

Chapter 9

Interstitial Transformation

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If one believes that ruptural strategies of emancipatory transformation are not plausible, at least under existing historical conditions, then the only real alternative is some sort of strategy that envisions transformation as a process of metamorphosis in which relatively small incremental transformations cumulatively generate a qualitative shift in the dynamics and logic of a social system. This does not imply that transformation is a smooth, non-conflictual process that somehow transcends antagonistic interests. A democratic egalitarian project of social emancipation is a challenge to exploitation and domination, inequality and privilege, and thus emancipatory metamorphosis requires struggles over power and confrontations with dominant classes and elites. The history of the future – if it is to be a history of emancipatory social empowerment – will be a trajectory of victories and defeats, winners and losers, not simply of compromise and cooperation between differing interests and classes. The episodes of that trajectory will be marked by institutional innovations that will have to overcome opposition from those whose interests are threatened by democratic egalitarianism, and some of that opposition will be nasty, recalcitrant and destructive. So, to invoke metamorphosis is not to abjure struggle, but to see the strategic goals and effects of struggle in a particular way: as the incremental modifications of the underlying structures of a social system and its mechanisms of social reproduction that cumulatively transform the system, rather than as a sharp discontinuity in the centers of power of the system as a whole.¹

Understood in this way, there are two broad approaches to the problem of transformation as metamorphosis: *interstitial transformation* and *symbiotic transformation*. These differ primarily in terms of their relationship to the state: Both envision a trajectory of change that progressively enlarges the social spaces of social empowerment, but interstitial strategies largely by-pass the state in pursuing this objective while symbiotic strategies try to systematically use the state to advance the process of emancipatory social empowerment. These need not constitute antagonistic strategies – in many circumstances they complement each other, and indeed may even require each other. Nevertheless, historically many supporters of interstitial strategies of transformation have been very wary of the state, and many advocates of more statist strategies have been dismissive of interstitial approaches.

In the next chapter we will explore symbiotic transformations. Here we will examine the logic of interstitial strategies. We will begin by distinguishing between interstitial *strategies* and what might be called interstitial *processes*. This will be followed by a discussion of different types of interstitial strategies and a discussion of the underlying logic of the ways such strategies

¹ This understanding of metamorphosis suggests that the stark contrast between “rupture” and “metamorphosis” is in some ways misleading since emancipatory metamorphosis can itself be thought of as a trajectory of partial and limited social ruptures – institutional innovations – that cumulatively constitute a qualitative transformation. What is really at issue here is therefore the extent to which a large-scale comprehensive rupture with the fundamental structures of power in capitalism is possible. [This footnote might best be integrated into the text]

might contribute to broad emancipatory transformation. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the limits of interstitial strategies.

What is an interstitial *strategy*?

The adjective “interstitial” is used in social theory to describe various kinds of processes that occur in the spaces and cracks within some dominant social structure of power. One can speak of the interstices of an organization, the interstices of a society, or even the interstices of global capitalism. The underlying assumption is that the social unit in question can be understood as a system within which there is some kind of dominant power structure or dominant logic which organizes the system, but that the system is not so coherent and integrated that those dominant power relations govern all of the activities that occur within it. Even in so-called “totalitarian” systems in which centralized power penetrates quite deeply into all spheres of social life there are still spaces within which individuals act in relatively autonomous ways, not following the dictates of the logic of the system. This need not imply that such interstitial practices are subversive or that they somehow corrode the dominant logic of the system, but simply that they are not directly governed or controlled by the dominant power relations and dominant principles of social organization.

Interstitial processes often play a central role in large-scale patterns of social change. For example, capitalism is often described as having developed in the interstices of feudal society. Feudal societies were characterized by a dominant structure of class and power relations consisting of nobles of various ranks who controlled the principle means of military violence and peasants with different kinds of rights who engaged in agricultural production and produced a surplus which was appropriated by the feudal dominant class through a variety of largely coercive mechanisms. Market relations developed in the cities, which were less fully integrated into feudal relations, and over time this created the context within which proto-capitalist relations and practices could emerge and eventually flourish. Whether one believes that the pivotal source of ultimate transformation of feudalism came from the dynamics of war-making and state-building, from contradictions in process of feudal surplus extraction, from the corrosive effects of markets, or from the eventual challenge of emerging capitalists, the interstitial development of capitalism within feudal societies is an important part of the story.

