dispositions lead to practices that reinforce that reinforce the dispositions. Passive reproduction is also very close to the notion of equilibrium in certain strands of institutional economics informed by game theory. See for example Masahiko Aoki, *Comparative Institutional Analysis* (MIT Press, 2001).

education, the media, churches, and so on. This does not imply that the only purpose of such institutions is social reproduction. Most complex social institutions serve a variety of “functions”. Nor does the claim that these are institutions of active social reproduction imply that such institutions are always effective. Indeed, the limits and contradictions of institutions of social reproduction are of pivotal importance for a theory of social emancipation. What is at issue here is that social reproduction is the result of the deliberate actions of institutions and not simply the unconscious by-product of the mundane activities of individuals.

Active and passive reproduction interact in important ways. Passive reproduction is aided by various institutions which help stabilize the mundane routines of everyday life. The regulation of contracts by the state, for example, facilitates predictable routines in labor markets and work, which in turn underwrite the passive reproduction generated by daily activities in workplaces. Accordingly passive reproduction can be disrupted when the institutions that shape the contexts of daily life are disrupted for one reason or another. But equally, the burden on institutions of active social reproduction is much greater if the processes of passive reproduction are weak and contradictory. Active and passive social reproduction thus constitutes a system of variable coherence and effectiveness.

The basic proposition of a theory of social reproduction within most currents of emancipatory social theory is this: *Social structures and institutions that systematically impose harms on people require vigorous mechanisms of active social reproduction in order to be sustained over time.* Oppression and exploitation are not sustained through some simple process of social inertia rooted only in processes of passive reproduction; they require active mechanisms of social reproduction in order to be sustained.<sup>5</sup>

This proposition is itself derived from three underling claims:

1. *The reality of harms.* The harms specified in the diagnosis and critique of capitalism do not simply reflect the peculiar values and ideas of theorists; they are to a greater or lesser extent experienced by people as real harms.<sup>6</sup> This does not

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<sup>5</sup> This way of framing the issues gives the theory of social reproduction a certain “functionalist” cast: The argument begins with a claim that oppressive social structures “require” an array of processes in order to survive; we observe that these structures do survive; and therefore we conclude that there must exist the requisite kinds of mechanisms. Traditional Marxist analyses of the state, for example, often treat the state as “fulfilling the function” of reproducing the economic structure. G.A. Cohen has forcefully argued that the classical base/superstructure analysis of capitalism in historical materialism relied on functional explanations: the superstructure exists and takes the form it does because it reproduces the economic base. (G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: a defense*). Such functional reasoning, however, need not imply that mechanisms of reproduction are generated by some automatic, nonintentional process operating “behind the backs” of people. Social reproduction is a contested, partial, and contradictory reality. If there are strong tendencies for particular institutions to contribute functionally to social reproduction, this is the result of the history of struggles over social reproduction and the resulting process of institution building, not some automatic, functional logic of the system.

<sup>6</sup> There are some currents of contemporary social theory which reject the idea that it is possible to make objective claims about harms and suffering, or about their antithesis, human flourishing. Suffering and flourishing, the argument goes, are entirely derived from arbitrary and variable cultural standards. It is possible to talk about “real harms” only in culturally-defined harms. While culture plays a pivotal role in the interpretation of harms and suffering and affects the ways in which people cope with harms and

mean, of course, that people necessarily understand the *source* of these harms. This is why emancipatory social science begins with a diagnosis and critique of existing social structures and institutions. But while the nature and causes of harms may not be transparent, nevertheless the harms are real, not simply a matter of perspective: they are embodied in lived experience by actual people and would in general be recognized as harms if people had all of the relevant information.

2. *Human capacities and motivations.* People universally have certain basic capacities (intelligence, imagination, problem-solving abilities, etc.) and motivations (for material wellbeing and security, social connection, autonomy, etc.) which would lead one to predict that when they experience things which are harmful to their lives, they will try to do something about it. When the source of harms is social, this means that *in the absence of counteracting forces*, people will try to change the social conditions which generate these harms. This does not mean that people never resign themselves to a life of suffering, but that such resignation requires explanation given human intelligence and problem-solving capacity. Something must be interfering with a response that would improve their situation.

3. *Obstacles.* In the absence of mechanisms which block social transformation, there will thus be a tendency for people to challenge those social structures and institutions which generate harms, and while this does not necessarily mean that they will fully succeed, it does mean that those structures and institutions are likely to change. The absence of challenges to oppression, therefore, requires an explanation. This is what a theory of social reproduction attempts to provide for an emancipatory social science: understanding the specific mechanisms that generate obstacles to such processes of oppression-reducing social transformation. This is not to suggest that oppressive social structures are always precarious, vulnerable to challenge, and that they need finely-tuned mechanisms to hold them together. Capitalism is not like a biological organism which can only survive under very specific and restrictive conditions. What an oppressive social system like capitalism needs are reasonably effective mechanisms that contain social conflicts within tolerable limits and that mute their disruptive effects sufficiently so that capitalist investment and capital accumulation can take place.

Understood in this way, the problem of social reproduction within an emancipatory social science is not the same as a classical “problem of social order” within sociology. Theories of social order and of social reproduction both attempt to explain social integration and stability, but they do so against different counterfactuals. The counterfactual to social order is Hobbesian chaos; the counterfactual to social reproduction is social transformation. The problem of social order is grounded in the latent potential for individuals to act in normatively unconstrained predatory ways – the war of all against all. The theory of social order attempts to explain the mechanisms that generate stable forms of cooperation and social integration by counteracting such individualistic antisocial tendencies of predation. The problem of social reproduction is

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suffering, I do not think that the problem of harms can be reduced to a problem of culturally determined perceptions. For a discussion of a realist view of suffering and flourishing, see Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge, 2005)

grounded in the latent potential for people to collectively challenge structures of domination, oppression and exploitation. The theory attempts to explain the mechanisms that generate sufficiently stable forms of cooperation and system integration to contain such collective tendencies for transformation. Both the problem of social order and the problem of social reproduction are important themes in social theory, and certain institutions may contribute to both -- the police, for example, can both prevent chaos and obstruct emancipatory transformation. Our concern here, however, is not with the issue of social order as such, but with the processes that contribute systematically to the reproduction of the fundamental social structures of power, oppression and privilege in capitalist society.

