

*Preface*¹

“Real Utopia” seems like a contradiction in terms. Utopias are fantasies, morally inspired designs for social life unconstrained by realistic considerations of human psychology and social feasibility. Realists eschew such fantasies. What are needed are hard-nosed proposals for pragmatically improving our institutions. Instead of indulging in utopian dreams we must accommodate to practical realities.

The idea of Real Utopias embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is grounded in the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. Self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful forces in history, and while it may be naively optimistic to say “where there is a will there is a way”, it is certainly true that without “will” many “ways” become impossible. Nurturing clear-sighted understandings of what it would take to create social institutions free of oppression is part of creating a political will for radical social changes to reduce oppression. A vital belief in a Utopian ideal may be necessary to motivate people to leave on the journey from the status quo in the first place, even though the likely actual destination may fall short of the utopian ideal. Yet, vague utopian fantasies may lead us astray, encouraging us to embark on trips that have no real destinations at all, or worse still, which lead us toward some unforeseen abyss. Along with “where there is a will there is a way”, the human struggle for emancipation confronts “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”. What we need, then, are “real utopias”: utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change.

The idea that social institutions can be rationally transformed in ways that enhance human wellbeing and happiness has a long and controversial history. On the one hand, radicals of diverse stripes have argued that social arrangements inherited from the past are not immutable facts of nature, but transformable human creations. Social institutions can be designed in ways that eliminate forms of oppression that thwart human aspirations for fulfilling and meaningful lives. The central task of emancipatory politics is to create such institutions.

On the other hand, conservatives have generally argued that grand designs for social reconstruction are nearly always disasters. While contemporary social institutions may be far from perfect, they are generally serviceable. At least, it is argued, they provide the minimal conditions for social order and stable interactions. These institutions have evolved through a process of slow, incremental modification as people adapt social rules and practices to changing circumstances. The process is driven by trial and error much more than by conscious design, and by and large those institutions which have endured have done so because they have enduring virtues. This does not preclude institutional change, even deliberate institutional change, but it means that such change should be piecemeal, not wholesale ruptures with existing arrangements.

At the heart of these alternative perspectives is a disagreement about the relationship between the intended and unintended consequences of deliberate efforts at social change. The

¹ This preface is modified from the Preface in Volume 1 of *the Real Utopias Project* series, *Associations and Democracy* by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, published by Verso (1995).

conservative critique of radical projects is not mainly that the emancipatory goals of radicals are morally indefensible – although some conservatives criticize the underlying values of such projects as well – but that the uncontrollable, and usually negative, unintended consequences of these efforts at massive social change inevitably swamp the intended consequences. Radicals and revolutionaries suffer from what Frederick Hayek termed the “fatal conceit” – the belief that through rational calculation and political will, society can be designed in ways that will significantly improve the human condition. Incremental tinkering may not be inspiring, but it is the best we can do.

Of course, one can point out that many reforms favored conservatives also have massive, destructive unintended consequences. The havoc created in many poor countries by World Bank structural adjustment programs would be an example. And furthermore, under certain circumstances conservatives themselves argue for radical, society-wide projects of institutional design, as in the catastrophic “shock therapy” strategy for transforming the command economy of the Soviet Union into free-market capitalism. Nevertheless, there is a certain apparent plausibility to the general claim by conservatives that the bigger the scale and scope of conscious projects of social change, the less likely it is that we will be able to predict ahead of time all of the ramifications of those changes.

Radicals on the left have generally rejected this pessimistic vision of human possibility. Particularly in the Marxist tradition, radical intellectuals have insisted that wholesale redesign of social institutions is within the grasp of human beings. This does not mean, as Marx emphasized, that detailed institutional “blueprints” can be devised in advance of the opportunity to create an alternative. What can be worked out are the core organizing principles of alternatives to existing institutions, the principles that would guide the pragmatic trial-and-error task of institution-building. Of course, there will be unintended consequences of various sorts, but these can be dealt with as they arrive “after the revolution.” The crucial point is that unintended consequences need not pose a fatal threat to the emancipatory projects themselves.

Regardless of which of these stances seems most plausible, the *belief* in the possibility of radical alternatives to existing institutions has played an important role in contemporary political life. It is likely that the political space for social democratic reforms was, at least in part, expanded because more radical ruptures with capitalism were seen as possible, and that possibility in turn depended crucially on many people believing that radical ruptures were workable. The *belief* in the viability of revolutionary socialism, especially when backed by the grand historical experiments in the USSR and elsewhere, enhanced the *achievability* of reformist social democracy as a form of class compromise. The political conditions for progressive tinkering with social arrangements, therefore, may depend in significant ways on the presence of a more radical visions of possible transformations. This does not mean, of course, that false beliefs are to be supported simply because they are thought to have desirable consequences, but it does suggest that it is important to seek firm foundations for plausible visions of radical alternatives.

We now live in a world in which these radical visions are mocked rather than taken seriously. Along with the post-modernist rejection of “grand narratives”, there is an ideological rejection of grand designs, even by those still on the left of the political spectrum. This need not

mean an abandonment of deeply egalitarian emancipatory values, but it does reflect a cynicism about the human capacity to realize those values on a substantial scale. This cynicism, in turn, weakens progressive political forces in general.

This is the context in which *The Real Utopias Project* was launched in the early 1990s as an attempt at countering this cynicism by sustaining and deepening serious discussion of radical alternatives to existing institutions. The project has focused on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of basic social institutions rather than on either general, abstract formulations of grand designs, or on small reforms of existing practices. This is a tricky kind of discussion to pursue rigorously. It is much easier to talk about concrete ways of tinkering with existing arrangements than it is to formulate plausible radical reconstructions. Marx was right that detailed blueprints of alternative designs are often pointless exercises in fantasy. What we want to achieve is a clear elaboration of the *institutional principles* that inform radical alternatives to the existing world. This falls between a discussion simply of the moral values that motivate the enterprise and the fine-grained details of institutional characteristics.

In this book I elaborate a general framework for thinking about many of the specific proposals that have been explored within Real Utopias project. We will begin in chapter 1 by embedding the specific problem of envisioning real utopias within a broader agenda of what can be called “emancipatory social science”. This agenda is built around three tasks: diagnosis and critique; formulating alternatives; and elaborating strategies of transformation. Part I of the book presents the basic diagnosis and critique of capitalism that animates the search for real utopian alternatives. Part II then discuss the problem of alternatives. Chapter 3 reviews the traditional Marxist approach to thinking about alternatives and shows why this approach is unsatisfactory. Chapter 4 elaborates an alternative strategy of analysis, anchored in the idea that socialism, as an alternative to capitalism, should be understood as a process of increasing social empowerment over state and economy. Chapters 5 and 6 explore a range of concrete proposals for institutional design in terms of this concept of social empowerment, the first of these chapters focusing on the problem of social empowerment and the state, and the second on the problem of social empowerment and the economy. Part III of the book turns to the problem of transformation – how to understand the process by which these real utopian alternatives could be brought about. Chapter 6 lays out the central elements of a theory of social transformation. Chapters 7 through 9 then examine three different broad strategies of emancipatory transformation – ruptural transformation (chapter 7), interstitial transformation (chapter 8), and symbiotic transformation (chapter 9). The book concludes in chapter 10 with a discussion of why we need optimism of the intellect, not just of the will, and how envisioning real utopias is part of the process of realizing social emancipation.