While interstitial *processes* and *activities* clearly play a significant role in social change, it is less obvious that there are compelling interstitial *strategies* for social transformation. The urban artisans and merchants in feudal society whose interstitial activities fostered new kinds of relations did not have a project of destroying feudal class relations and forging a new kind of society. They were simply engaged in profit-seeking activities, adapting to the opportunities and possibilities of the society in which they live. The broader ramifications for long-term social change were basically unintended by-products of their interstitial activities, not a strategy as such. An interstitial strategy, in contrast, involves the deliberate development of interstitial activities for the purpose of fundamental transformation of the system as a whole.

There are certainly many interstitial activities in contemporary capitalist societies which are candidates for elements of an interstitial strategy of social emancipation: producer and consumer coops, battered women’s shelters, workers factory councils, intentional communities and communes, community-based social economy services, civic environmental councils, community-controlled land trusts, cross-border equal-exchange trade organizations, and many other things. [\[add to list\]](#). All of these are consciously constructed forms of social organization

that differ from the dominant structures of power and inequality. Some are part of grand visions for the reconstruction of society as a whole; others have more modest objectives of transforming specific domains of social life. Some are linked to systematic theories of social transformation; others are pragmatic responses to the exigencies of social problem-solving. What they have in common is the idea of building alternative institutions and deliberately fostering new forms of social relations that embody emancipatory ideals and that are created primarily through direct action of one sort or another rather than through the state.

This vision of interstitial transformation has a long and venerable place in the anarchist tradition, although there is no inherent reason why strategies of interstitial transformation should be restricted to the specific anarchist vision of emancipatory alternatives.² The preamble of the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World, the influential anarcho-syndicalist movement in early 20th century United States, proclaimed, “By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”³ Half a century later, Colin Ward, the prominent British anarchist writer, described the central idea of an anarchist strategy thus: “...far from being a speculative vision of a future society...[anarchy] is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society....the anarchist alternatives are already there, in the interstices of the dominant power structure. If you want to build a free society, the parts are all at hand.”⁴ At the beginning of the 21st century when activists at the World Social Forum proclaim, “Another world is possible,” much of what they have in mind are anarchist-inflected grass roots initiatives to create producer and consumer co-operatives, fair trade networks, cross-border labor standards campaigns, and other institutions that directly embody the alternative world they desire.

Many socialists, especially those enmeshed in the Marxist tradition, are quite skeptical of such projects. The argument goes something like this: While many of these efforts at building alternative institutions may embody desirable values and perhaps even prefigure emancipatory

² The anarchist vision of social emancipation revolves around the idea of a stateless society in which social cooperation is organized through voluntary activity within relatively small communities linked through some kind of voluntary federation. There is an obvious affinity between this vision of a “destination” and the idea of interstitial strategies that largely ignore the state. But interstitial strategies can also figure in visions of emancipatory social empowerment within which the state plays an important role.

³ The literature of the I.W.W. continually refers to new forms of worker organization as “embryonic” forms of the future society, suggesting again the idea that the future is built within the interstices of the present. For example, in a 1913 pamphlet titled “The Trial of a New Society” by Justus Ebert (I.W.W., Chicago, 1913) the metaphor of embryonic development is used to characterize the process of transformation. The solidaristic organization of workers in the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile strike of 1912, the pamphlet proclaims, was “The crude embryo -- the rough outline of the future state, where industry and government shall be, by, for, and of the workers direct.” In the conclusion to the pamphlet the author asks: “The fact that a new economic power has arisen and is achieving new political and social triumphs within the old social order cannot be denied. But the question arises, can it endure? Will the embryo thus conceived develop until it overgrows and dominates all institutions in the interests of a new era?” In answering in the affirmative, the author draws on the history of the rise of the bourgeoisie which “developed their own institutions, their crafts, their trade, their guilds, their communes and confederations outside of and in opposition to the institutions peculiar to the original feudal constitution. They built the new society within the shell of the old; they evolved out of the old by means of new institutions in keeping with their new aspirations.”

⁴ Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, p.18., quoted by Stuart White in “A Relevant Anarchism? The Social Philosophy of Colin Ward”, unpublished manuscript, 2006., p.10

forms of social relations, they pose no serious challenge to existing relations of power and domination. Precisely because these are “interstitial” they can only occupy spaces that are “allowed” by capitalism. They may even strengthen capitalism by siphoning off discontent and creating the illusion that if people are unhappy with the dominant institutions they should just go off and live their lives in alternative settings. Ultimately, therefore, interstitial projects constitute retreats from political struggle for social transformation, not a viable strategy for achieving radical social transformation. At best they may make life a little better for some people in the world as it is; at worst they deflect energies from real political challenge to change the world to something better.