What, then, are the central ingredients for a theory of social reproduction? Four clusters of mechanisms through which institutions of various sorts affect the actions of people, individually and collectively, are especially important: *coercion*, *institutional rules*, *ideology*, and *material interests*. These constitute mechanisms of capitalist social reproduction to the extent that they, first, obstruct individual and collective actions which would be threatening to capitalist structures of power and privilege, and second, channel actions in such a way that these actions positively contribute to the stability of those social structures, particularly through the ways in which they contribute to passive reproduction.<sup>7</sup> The core problem of a theory of reproduction of capitalism is to understand the ways in which the dominant institutions of capitalist society accomplish this.

Coercion, rules, ideology, and material interests interact in a variety of ways, some more effective than others in creating a system of coherent social reproduction. Two configurations are especially important, *despotism* and *hegemony*.<sup>8</sup> In the former coercion and rules are the central mechanisms of social control; ideology and material interests mainly function to reinforce coercion and rules. In the latter, ideology and material interests play a much more central role in social reproduction. In what follows we will first briefly look at each of the clusters of mechanisms and then examine the contrast between despotism and hegemony.

*Coercion: Mechanisms which raise the costs of collective challenge*

At the center of active social reproduction are various processes which raise the cost of collective challenges to existing structures of power and privilege by imposing various kinds of punishments on people for those actions. This would include both things which raise the costs and risks to individuals of participating in collective actions and the costs to collectivities of organizing such actions.

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<sup>7</sup> Obstructing threatening actions and promoting stability are not the same thing, since among non-threatening actions some actively contribute to sustaining power and privilege while other actions may have no systematic effects on the issue of stability.

<sup>8</sup> This particular terminology for the contrast comes from Michael Burawoy's reworking of Gramsci's understanding of hegemony. In his discussions of the problem workers cooperation with capitalists within the labor process he distinguishes between what he calls hegemonic factory regimes and despotic factory regimes. This is a specific instance of the more general idea of despotic and hegemonic forms of social reproduction. See Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production* (get precise citation).

Of particular importance here are the ways in which the state regulates collective action by making certain forms of collective action illegal. This is not simply a question of the state proscribing insurrectionary violence by revolutionary movements that directly challenge existing power structures, but of the state regulating a wide range of associational practices that bear on the problem of forming collective organization for transformative social struggle. For example, part of the explanation for the weakness of the American labor movement is the particularly restrictive legal rules imposed on unions for organizing workers and engaging in collective action. The rules that raise the costs of collective action for individuals and unions include such things as the legal right of employers to hire permanent replacement workers during strikes, laws that bar secondary boycotts by unions, rules governing union certification and decertification elections that are advantageous to employers, and so on. A union which violated these rules would face directly repressive actions by the state, ranging from heavy court imposed fines to imprisonment of union members and leaders. This adverse legal environment for labor organizing is further aggravated by the administrative practices of the state regulatory apparatuses which only weakly enforce rules favorable to labor. The overall result, therefore, is a relatively repressive and hostile regulatory environment for union organizing.

Beyond direct state regulation, non-state actors in various ways also use coercion and the threats of coercion to raise the costs of collective challenge to structures of power and privilege. Sometimes these non-state forms of repression are themselves authorized by the state, as in rules which allow employers to fire employees who are seen as troublemakers, or rules which prevent people from handing out leaflets in shopping malls. Other times private repressiveness may not be formally authorized, but nevertheless tolerated by the state, as in the long history of privately organized coercion to maintain structures of racial domination and exclusion.

Repression, we know, does not always work. It can breed anger, undermine legitimacy, and contribute to solidarities of shared victimization. In some situations, therefore, coercion can trigger intensified resistance and thus fail as a mechanism of social reproduction. A key problem for a theory of social reproduction, therefore, is to understand the conditions which reinforce or undermine the effectiveness of coercive means of social reproduction. We will examine this issue in the discussion of hegemony below.

*Institutional rules: creating gradients of collective action opportunities*

While the importance of direct repression of illegal activity should not be underestimated, it would be a mistake to see the state's role in social reproduction as operating exclusively, or even primarily, through such explicit coercion. Of equal importance are the procedural "rules of the game" which make some courses of action much easier to pursue and others more difficult. Such gradients of collective action opportunities contribute to social reproduction when it is the case that the easy and less risky strategies are much less likely to be threatening to the stability of capitalism than the more difficult strategies.

Consider, for example, the core institution of representative democracy in capitalist societies. Prior to the advent of the universal franchise, the general fear among ruling

elites was that democracy would threaten the stability of capitalism. This seems straightforward enough: you give people who are harmed by capitalism the vote and it would seem that this would make it easier for them to challenge capitalism. Marx himself expressed this expectation when he wrote about representative democracy:

The comprehensive contradiction of this constitution, however, consists in the following: the classes whose social slavery the constitution is to perpetuate, proletariat, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie, it puts into the possession of political power through universal suffrage. And from the class whose old social power it sanctions, the bourgeoisie, it withdraws the political guarantees of this power. It forces the political rule of the bourgeoisie into democratic conditions, which at every moment help the hostile classes to victory and jeopardize the very foundations of bourgeois society.<sup>9</sup>

As it turned out, representative democracy has been one of the critical sources of social stability in developed capitalism. Adam Przeworski, in his brilliant analysis of the dynamic reproductive effects of capitalist democracy, explains this outcome in terms of the mechanisms by which capitalist democracy channels social conflicts in ways that tend to reproduce capitalist social relations.<sup>10</sup> The dilemma faced by socialist parties historically was basically this: if they participated seriously in electoral competition, then they would be subjected to a whole series of systematic pressures to act responsibly and play by the rules which over time would erode militancy; if, on the other hand, they abstained from electoral competition in order to avoid these pressures, then they risked political marginalization since other parties would then be better positioned to champion the immediate economic interests of workers and other potential supporters of socialist parties. To avoid such marginalization, socialist parties historically chose to participate energetically in elections, but in order to win elections they had to support policies which would attract middle class voters whose interests were less sharply at odds with capitalism, and when they won elections from time to time, if they wanted to remain in power they had to pursue policies which would foster robust capital accumulation. This does not mean, Przeworski stresses, that socialist and social democratic parties have not in fact served important material interests of workers, but they have done so in ways which broadly strengthen rather than undermine capitalism. Representative democracy has greatly facilitated this integrative process.