There are certainly instances in which this negative diagnosis seems plausible. The hippy communes of the 1960s may have been inspired by utopian longings and a belief that they were part of the “dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” but in practice they functioned more as escapes from the realities of capitalist society than as nodes of radical transformation. Other examples, like organic grocery cooperatives, while not escapes from capitalist society, nevertheless seem constrained to occupy small niches often catering to relatively affluent people who can afford to “indulge” their preferences for a particular kind of “life style”. They may embody some progressive ideals, but they do not pose a threat to the system.

As a general indictment of interstitial strategies of transformation, these negative judgments are too harsh. They assume both that there is an alternative strategy which does pose a serious “threat to the system” and also that this alternative strategy is undermined by the existence of interstitial efforts at social transformation. The fact is that no strategy poses a threat to the system in the sense that adopting the strategy today generates effects today or in the near future that would threaten capitalism. This is what it means to live in a hegemonic capitalist system: capitalism is sufficiently secure and flexible in its basic structures that there is no strategy possible that immediately threatens it. The strategic problem is to imagine things we can do now which have reasonable chances of opening up possibilities under contingent conditions in the future. Interstitial strategies, of course, may ultimately be dead ends and be permanently contained within narrow limits, but it is also possible that under certain circumstances they can play a positive role in a long-term trajectory of emancipatory social transformation.

The question, then, is this: what is the underlying model of social transformation in which interstitial activities can be viewed as part of an overall strategy for emancipatory social empowerment? What is the implicit theory of the ways in which such activities can cumulatively transform the society as a whole? Writers in the anarchist tradition devote remarkably little attention to this problem. While there is extensive anarchist writing that criticizes existing structures of capitalist and statist power and defends a vision of a federated cooperative alternative without the coercive domination of the state, there is very little systematic elaboration of how to actually “build the new society within the shell of the old” and how this can lead to a systemic transformation.

In the next section of this chapter we will explore two kinds of interstitial strategies – interstitial strategies within capitalist firms and interstitial rivals to capitalist organizations. This will be followed by a discussion of how such strategies they might contribute to emancipatory transformation.

Two Types of Interstitial Strategies

Interstitial strategies operate within the spaces of organized systems of power. In these terms a simple contrast can be drawn between interstitial strategies within dominant organizations – in the case of capitalism, within capitalist firms – and interstitial strategies that create rivals to dominant organizations.

Interstitial transformations within capitalist firms

Interstitial activity is pervasive within capitalist firms through the myriad ways in which employees – both workers and managers – act in self-directed ways outside of the dictates of the power relations and logic of capitalist production. Some of this is what capitalists call “shirking” – workers choosing a level of work effort below that desired by owners. Some constitutes individual “resistance” – workers defying orders to which they object for one reason or another. Mostly such interstitial acts are simply part of the mundane functioning of the firm which may sometimes reduce capitalist efficiency but pose no particular challenge to capitalist relations. Indeed, as Michael Burawoy has argued, the autonomous strategies of adaptation of workers within the capitalist firm can be quite functional for capitalism, both in the sense of providing a certain safety valve for the frustrations of working in capitalist firms and in the sense of solving certain kinds of practical problems within capitalist labor processes which would be more difficult to solve if workers simply followed orders.⁵ This remains interstitial activity, not interstitial strategy.

The solidarities that are formed within work, however, can also form the basis for interstitial strategies. The simplest example of this is the formation of unions. Unions began as interstitial associations within capitalism, building on the solidarities of workers within firms and defying the competitive, atomistic logic of capitalist markets. What unions do, even when they are restricted in their strategic vision to ordinary collective bargaining, is partially transform capitalist power relations, for the labor market ceases to be a market in which individuals sell their labor power strictly as separate owners of a particular asset, but rather as collective members of a “bargaining unit.” Unions are a form of social empowerment which modify capitalism even if they also contribute to the stability of capitalism by channeling social conflict in particular ways.

At various times and places interstitial strategies of workers within capitalist firms and labor markets have gone beyond simple bargaining over wages and other aspects of the labor contract, and have attempted to encroach on more fundamental aspects of capitalist control over production. Factory councils, works councils and other forms of direct worker involvement in the decision-making structure of firms have, from time to time, gained significant influence over working conditions, technology, the organization of work, health and safety regulation, and so on. [Cite examples] In each of these cases certain kinds of decisions which, in the absence of unions would be under the unilateral control of capitalists and their delegates, are partially “socialized” through the process of social empowerment. While such encroaching rarely challenged the basic prerogative of capitalists to invest and disinvest their capital, they did constitute meaningful shifts in the power relations within firms.