The design of electoral institutions in capitalist states is a specific instance of a more general phenomenon that Claus Offe has termed “negative selection” – the organization of state institutions in such a way as to filter out (“negatively select”) those practices and policies which would have especially disruptive effects on the reproduction of capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Negative selection mechanisms built into state would include things like the formal rules of bureaucratic administration (which insulate the state bureaucracy from popular pressures), the procedures of courts (which make it difficult for anti-system

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<sup>9</sup> Marx/Engels, *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, vol.I, Moscow, pp.235-6

<sup>10</sup> Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*... Is also the superb analysis of the system-maintaining features of capitalist democracy in Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *On Democracy* (Penguin Books, 198X)

<sup>11</sup> See Claus Offe, “structural problems of the capitalist state....”, other citations.

forces to effectively use courts), and the rules through which the state acquires revenues for its activities (which make the state dependent on income generated within the capitalist economy for its tax base). Offe argues that the critical reproductive property of these mechanisms lies in what they systematically *exclude*: these filter mechanisms all have the effect of systematically impeding the possibility of systematic challenges to the basic structures of capitalism being translated into actions by the state.<sup>12</sup> When critics of capitalism argue that the capitalist state is systematically biased in favor of the capitalist class, much of what they are describing is the class character of these negative selection mechanisms built into the institutional rules of the apparatuses of the state.<sup>13</sup>

*Ideology and culture: mechanisms which shape the subjectivities of actors.*

There are many different idioms one can use to discuss the social processes through which the subjectivities of actors are formed and the ways this contributes to (or perhaps undermines) social reproduction in the sense we are using this term here. One way of doing this is by drawing a contrast between *ideology* and *culture*. As I will use the terms here, ideology refers to the *conscious* aspects of subjectivity: beliefs, ideas, values, doctrines, theories, and so on. Culture refers to the *nonconscious* aspects of subjectivity: dispositions, habits, tastes, tacit skills.<sup>14</sup> Thus, for example, the *belief* that intense competition is a good thing would be an aspect of capitalist ideology; the personal habits, skills and dispositions to act in intensely competitive ways is an aspect of capitalist culture.<sup>15</sup>

A central issue in the theory of social reproduction is the extent to which ideology and culture defined in this way contribute to the sustainability of structures of power, inequality, and privilege. Why should it be the case that the ideas people hold as well as their inner dispositions should contribute to the stability of a social structure? A variety of mechanisms have been proposed to answer this question. The simplest centers on the way the production and dissemination of ideas are in significant ways controlled by individuals and institutions that benefit substantially from existing structures of power and privilege.<sup>16</sup> The domination of the mass media by capitalist corporations, for

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<sup>12</sup> The argument that the structure of the states imposes negative selectivity on state actions is a form of weak functionalism. The structure of the state excludes highly *dysfunctional* actions, actions which would seriously undermine capitalism, but among the non-excluded possibilities there is no claim that functionally optimal actions are selected.

<sup>13</sup> The most extended, systematic analysis of the class biases built into the machinery of the capitalist state and of the complex ways these contribute to the reproduction of capitalism is Goran Therborn's *What does the Ruling Class do when it Rules?* (London: Verso).

<sup>14</sup> This definition of culture, centering on the way individual dispositions are formed, corresponds closely to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus". (expand a comment on Bourdieu here)

<sup>15</sup> This is not the standard way of explicitly defining the contrast of culture and ideology even if it corresponds in practice to the main ways these two terms are used in explanations. In many discussions, culture is an all embracing term within which ideology would be a specific type of cultural product. In other discussions, ideology is used more restrictively to refer to coherent, codified doctrines rather than the full set of conscious elements of subjectivity.

<sup>16</sup> Add comment her re Marx and Engels formulation in "The German Ideology" that the "Ruling ideas of an epoch are the idea of the ruling class" [get proper quote]. The mechanism which underlies this claim is the control over the process of production of ideas by capitalists and their proxies.

example, would be a particularly salient aspect of this process. While this does not guarantee that the only messages people receive are those consistent with the interests of people in power, it does mean that system-affirming ideas will be more prevalent, disseminated more widely, and be backed by higher status media and institutions than ideas which challenge structures of power and privilege. To the extent that the beliefs and ideas people hold are shaped by the explicit messages they receive, then this will tend to generate a rough correspondence between prevalent beliefs and the requirements of social reproduction.

Whatever tendency exists for there to be a correspondence of ideology and culture to the requirements of the social reproduction of capitalism, however, is not simply the result of deliberate inculcation of ideas by powerful actors. Such correspondence is also generated by the micro-processes of the formation of beliefs and dispositions. Institutions of socialization, such as the family and schools, are generally concerned with instilling habits and dispositions that will enable children to function well in the world when they are adults, to live the best lives possible given the constraints which they are expected to face. This means that parents and teachers try as best they can to encourage dispositions that are at least compatible with effective functioning within existing structure of power, inequality and privilege. This does not always work well, but it generates at least a rough correspondence between the kinds of social subjects needed for the social structure to be reproduced and the kinds of social subjects produced within the society.<sup>17</sup>

Beliefs, of course, are not simply inculcated in the process of childhood socialization, but are continually formed and reformed throughout life, and this also bears on the processes of social reproduction. Here the issue is the various ways in which psychological processes of belief formation interact with the lived experience of people in the social settings in which they act. This is where the processes of active and passive social reproduction meet. Jon Elster, for example, argues that adaptive preference formation is one of the psychological processes by which people come to align their beliefs about what is desirable with their perceptions of what is possible. This provides psychological foundations for certain key elements of inequality-supporting ideologies.<sup>18</sup> Göran Therborn has elaborated a simple learning model in his analysis of ideology and the formation of the human subject: As individuals go about their lives they act on the basis of certain kinds of beliefs about the nature of the social world in which they live. If they believe that the individual acquisition of education is a way to improve one's material condition, then they are more likely to attempt to get education than if they believe education doesn't matter, and if they get more education then their economic prospects are likely to be better than those of people who did not. Every day when people go to work they act on the basis of their expectations about how other people will behave

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<sup>17</sup> The broad functional correspondence between the process of formation of social subjects in schools and the requirements of capitalist organizations is a longstanding theme in Marxist and critical studies of education. For an influential account of this correspondence see Samuel Bowles and Herb Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books...).

<sup>18</sup> Elster is very careful to argue against any view that sees beliefs as automatically adjusting in just the right way to be functional for social reproduction. (find quote about society not secreting the ideology it needs). Nevertheless, much of his analysis clarifies the psychological mechanisms that help anchor such functional-reproductive beliefs. See Jon Elster in *Making Sense of Marx*.

and what will be the consequences of their actions. In a well functioning set of institutions with interlocking expectations and patterns of behavior, these expectations and predictions will be fairly consistently affirmed, and the underlying beliefs thus reinforced; when, the predictions fail, the beliefs will tend to be weakened. To the extent that the social system generates a pattern of “affirmations and sanctions” (to use Therborn’s expression) consistent with the beliefs in a given ideology, that ideology will be strengthened. Ideology contributes to social reproduction, then, when beliefs that contribute to social stability are affirmed in the daily practices of people.

Of the various aspects of ideology and belief formation that bear on the problem of social reproduction and potential challenges to structures of power and privilege, perhaps the most important are beliefs about *what is possible*.<sup>19</sup> People can have many complaints about the social world and know that it generates significant harms to themselves and others, and yet still believe that such harms are inevitable, that there are no other real possibilities that would make things significantly better, and thus little point in struggling to change things, particularly since such struggles involve significant costs. Such beliefs are formed in part through education, the media and other processes by which people are told what is possible. But they are also forged through the daily, mundane activities in the world which make existing institutions, social relations and structure seem natural and inevitable.

*Material interests: Mechanisms which tie the welfare of individuals to the effective functioning of capitalist structures*

Joan Robinson, the Cambridge University economist from the 1930s through the 1950s, is reputed to have said, “The one thing worse than being exploited in capitalism is not being exploited.” By this she meant, of course, that unemployment was a worse condition than being exploited within work, not that exploitation as such was desirable. This quip reflects a central point about the process of the social reproduction of capitalist society: capitalism organizes the material conditions of life of people in such a way that nearly everyone fares better when the capitalist economy is doing well than when it is doing badly. The famous slogan, “What is good for General Motors is good for America” thus contains a crucial truth: within a well-functioning capitalism the material interests of nearly everyone depend to a significant degree upon successful capitalist economic activity.

This near universal dependence of everyone’s material interests on the pursuit of profits by capitalist firms is perhaps the most fundamental mechanism of social reproduction of capitalist society. It lends credibility to the claim that capitalism is in fact in everyone’s interest, not just the interests of the capitalist class, and it places a considerably greater burden on the argument that an alternative would be better. It underwrites broad public support for a wide range of state policies designed to sustain robust capital accumulation and acts as a systematic constraint on the pursuit of policies that might in other ways benefit a large majority of people but which might threaten

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<sup>19</sup> Therborn identifies three core questions for which ideology gives people answers: What is good? What exists? What is possible? The first of these defines the normative dimension of beliefs. The second centers on descriptions and explanations about how the social world works. And the third concerns what alternatives are imaginable.

capitalist profits. So long as capitalism can effectively tie the material interests of the large majority of the population to the interests of capital, other mechanisms of social reproduction have less work to do.

It is because of the centrality of this mechanism that economic crises in capitalism loom so large in discussions of social reproduction, for in crisis conditions the close link between individual material interests and capitalism is weakened. In a prolonged crisis large numbers of people may become relatively marginalized from the labor market and the core mechanisms of capitalist integration, and thus find ideologies and movements that challenge capitalism more credible. Marx's slogan, "Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains and a world to win," has particular cogency when it is not simply the case that workers perceive capitalism as obstructing their freedom but when it fails to provide for basic material welfare and security. The stability of capitalism and its robustness against transformative challenges thus depend in significant ways on the extent to which the economic processes of capitalism generate this kind of economic integration for large numbers of people.

### *Despotic and Hegemonic Reproduction*

Coercion, rules, ideology/culture, and material interests should not be understood as four independent, autonomous clusters of mechanisms each of which *additively* contributes its bit to the process of social reproduction. Rather, social reproduction is the result of the complex forms of interaction among these processes. Institutional rules function better when people also believe that they are legitimate (an aspect of ideology), when following them is in the material interests of people, and when there is a predictable sanction for violating the rules.<sup>20</sup> Coercion is more effective when rarely used because most people comply with laws out of duty or self-interest. Ideologies are more robust when they mesh with important aspects of material interests. To understand the problem of social reproduction, therefore, we must study configurations of mechanisms and not just the mechanisms taken separately.

Two configurations of these mechanisms of reproduction are particularly important: *despotic reproduction* and *hegemonic reproduction*.

In the despotic form of social reproduction, coercion is the primary mechanism of social reproduction, coupled with the specific institutional rules through which coercion is exercised. Social order is maintained primarily through fear, and potential transformative challenges are blocked primarily by various forms of repression. There is still a role for ideology and culture and for material interests, if only to provide cohesion within elites and a necessary degree of loyalty within the repressive forces themselves. But most of the burden of social reproduction is carried by coercive processes.

In the hegemonic form of reproduction, coercion recedes to the background, and the

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<sup>20</sup> The point here is not that most people follow institutional rules simply out of fear of punishment. Compliance for most people most of the time is because of a belief in the obligation to follow rules. Nevertheless, the reality of sanctions still matters for it prevents the erosion of this sense of obligation that is likely to occur if people can violate the rules with impunity. For a systematic discussion of this interplay of obligation and coercion, see Maraget Levi, *Of Revenue and Rule* (reference).

active consent of subordinate classes and groups becomes much more important.<sup>21</sup> Active consent means that people willingly participate and cooperate in reproducing existing structures of power and inequality not mainly out of fear, but because they believe that doing so is both in their interests and is the right thing to do. Active consent requires more than the simple recognition that one's livelihood depends upon capitalist profits. That much is true even in a despotic system of capitalist social reproduction. It requires a much stronger sense that at least some of the gains from capital accumulation are shared with ordinary people, either through productivity-linked wage increases or through state redistribution in the form of a "social wage." This kind of *quid pro quo* of workers' active cooperation in exchange for gains from growth is called a "class compromise."

Active consent also depends on the ways in which the dominant class, to use Gramsci's expression, is seen as providing "moral and intellectual leadership" to the society as a whole. Leaders are different from bosses: bosses are obeyed because of their power; leaders are followed because of the belief that they are on your side, that they have your interests at heart. When this is the case, the ideology which supports the status quo is not experienced as an alien body of ideas imposed on the society, but as "common sense" that links elites and masses together in a common project.<sup>22</sup>

Institutional rules of the state are much more complex in hegemonic systems than in despotic systems of social reproduction. In a despotic system of reproduction, the institutional rules of the state affect social reproduction primarily through their role in the exercise of threats and sanctions. The main problem they face is containing arbitrary, self-destructive forms of repression. In the hegemonic form of social reproduction there is a much greater burden on institutional rules, since they are called upon to facilitate class compromise and forge at least a rough ideological consensus.