⁵ Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent*; Burawoy and Wright, P&S article on consent. Give the synoptic argument.

Interstitial strategies for social empowerment within firms always face significant limits imposed by the fundamentally capitalist character of the organization of production. To survive, capitalist firms need to make profits. Particularly when firms are organized as corporations, they need to make the going rate of profit (not simply positive profits) if they are to successfully compete against rivals, and this imposes limits of transformations of internal power relations. This is not to imply that unions, works councils and other forms of interstitial social empowerment of workers are of no consequence, but merely that they face real limits on their scope of expansion.

Interstitial rivals to capitalist organization

A second kind of interstitial transformative strategy attempts to build alternatives to capitalist institutions outside of those institutions. While, depending on the context, such efforts may still involve intensive interaction with capitalist firms and markets, the institution-building process is much more autonomous and occurs outside of organizations of direct capitalist authority. This kind of interstitial strategy covers a very wide range of activities. I will briefly discuss six of these: producer cooperatives, the kibbutz, fair trade/equal exchange, global labor and environmental standards enforcement, the social economy, and internet-based challenges to intellectual property rights.

Producer Co-operatives. Perhaps the oldest interstitial rival to capitalist organization is the cooperative. In the 19th century, in fact, the cooperative movement was animated by a strongly anti-capitalist ideology and constituted a central idea of the socialist currents Marx derided as “Utopian Socialism” and subsequently became identified with anarchism. Proudhon, one of the principle targets of Marx’s attack, saw workers cooperatives both as the cellular units of a socialist alternative to capitalism and as the centerpiece of the struggle against capitalism. In 1853 he described the principle thus:

“Mutuality, reciprocity exists when all the workers in an industry, instead of working for an *entrepreneur* who pays them and keeps their products, work for one another and thus collaborate in the making of a common product whose profits they share amongst themselves. Extend the principle of reciprocity as unity the work of every group, to the Workers’ Societies as units, and you have created a form of civilization which from all points of view – political, economic and aesthetic – is radically different from all earlier civilizations.”⁶

Such mutualist worker coops would cooperate with each other through a kind of voluntary federal structure which would facilitate coordination and joint action. Mutualism within production and voluntary federalism among productive units would form the basis of a new society within capitalism itself.

Marx had a quite ambivalent attitude towards this strategic vision.⁷ In the *Communist Manifesto* he derisively dismissed things like producer cooperatives as “little experiments, inevitably abortive.” In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* he sharply criticized the

⁶ Proudhon, *The Stockjobber’s Handbook*, quoted in Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958 [1949]), p. 29

⁷ This account of Marx’s views of worker coops comes from Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958 [1949]), chapter VIII.

French working class for engaging in “doctrinaire experiments, exchange banks, and workers’ association” which in Marx’s eyes constituted a “movement which, having given up the struggle to overthrow the old world despite all the means at its disposal, prefers to seek its own salvation behind society’s back, privately, inside the narrow framework of its existence, and which will thus necessarily come to grief.”⁸ On the other hand, in 1864 in his Inaugural address to the International Working Men’s Association,” Marx heralded the Co-operative Movement as a major achievement of the working class, of even greater significance than the passage of the ten hour law:

“But there was in store a still greater victory of the political economy of labor over the political economy of property. We speak of the co-operative movement, especially the co-operative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few bold “hands”. The value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated. By deed instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labor need not be monopolized as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the laboring man himself; and that, like slave labor, like serf labor, hired labor is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labor plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart.”⁹

The interstitial strategy of building worker’s cooperatives, therefore, became, for Marx, a legitimate element of working class strategy, although he continued to believe that they would be contained within relatively narrow limits so long as capitalist power remained intact:

“To save the industrious masses, co-operative labor ought to be developed to national dimensions, and, consequently, to be fostered by national means. Yet the lords of the land and the lords of capital will always use their political privileges for the defense and perpetuation of their economic monopolies. So far from promoting, they will continue to lay every possible impediment in the way of the emancipation of labor....To conquer political power has, therefore, become the great duty of the working classes.”¹⁰

Workers coops have continued throughout the subsequent history of capitalist development, although today, with a few notable exceptions, they are mostly relatively small and local operations.¹¹ When they are successful, they often tend to evolve in the direction of more conventional capitalist firms, hiring non-member employees as a way of expanding production rather than enlarging the full membership of the producer coop itself.¹² While many, perhaps

⁸ Quoted by Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, p.84

⁹ Karl Marx, “The Inaugural address to the International Working Men’s Associations,” (1864) [get page number from some edition]

¹⁰ Karl Marx, “The Inaugural address to the International Working Men’s Associations,” (1864) [get page number from some edition]

¹¹ footnote about Mondragon and some general statistics on co-operatives today.