Despotic and hegemonic configurations of social reproduction are ideal-types. Most actual capitalist systems contain both despotic and hegemonic processes. In the United States today, despotic reproduction plays a key role with respect to certain segments of the population, especially inner city minorities. The extraordinarily high level of imprisonment of African-American young men reflects the failure of a hegemonic project of social integration. A substantial segment of the "middle class", on the other hand, participates enthusiastically in the tasks of social reproduction through fully hegemonic processes. For much of the working class, social reproduction takes a mixed form.

### **Limits, gaps, and contradictions within the process of reproduction**

If processes of social reproduction were comprehensive, effective and fully coherent, then there would be little possibility for effective strategies of radical social transformation. The only kinds of deliberate social change that would be possible would be those entirely compatible with reproducing existing structures of power and privilege.

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<sup>21</sup> In Antonio Gramsci's well-known expression, hegemony consists of "consent surrounded by the armory of coercion" (get precise quote).

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent exposition of Gramsci's notions of ideological hegemony that emphasizes the ways in which it involves forging real ideological links between elites and masses, see Chantal Mouffe, "....." (essay on hegemony and articulation).

There are currents in social theory which come close to this view. Certain interpretations of the work of Foucault, for example, see domination as penetrating so deeply into the fabric of everyday life and practice that there is virtually no room for transformative resistance. Some accounts of ideology and culture make the hold of dominant ideologies and cultural forms seem so powerful that it is hard to see how meaningful challenge can occur. And some accounts of the repressive capacity of the state make it seem that even if people were somehow to break out of the straightjacket of the hegemonic ideology, they would never be able to organize collective actions capable of seriously threatening dominant classes and elites without triggering levels of repression that would render such challenges futile.

There are reasons to be skeptical of this radical pessimism. One of the central tasks of emancipatory social science is to try to understand the contradictions, limits and gaps in systems of reproduction which open up spaces for transformative strategies. There is, of course, no a priori guarantee in any time and place that those spaces are large enough to allow for significant movement in the direction of fundamental transformations of structures of domination, oppression, and exploitation. But even when the spaces are limited, they can allow for transformations that matter. In any case, emancipatory theory should not simply map the mechanisms of social reproduction, but also identify the processes that generate cracks and openings in the system of reproduction.

What, then, are the sources of limits and contradictions to social reproduction in capitalist societies? Four themes are especially important:

*1. Complexity and inconsistent requirement for social reproduction*

The first, and perhaps most fundamental, source of limits and gaps to social reproduction is complexity. Social systems, particularly when they are built around deep cleavages and forms of oppression, have multiple requirements for their stable reproduction and in general there is no reason to believe that these requirements are entirely consistent. What this means is the process of social reproduction is continually faced with dilemmas and trade-offs in which solutions to one set of problems create conditions which potentially intensify other problems.

Let me illustrate this problem with what might be called the “Frankenstein problem” of the state. For a whole host of familiar reasons, capitalism would destroy itself in the absence of an effective state capable of regulating various aspects of the market and production. There is thus what can be termed a functional necessity for what some people have called “flanking systems” through which the state intervenes to prevent such self-destructive processes. The financial system must be regulated, infrastructures must be built, training and education must be provided, predatory business practices must be controlled, contracts must be enforced, negative externalities countered, monopolies regulated, and so on. In order for these interventions to work well the state needs to have to have both a degree of autonomy and an effective capacity to act -- autonomy from the particular interests of specific capitalists and corporations and a real capacity to intervene to discipline specific capitalists and sectors. In the absence of this autonomy, parts of the state can be captured by particular groups of capitalists and state power used to protect their specific interests rather than manage the functioning of the capitalist system as a whole; in the absence of capacity, the state’s regulatory interventions will be ineffective.

This autonomy and capacity, however, also means that the state will have the ability to damage capital accumulation not just facilitate it. This creates the specter of the state undermining social reproduction either through serious mistakes or because the political leadership of the state begins to pursue anticapitalist objectives for one reason or another. Thus the Frankenstein problem: in order to be able to autonomously intervene functionally the state must have the capacity to do so destructively; it has the potential to become a monster out of control.

This potential Frankenstein problem becomes particularly intense as the conditions for a stable capitalist economy become more complex and require a broader array of state regulations and interventions. The extension and deepening of the interventionist capacity of the state creates a perpetual problem of lines of demarcation between state and economy as principles of action. These are no longer seen as “naturally” separated spheres and thus the scope and purposes of state action with respect to the economy are perpetually contested. In response to such contestation, capitalist elites and the political representatives they support might for a time argue for a radical retreat of the state towards deregulation and privatization, but a serious withdrawal of the state from the economic regulation of capitalism is an illusion. If the anti-statist mantra of neoliberalism were ever really implemented, capitalist crises would intensify and social reproduction become even more problematic. Thus the dilemma: reduce the role of the state and the likelihood of serious economic disruption increases; create the capacity and autonomy of the state needed for effective intervention to manage capitalism, and risk the continual politicization of the capitalist economy.<sup>23</sup>

There are many other contradictions and dilemmas generated by the multiple requirements for the stable social reproduction of capitalism: tensions between the conditions for the reproduction of global corporations and local capitalist firms; between the requirements of different sectors of the economy (eg. oil vs transportation; health care vs manufacturing); between reproducing the long-term environmental conditions for capitalism and the short-term rates of capital accumulation; and so on. There is no stable equilibrium possible in which all of the conditions are met, all of these tensions resolved, and this creates openings for strategies of social change.

## *2. Strategic Intentionality and its ramifications.*

The active social reproduction of capitalism occurs through institutions that solve problems of various sorts which, if left unsolved, would render capitalism more vulnerable to challenge and transformation. Functionally adequate solutions to problems of social reproduction, however, are not somehow secreted spontaneously by the workings of a society; they are produced through the intentional, strategic actions of people grappling with problems and struggling over the power to define the shape and

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<sup>23</sup> Claus Offe describes this tension in the role of the state in reproducing the capitalist economy as “the problem of whether the political administrative [system] can politically regulate the economic system without politicizing its substance and thus negating its identity as a capitalist economic system...” Claus Offe, “The Crisis of Crisis Management”, p.52

practices of institutions.<sup>24</sup> This means that institutions of social reproduction necessarily face three important problems: first, the problem of institutional design being the result of struggles over design rather than simple imposition; second, the problem of inadequate knowledge about the effects of alternative institutional designs and practices, and third, the problem of the accumulation of unintended and unanticipated consequences of intentional action.

The institutions that play a pivotal role in social reproduction are not the result of careful intentional design by powerful actors with a free hand to build these institutions as they wish; they are the result of struggles over institutions, especially among different factions of various sorts among elites, but also between elites and popular social forces. Marx's quip that people "make history, but not just as they choose" applies to elites just as much as to the masses. Institutional designs, therefore, reflect the balances of power and compromises of the social forces engaged in their creation and development. The resulting institutions may certainly be "good enough" for adequate social reproduction most of the time, but they are very unlikely to be finely-tuned, optimal machinery that block all efforts at transformative social change.

Second, even apart from the relatively messy conditions for the design and development of institutions important for social reproduction, inadequate knowledge is a chronic problem. Powerful actors may have access to more sophisticated economics and social science than ordinary citizens, but they are still prone to simple-minded theories about how society works and ideological blinders about optimal policies for social reproduction. Even if the political leadership of the state and other institutions of social reproduction is motivated to enact policies which secure the interests of capital and the social reproduction of capitalism, in many circumstances they act on the basis of quite faulty understandings of what is needed to accomplish these goals, at times with astounding stupidity. Mistakes, including quite serious mistakes, are therefore to be expected.

Finally, even when policies are based on good theories, most policies have unintended side effects and over time the accumulations of unintended consequences can undermine the value of initially effective institutional arrangements. Gaps in the process of social reproduction, therefore are both present from the start because of the strategic conditions under which those institutions are built, and they develop over time through the ramifications of unintended consequences.

### *3. Institutional rigidities and path dependency*

The problem of unintended consequences is particularly important because of the third source of limits of social reproduction -- institutional rigidity. The issue is a familiar one: the institutions which play an important role in macro social reproduction are created under specific historical conditions, facing particular problems and design possibilities. Their subsequent development bears the stamp of these initial conditions. Furthermore, they are themselves social systems in their own right, with internal cleavages, hierarchies,

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<sup>24</sup> The critique of those kinds of functionalist arguments which see functional solutions being spontaneously "secreted" by the needs of a system comes from Jon Elster, (reference to discussion of ideology in *Making Sense of Marx*).

power structures, conflicts of interest, and so on. In order to be sustained over time they too need mechanisms of social reproduction. These mechanisms of internal social reproduction render institutions relatively rigid – that is, they help sustain the basic structures of power and inequality within these institutions. This rigidity, however, makes it harder for institutions to flexibly change when the requirements for broader social reproduction change.<sup>25</sup> States have particular kinds of electoral rules, political jurisdictions, administrative structures; capitalist firms have particular corporate structures, managerial hierarchies, divisions of labor; educational systems are designed to deal with particular kinds of students, labor markets, and cultural conditions. Thus, even institutional designs that contribute effectively to social reproduction in one period under one set of conditions can easily become much less effective as conditions change. And because of the vested interests of people within those institutions and the strength of their own mechanisms of reproduction, they may be very difficult to change or replace.<sup>26</sup>

Two examples will illustrate these issues. In the United States most people get their health insurance from their employers. In the 1950s and 1960s large corporations embraced this arrangement as a way of tying their employees to the firm. It was a relatively inexpensive fringe benefit and seen as part of a package that contributed to a stable, loyal workforce. Gradually the benefit expanded, particularly to include retired workers who had worked for the firm for an extended period of time. Now, with an aging population and rapidly rising health costs, these health insurance obligations are a significant liability to many firms. It is one of the reasons large auto manufacturers are in serious economic difficulty. Yet this particular institution of social reproduction is now locked-in to a large, powerful private health insurance system which has effectively blocked any serious movement towards a universal public insurance system. From the point of view of the overall stability and social reproduction of capital accumulation in the United States, some form of universal publicly-funded insurance would almost certainly be better than employer-funded private insurance, yet the institutional rigidity of the existing system and the interests bound up with it prevent this change from occurring.

A second example is the pattern of urban transportation and housing in most American cities. In the 1950s and beyond a massive project of highway construction and suburbanization helped fuel a vibrant automobile-based process of capitalist economic growth in the United States. These policies transformed the built environment of American cities and changed the normative expectations about the balance between public and private modes of transportation. The twin processes of suburbanization and automobilization were central components of the hegemonic integration of material interests of workers with capitalist development in the decades following World War II. These processes also destroyed much of the physical infrastructure of public

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<sup>25</sup> This problem, it should be noted, applies to organizations committed to challenging existing institutions as well as to those institutions themselves: political parties and labor unions are institutions with internal hierarchies and power relations and internal mechanisms of social reproduction which generate path-dependent rigidities and may make it difficult for these organizations to adapt to changing strategic imperatives in their social environment.

<sup>26</sup> This is one of the robust findings of the school of organizational sociology called “organizational ecology”. In studies of capitalist firms, the basic organizational design of corporations changes mainly as one kind of firm replaces another rather than through processes of internal transformation.

transportation, most notoriously in Los Angeles, and imposed serious constraints on the future development of transportation systems. Today, under conditions of rapidly rising energy costs and concerns about global warming, this lack of infrastructure and the prevalence of low density residential development and urban sprawl make it very difficult in most large U.S. cities to move towards a renewed system of urban mass transit that would be desirable, not just for the lives of individuals, but for capitalism as well.

[perhaps add other examples: labor market rigidities in Europe]

#### *4. Contingency and unpredictability*

Institutional rigidity would not necessarily generate significant gaps in the process of social reproduction if the tasks and problems of social reproduction remained fairly constant or if the changes in those tasks were sufficiently predictable that they could be anticipated well in advance. But this is not the case: perhaps the one thing we can predict with certainty is that the future is uncertain. One might imagine that the key institutions of social reproduction could be designed in such a way that they could quickly and flexibly respond to whatever new demands were placed on them. After all, learning capacity and adaptive capacity are the hallmarks of well-designed institutions. To some extent this is what liberal democracy has accomplished in capitalism, for democratic institutions do in fact make possible learning and change more effectively than more closed authoritarian institutional structures. Nevertheless, even well-functioning liberal democratic institutions are plagued by institutional inertia, and the contingency and unpredictability of socio-economic and political changes continually disrupt smooth adjustments.

These four arguments for the gaps and contradictions in the process of social reproduction do not imply that the social reproduction of capitalism is perpetually precarious. The mechanisms of coercion, institutional rules, ideology, and material interests generally enable capitalist societies to muddle through pretty well and weather the storms of disruptive change when they occur. But the inevitable limits and contradictions in social reproduction do mean that even in periods in which prospects for transformative challenge seem quite limited, spaces are likely to open up for transformative challenge due to unexpected, contingent changes in the future.