¹² Martin Buber notes that Marx saw the tendency for cooperatives to become ordinary firms was a significant problem: “[Marx] clearly recognizes the danger of the Co-operatives degenerating into ordinary bourgeois joint-stock companies, and even recommends the right remedy: that all the workers employed should receive the same share.” (Buber, *Paths*

most, people who participate in them continue to see them as an alternative way of life to working in a conventional capitalist firm, for most participants they are no longer part of a broad strategy for building an alternative to capitalism and are certainly not part of an organized anti-system strategy as was the case in the 19th Century Cooperative Movement. For most workers in current producer coops, they have shifted from an interstitial strategy of system-wide social transformation to an interstitial activity.

The kibbutz. The most thorough attempt to produce an interstitial rival to capitalist economic organization was the kibbutz. These constituted comprehensive producer, consumer, and living communities organized on radically egalitarian and democratic principles. All property was held in common, distribution was based almost entirely on need and labor contributions on ability. While a significant part of production was oriented to the market, and thus the Kibbutz had to interact with capitalist institutions, much production was also oriented to meeting subsistence needs. In the most radical model of kibbutz organization, children slept in communal children's houses, and while they maintained a special relation to their parents, childrearing was seen primarily as a collective responsibility of the entire community.

The kibbutz constituted a vibrant alternative to capitalist economic organization for roughly half a century – from the 1930s to the 1980s [check dates]. At their height, their strongest supporters hoped that variants of the kibbutz model would be so attractive that they eventually become the dominant form of economic organization in Israel. In the course of the 1980s, however, for a variety of reasons -- some economic, some social and cultural -- the kibbutz movement entered a period prolonged crisis during which the internal structures of the communities were significantly altered – children's houses were abolished, consumption became more privatized as families became the primary source of childrearing, external labor was hired as non-member employees, and many young people raised on the kibbutz decided to move to cities.¹³ As a result, while kibbutzim today still retain some of the collectivist qualities of the earlier period, they no longer constitute a sharp emancipatory rival to capitalist ways of life.

Fair Trade equal exchange. In recent years in response to the growth of capitalist globalization in which global patterns of market exchange are dominated by large corporations a number of efforts have been made to build alternative networks of global exchange based on more egalitarian, participatory principles. The basic idea is to remove corporate middlemen between small farmers and producer cooperatives in third world countries and consumers concerned about global equity in the developed world. This constitutes an interstitial strategy within global markets. One of the notable successes is in the global marketing of coffee. [give the basic story of fair trade coffee and the response of large corporations]

Interstitial strategies labor standards and environmental standards enforcement. Another example of interstitial strategies within global market relations concerns efforts to create mechanisms for the enforcement of labor standards and environmental standards. One of the ramifications of neoliberalism has been the development of an international trade regime in which it is relatively easy for corporations to escape strict state-imposed environmental and labor regulations by moving production to third world countries. One response is for activists to

¹³ For a discussion of the crisis in the kibbutz, see Uri Levitan (ed), *Crisis of the Kibbutz...*

organize trans-border efforts at creating environmental and labor standards and attempt to impose those standards on production processes. Like the fair trade movement, this involves linking consumers in developing countries who are prepared to make consumption choices based on certification of such standards, with activist organizations involved in monitoring compliance with the standards. **[elaborate two examples here: anti-sweatshop certification and forestry standards certification]**

Social economy provision of basic needs. As discussed in chapter 6, the social economy constitutes an alternative way of producing to satisfy needs than either the state or the market. Often such production is organized by nonprofit charitable organizations which are responding to particular gaps in the provision of needs and do not see their activities as offering an alternative model to capitalist production and markets. But in some cases, as in the Quebec social economy movement, the social economy is conceived as an interstitial strategy for expanding the space for alternative economic practices.

Open-source programming and other “digital challenges” to intellectual property rights. The digital revolution in information combined with the growth of the Internet as a medium for dissemination of digital material has created a vibrant arena for new forms of interstitial strategies aimed at challenging various aspects of capitalist property rights, especially those connected to intellectual property. Three iconic examples are the Unix operating system, Wikipedia, and Napster. The Unix computer operating system was developed as an open-source program in which no one has property rights in the code and the development was accomplished by hundreds of programmers contributing on a voluntary, cooperative basis. The success of this project has served as a model for other movements towards less proprietary software development. Wikipedia is an on-line encyclopedia developed by tens of thousands of people writing, editing, monitoring and correcting entries. **[give the potted account of Wikipedia]** Napster was a music sharing program that enabled people to copy, share, and download music on the internet. It seriously threatened conventional property rights in copyrighted material. More generally, the ease of posting published and copyrighted material on the web, sharing digital information, and downloading material has opened up possibilities for a much more egalitarian, participatory, and democratic structure of access to a wide range of information. The capacity of corporations to organize ownership, control and dissemination of information in a capitalist manner has been weakened, and while concerted counter-efforts are being made to reassert intellectual property rights, it is by no means clear that this will be successful. To the extent that information is a pivotal “force of production” in the “knowledge economy”, and the capitalist domination of these forces of production is less secure, then egalitarian, democratic alternatives in this arena of economic life may be able to be forged through interstitial strategies.

How Interstitial Strategies can contribute to emancipatory social transformation

Within each of these interstitial activities, many of the actors involved see what they are doing as part of a strategy for broad social change, not simply as self-limiting activities motivated by life-style preferences or the desire to “do good works”. The question then is how these kinds of interstitial activities could have broad transformative, emancipatory effects for the society as a whole? What is the underlying logic through which they cumulatively contribute to making another world possible?

There are two principle ways that interstitial strategies within capitalism potentially point the way beyond capitalism: first, by altering the conditions for eventual rupture, and second, by gradually expanding their effective scope and depth of operation so that capitalist constraints cease to impose binding limits. I will refer to these as the *revolutionary anarchist* and *evolutionary anarchist* strategic visions, not because only anarchists hold these views, but because the broad idea of not using the state as an instrument of social emancipation is so closely linked to the anarchist tradition.

Paving the route to rupture

Many 19th century anarchists shared with Marxist-inspired revolutionary socialists the belief that ultimately a revolutionary break with capitalism would be necessary. Where they differed sharply was in the belief of what sorts of transformations were needed within capitalism in order for a revolutionary rupture to plausibly usher in a genuinely emancipatory alternative. For Marx, and later for Lenin, the central task of struggles within capitalism is to forge the collective capacity of a politically unified working class needed to successfully overthrow capitalism. The task of deep social reconstruction to create the environment for a new way of life with new principles, new forms of social interaction and reciprocity, would largely have to wait until “after the revolution.”¹⁴

For revolutionary anarchists, on the other hand, significant progress in such reconstruction is not only possible within capitalism, but is a necessary condition for a sustainable emancipatory rupture with capitalism. In discussing Proudhon’s views on revolution, Martin Buber writes, “[Proudhon] divined the tragedy of revolutions and came to feel it more and more deeply in the course of disappointing experiences. Their tragedy is that as regards their *positive* goal they will always result in the exact opposite of what the most honest and passionate revolutionaries strive for, unless and until this [i.e. deep social reform] has so far taken shape *before* the revolution that the revolutionary act has only to wrest the space for it in which it can develop unimpeded.”¹⁵ If we want a revolution to result in a deeply egalitarian, democratic, and participatory way of life, Buber writes, “the all-important fact is that, in the social as opposed to the political sphere, revolution is not so much a creative as a delivering force whose function is to set free and authenticate – i.e. that it can only perfect, set free, and lend the stamp of authority to something that has already been foreshadowed in the womb of the pre-revolutionary society; that, as regards social evolution, the hour of revolution is not an hour of begetting but an hour of birth – provided there was a begetting beforehand.”¹⁶ A rupture with capitalism is thus necessary in this strategic vision, but it requires a deep process of interstitial transformation beforehand if it is to succeed.

There are, I think, four different arguments implicitly in play in this vision of pre-revolutionary (i.e. pre-ruptural) interstitial social transformation within capitalism. These arguments are represented in Figure 9.1, a modified version of the transition trough diagrams from the previous chapter.

¹⁴ Buber argues that while Marx eventually came to acknowledge some virtues in the creation of cooperatives, he remained critical of views that saw this as a centerpiece of struggles within capitalism, feeling that it was an illusion that cooperatives could contribute much to the remodeling of society so long as the bourgeoisie remained in power.

¹⁵ Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, p44.

¹⁶ Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, p44-5.

-- Figure 9.1 about here --

First, supporters of the necessity of interstitial transformation within capitalism claim that such transformations can bring into capitalism some of the virtues of a society beyond capitalism. Thus the quality of life of ordinary people in capitalism is improved by such transformation. In phase I of Figure 9.1 interstitial transformations in capitalism are initiated and these generate an improvement of the quality of life for the average person relative to a capitalism without such transformations.¹⁷

Second, the revolutionary anarchist strategy affirms that at some point such interstitial social transformations within capitalism hit limits which impose binding constraints (phase II in the figure). Capitalism ultimately blocks the full realization of the potential of socially empowering interstitial transformations. A rupture with capitalism (phase III) becomes necessary to break through those limits if that potential is to advance further.