#### **The underlying dynamics and trajectory of unintended social change.**

The first two components of a theory of emancipatory transformation tell us that any project of radical social transformation will face systematic obstacles generated by the mechanisms of social reproduction, but that these obstacles will have cracks and leave open spaces of action because of the limits and contradictions of reproduction which, at least periodically, make transformative strategies possible. However, these components by themselves do not give any specific prognosis about the long-term prospects for emancipatory change. They do not tell us whether the spaces of action are likely to expand or contract in the future, whether the mechanisms of reproduction tend to become more coherent or more crisis-prone. For this we need a theory of the trajectory of unintended social change.

The actual trajectory of large-scale social change we observe in history is the result of two interacting kinds of change-generating processes: first, the cumulative *unintended by-products of the actions* of people operating under existing social relations, and second, the effects of *conscious projects of social change* by people acting strategically to transform those social relations. The first includes such things as capitalists introducing new technologies or adopting new strategies of investment and competition, families changing their fertility behavior, and women deciding not to interrupt their labor market participation after the birth of a child. In each of these cases people engage in actions not in an effort to change the world, but to solve specific problems which they face. The cumulative effects of such individual actions, however, are social changes with very broad ramifications. These ramifications are “unintended effects” not because they are necessarily unwanted – women, for example, may welcome the collective erosion of traditional gender norms that is the cumulative effect of their individual adaptive strategies – but because the broad macro-effects were not part of the intentions and strategies that explain the actions in the first place. The second change-generating process includes actions by collective actors of various sorts – political parties, unions, social movements, nonprofit foundations, corporations, states – to deliberately transform social structures and institutions in various ways: through state policies, through social protests, through pressures on powerful organizations, through practical institution-building efforts, sometimes through violent confrontations. These actions, of course, also have cumulative unintended effects, and thus also constitute instances of the first kind of process, but they differ in also being directly motivated by the goal of generating social change.

Both deliberate and unintended processes of social change are crucial for emancipatory transformation. Significant movement towards radical egalitarian democratic social empowerment is not something that will happen just by accident as a by-product of social action for other purposes; it requires deliberate strategic action, and since such popular empowerment threatens the interests of powerful actors, this strategic action typically involves struggle. But strategy and struggle are not enough. For radical transformation to occur conditions must be “ripe”; the contradictions and gaps in the processes of social reproduction must create real opportunities for strategy to have meaningful transformative effects.

This confluence of trajectories of unintended social change with deliberate strategies of transformation has marked major contemporary episodes of emancipatory transformation. Consider the dramatic transformation of changes in gender relations since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Men and women went about their lives looking for jobs, fighting over housework, trying to make ends meet, raising their children. Employers adopted new technologies, faced new kinds of labor requirements, and looked for workers. Mostly people were not deliberately trying to change the world; they were trying to deal with concrete problems they encountered as they made their lives as best they could. However, because of the nature of the opportunities they faced, the resources they controlled, and the beliefs they held, and the choices they ultimately made, they did things which cumulatively contributed to the transformation of gender relations. This is not, of course, the end of the story. Deliberate efforts at social change were also crucial. Women joined together to fight for equal rights. They formed consciousness raising groups with the explicit purpose of changing their understanding of the world. They

engaged in local projects of institution-building for gender equality, and larger scale political mobilization for system level change. Men often resisted these changes, mocking feminists, but overall the forces for transformation were stronger. An important reason they were stronger is that the cumulative effect of the unintended processes had weakened the interests of powerful actors in the maintenance of male dominance.<sup>27</sup> By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a result of the interplay of the unintended consequences of individual actions and the deliberate strategies of transformation the gender order of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century had been pervasively changed. This is not to say that deep gender equality has been realized, but still the transformations are profound in an emancipatory direction.<sup>28</sup>

This duality to the processes which generate trajectories of social change poses a serious problem for people committed to emancipatory projects of transformation. The problem is this: any plausible strategy for the fundamental emancipatory transformation of existing institutions of power, inequality and privilege, especially in developed capitalist societies, has to have a fairly long time horizon. There is simply no short-term strategy that could plausibly work. If we believed that the basic social structural parameters within which we formed our strategies would remain constant, then perhaps we could avoid worrying too much about how conditions change over time. But this is not the case, and so, in order to have a coherent long term strategy we need at least a rough understanding of the general trajectory of unintended, unplanned social changes into the future. This turns out to be a daunting theoretical task.

Classical Marxism proposed precisely such a theory. As argued in chapter 3, historical materialism is basically a theory of the history of the future of capitalism. Marx attempted to identify how the unintended consequences of capitalist competition and exploitation in the process of capital accumulation generate a specific trajectory of capitalist development. This trajectory was marked by several salient features: an ever-expanding breadth and depth of market relations culminating in global capitalism and the commodification of social life; an increasing concentration and centralization of capital, resulting in an economy dominated by giant corporations; a general tendency for capital intensity and productivity to increase over time; a cyclical intensification of economic crisis; a tendency towards both the expansion of the working class and its homogenization; and a weakening of the economic mechanisms of social reproduction.

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<sup>27</sup> For an extended discussion of the ways the trajectory of economic changes eroded the interests of powerful men in sustaining strong male domination and how this interacts with social movements to produce transformations of gender relations, see Robert Jackson, *Destined for Equality: the inevitable rise of women's status*.

<sup>28</sup> [perhaps in the text] A similar argument can be made for the successful transformation of the segregationist institutions of racial domination in the U.S. South by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s compared to the failure of such movements in earlier decades. As David James has argued, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the segregationist racial state emerged and consolidated in the South to a significant extent because of its importance for the social reproduction of oppressive forms of agrarian labor, especially sharecropping. The destruction of sharecropping in the 1930s and the mechanization of Southern agriculture played a key role in eroding the material basis for this form of the state and made it much more vulnerable to transformation under changed broader political conditions in the post-WWII period. See David James, "..." (ASR article)

Many of the predictions of historical materialism have in fact been born out by the actual history of capitalism. In particular, capitalism has become a global system of capital accumulation; corporations have grown in both absolute and relative size; and capitalist commodification penetrates ever more pervasively into social life. But other predictions do not seem adequate. Capitalism does not seem to be faced with systematic tendencies towards intensification of crisis; the class structure has not become simplified into a more polarized structure and the working class has not become ever more homogeneous; and the economic mechanisms of social reproduction that tie the immediate material interests of most people to capitalism do not seem to have been dramatically weakened. Historical materialism (understood as the theory of capitalism's future), therefore, does not seem to be an adequate theory of the trajectory of unintended social change on which to ground the problem of strategies for emancipatory transformation.