Third, if capitalism has already been significantly internally transformed through socially empowering interstitial transformations, the transition trough will be tolerably shallow and of relatively short duration (phase IV). Successful interstitial transformations within capitalism mean that economic life becomes less dependent upon capitalist firms and capitalist markets. Workers co-operatives and consumer cooperatives have developed widely and play a significant role in the economy, the social economy provides significant basic needs, collective associations engage in a wide variety of socially empowered forms of regulation, and perhaps power relations within capitalist firms have been significantly transformed as well. Taken together, these changes mean that the economic disruption of the break with capitalism will be less damaging than in the absence of such interstitial transformations. Furthermore, the pre-ruptural transformations are palpable demonstrations to workers and other potential beneficiaries of socialism that alternatives to capitalism in which the quality of life is better are viable. This contributes to forming the political will for a rupture once the untransgressable limits within capitalism are encountered.¹⁸ The transition trough in figure 9.1 is thus much shallower than it would otherwise be.

And finally, egalitarian, democratic social empowerment will be sustainable after a rupture only if significant socially empowering interstitial transformations had occurred before the rupture. In the absence of such prior social empowerment, the rupture with capitalism will unleash strong centralizing and authoritarian tendencies that are likely to lead to a consolidation of an oppressive form of statism. Even well-intentioned socialists will be forced by the contradictions they confront to build a different kind of society than they wanted. The result will be a decline in the quality of life for most people below the trajectory it would have had even under capitalism itself.

¹⁷ I am using the general expression “quality of life” here to indicate the all-things-considered wellbeing of people, without giving any particular weights to things like income, working conditions, quality of leisure, the nature of community, etc.

¹⁸ An alternative way of expressing these arguments is to use the language of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci argued that in the West, with its strong civil society, socialist revolution required a prolonged “war of position” before a successful “war of maneuver” was possible. This means that the period before a rupture is a period of building an effective counter-hegemony. Gramsci’s emphasis was on building political and ideological counter-hegemony. Interstitial transformations can be viewed as transforming key aspects of the “material bases of consent” necessary for such a counter-hegemonic movement.

Eroding the binding limits of capitalism

The strategic scenario in figure 9.1 assumes that capitalism imposes untransgressable limits on the possibilities of democratic egalitarian emancipatory transformations. The evolutionary anarchist scenario for social emancipation through interstitial transformation drops this assumption. The basic idea, as illustrated in a stylized way in Figure 9.2, is this: Capitalist structures and relations do impose limits on emancipatory social transformation through interstitial strategies, but those limits can themselves be eroded over time by appropriate interstitial strategies. The trajectory of change through interstitial strategy, therefore, will be marked by periods in which limits of possibility are encountered and transformation is severely impeded. In such periods new interstitial strategies must be devised which erode those limits. In different historical periods, therefore, different kinds of interstitial strategies may play the critical role in advancing the process of social empowerment. Strategies for building workers cooperatives may be the most important in some periods, the extension of the social economy or the invention of new associational devices for controlling investments (eg. union controlled venture capital funds) in others. The important idea is that limits are simply the effect of the power of specific institutional arrangements, and interstitial strategies have the capacity to create alternative institutions that weaken those limits. Whereas the revolutionary anarchist strategic scenario argues that eventually hard limits are encountered that cannot themselves be transformed from within the system, in this more evolutionary model the existing constraints can be softened to the point that a more accelerated process of interstitial transformation can take place until it too encounters new limits. There will thus be a kind of cycle of extension of social empowerment and stagnation as successive limits are encountered and eroded. Eventually, if this process can be sustained, capitalism itself would be sufficiently modified and capitalist power sufficiently undermined that it no longer imposed distinctively capitalist limits on the deepening of social empowerment.¹⁹ In effect the system-hybridization process generated by interstitial strategies would have reached a tipping point in which the logic of the system as a whole had changed in ways that open-up the possibilities for continued social empowerment.