At the present we do not have such a theory. At best our theories of the immanent tendencies of social change beyond the near future are simple extrapolations of observable tendencies in the present or speculations about longer term possibilities. There is thus a disjuncture between desirable time horizons of strategic action and planning for radical social change and effective time horizons of our theories. This may simply reflect a lack of development of good theory. But it may also reflect the inherent complexity of the problem. It is possible, after all, to have very powerful theories explaining the historical trajectory of development in the past without being able to develop a theory of future tendencies. This is the case for evolutionary biology, which has sound explanations for the trajectory of living things from single celled creatures to the present, but virtually no theory of what future evolution will look like.<sup>29</sup> This may also be the case for the theory of social change: we may be able to provide rigorous and convincing explanations for the trajectory of change to the present, but have almost no ability to explain much about what the future holds in store.

In any event, for whatever reasons, at the moment we lack a compelling theory of the long term immanent trajectory of social change. This places a greater burden on the fourth element of a theory of transformation, the theory of transformative strategies, for it is forced to grapple with the problem of transformative practices without a satisfactory understanding of the trajectory of conditions those practices are likely to encounter.

### **Strategies of Transformation**

The final element of a theory of transformation focuses directly on collective action and transformative strategy. The central question is this: given the obstacles and opportunities for emancipatory transformation generated by the process of social reproduction, the gaps in that process, and the uncertain trajectory of unintended social change into the future, what sort of collective strategies will help us move in the direction of social emancipation? In the rest of this book we will focus on three basic modes of transformation through which new institutions of social empowerment can potentially be

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<sup>29</sup> The reason for this impossibility of theorizing the future of biological evolution is because of the enormous role of contingent events – asteroids hitting the earth, for example – in explaining the actual course of evolution. For a discussion of the distinctive quality of the historical explanations of evolutionary theory, see Wright, Levine and Sober....

built: *ruptural*, *interstitial*, and *symbiotic*.

*Ruptural transformations* envision creating new institutions of social empowerment through a sharp break within existing institutions and social structures. The central idea is that through direct confrontation and political struggles it is possible to create a radical disjuncture in institutional structures in which existing institutions are destroyed and new ones built in a fairly rapid way. A revolutionary scenario for the transition to socialism is the iconic version of this: a revolution constitutes a decisive, encompassing victory of popular forces for social empowerment resulting in the rapid transformation of the foundations of economic structures. However, ruptural transformations are not confined to revolutions. Ruptures can occur over particular clusters of institutions rather than the foundations of a social system. Ruptures may also be partial and incomplete rather than total. The unifying idea is of sharp discontinuity and rapid change rather than metamorphosis over an extended period of time.

*Interstitial transformations* seek to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches, spaces and margins of capitalist society, often where they do not seem to pose any immediate threat to dominant classes and elites. This is the strategy of building institutions of social empowerment that is most deeply embedded in civil society and often falls below the radar screen of radical critics of capitalism. While interstitial strategies are at the center of some anarchist approaches to social change, and they play a big practical role in the activities of many community activists, socialists have often disparaged such efforts, seeing them as palliative or merely symbolic, offering little prospect of serious challenge to the status quo. Yet, cumulatively, such developments can not only make a real difference in the lives of people, but potentially constitute a key component of enlarging the transformative scope for social empowerment in the society as a whole.

*Symbiotic transformations* involve strategies in which extending and deepening the institutional forms of popular social empowerment helps solve certain practical problems faced by dominant classes and elites. The democratization of the capitalist state had this character: democracy was the result of concentrated pressures and struggles from below which were initially seen as a serious threat to the stability of capitalist dominance, but in the end liberal democracy helped solve a wide range of problems which contributed to the stability of capitalism. The increase in social empowerment was real, not illusory, but it also helped to solve problems in ways that served the interests of capitalists and other elites. Symbiotic transformations thus have a contradictory character to them, often taking advantage of a tension between short-term and long-term effects of institutional change: in the short term, symbiotic forms of social empowerment are in the interests of elites and dominant classes; in the long term they can shift the balance of power towards broader social empowerment.

These three modes of transformation suggest very different postures towards the politics of transformation. Ruptural transformation marches under the revolutionary banner “*Smash the state*”. The assumption is that the core institutions of social reproduction are so potent and coherent that they cannot be effectively used for emancipatory purposes; they must be destroyed and replaced with something qualitatively new and different. Interstitial transformation embodies the slogan, “*Ignore the state.*” The central thrust is to get on with the business of building an alternative

world inside the old from the bottom up. Perhaps there are moments when established institutions can be harnessed to facilitate this process, but mostly transformation sidesteps centers of power. Symbiotic transformation adopts the stance “*Use the state.*” The task is to find ways in which the emancipatory changes can be embodied in the core institutions of social reproduction, especially the state. The hope is to forge new hybrid forms which have a ratchet-like character moving us in the direction of emancipatory social empowerment.

These three visions of transformation can also be thought of as responses to three different kinds of questions one can ask about a transformative strategy. Ruptural strategies are a response to the question: can the fundamental power relations of a social system be transformed through some process of gradual metamorphosis, or at some point must there be a sharp discontinuity in the organization of power? Ruptural strategies affirm the necessity of discontinuity, and ultimately this means that struggle involves confrontations between opposing forces in which the goal is to defeat dominant classes and elites. Interstitial strategies are answers to a different question: what should be the basic institutional target of collective energy and action for social emancipation -- civil society or the state? Interstitial strategies see civil society as the pivotal arena for transformative possibility. Struggles do not inherently involve sharp confrontations with dominant elites. Rather they are often mainly a question of cultural changes that convince ordinary people to participate in the creation and deepening of new ways of organizing collective life. And finally, symbiotic strategies are a response to a third question, a question directly about the nature of social struggles and interactions with dominant classes and elites: is conflict between dominant and subordinate groups and classes inevitably zero-sum, or are there possibilities for sustainable positive-sum collaboration? Symbiotic strategies see an important role for such collaboration in which the goal is not to decisively defeat powerful groups through confrontation, but to gradually erode their dominance through sustainable forms of cooperation.

None of these strategies is simple and unproblematic. None of them guarantee success. All of them contain dilemmas; all of them contain risks and limits. In different times and places, one or another of these modes of transformation may be the most effective, but typically all of them are important. It often happens that activists become deeply committed to one or another of these strategic visions, seeing them as being universally valid. As a result, considerable energy is expended fighting against the rejected strategic model. A long-term political project of emancipatory transformation with any prospects for success must grapple with the messy problem of combining these strategies, even though on the ground it is often the case that they work at cross-purposes. Examining these three modes of transformation in more detail is the task of the next three chapters.