-- Figure 9.2 about here --

Of course the trajectory in figure 9.2 is highly simplified. Even optimistic visions of interstitial strategies understand that there can be reversals and the periods of thwarted advance of social empowerment could be quite extended. And there may be contingent historical circumstances in which interstitial strategies may no longer be possible – for example, in conditions of authoritarian statism where the political space for such strategies has been closed off. In such circumstances, ruptural strategies may be necessary, no so much to directly transform capitalism as to unblock the interstitial processes blocked by authoritarian statism. The key idea, however, is that there is nothing inherent in the structures of capitalism as such which prevents interstitial strategies from having these transformative effects, and thus an interstitial trajectory towards social emancipation is possible within a world dominated by capitalism.²⁰

¹⁹ Other kinds of structural limits might still exist – limits imposed by gender or global political divisions or some other kind of social relations – and this means that the cycle of encountering limits and devising new limit-eroding strategies would continue. But the specific limits to social empowerment imposed by capitalism would no longer impose binding constraints.

²⁰ This claim – the capitalism as such does not generate untransgressable limits of possibility – is sometimes couched in a language of “anti-essentialism.” See, for example, Julie Gibson and Katherine Graham, in *The end of*

Interstitial Strategies and the State

It is possible to acknowledge that interstitial strategies of transformation can expand the scope of social empowerment and improve the quality of life of people without embracing these broad strategic visions. Interstitial strategies may create enlarged spaces for non-commodified, non-capitalist economic relations, but it seems unlikely that this could sufficiently insulate most people from dependency on the capitalist economy and sufficiently weaken the power of the capitalist class to render the transition trough in the revolutionary scenario short and shallow. And while interstitial strategies may expand the scope of social empowerment, it is difficult to see how they could ever by themselves sufficiently erode the basic structural power of capital to dissolve the capitalist limits on emancipatory social change.

The basic limitation of both scenarios concerns their stance towards the state. The anarchist tradition of social emancipation understands that both civil society and the economy are only loosely integrated systems which allow considerable scope for direct action to forge new kinds of relations and practices. In contrast, anarchists tend to view the state as a monolithic, integrated institution, without significant cracks and only marginal potentials for emancipatory transformation. For revolutionary anarchists, in fact, the state is precisely the institution which makes an ultimate rupture necessary: the coercive power of the state enforces the untransgressable limits on social empowerment. Without the state, the erosion of capitalist power through interstitial transformation could proceed in the manner described by evolutionary anarchists.

This is not a satisfactory understanding of the state in general or the state in capitalist societies in particular. The state is no more a unitary, fully integrated structure of power than is the economy or civil society. And while the state may indeed be a “capitalist state” which plays a substantial role in reproducing capitalist relations, it is not *merely* a capitalist state embodying a pure functional logic for sustaining capitalism. The state contains a heterogeneous set of apparatuses, unevenly integrated into a loosely coupled ensemble, in which a variety of interests and ideologies interact. It is an arena of struggle in which contending forces in civil society meet. It is a site not for class compromise as well as class domination. In short, the state must be understood not simply in terms of its relationship to social reproduction, but also in terms of the limits, gaps and contradictions of social reproduction.

What this means is that emancipatory transformations should not simply ignore the state as envisioned by evolutionary interstitial strategies, nor can it realistically smash the state, as envisioned by ruptural strategies. Social emancipation must involve, in one way or another, engaging the state, using it to further the process of emancipatory social empowerment. This is the central idea of symbiotic transformation.

Capitalism (as we knew it): a feminist critique of political economy (by J.K. Gibson-Graham, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) who argue that economic systems are always hybrids and that the capitalist dimension or component of the hybrid has no deep, unalterable “essence” which imposes rigid limits of possibility on the character of the hybrid as a whole.

FIGURES FOR CHAPTER 9

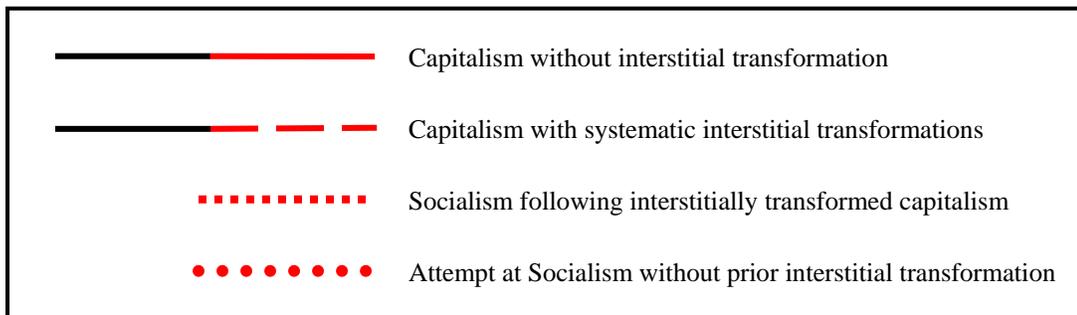
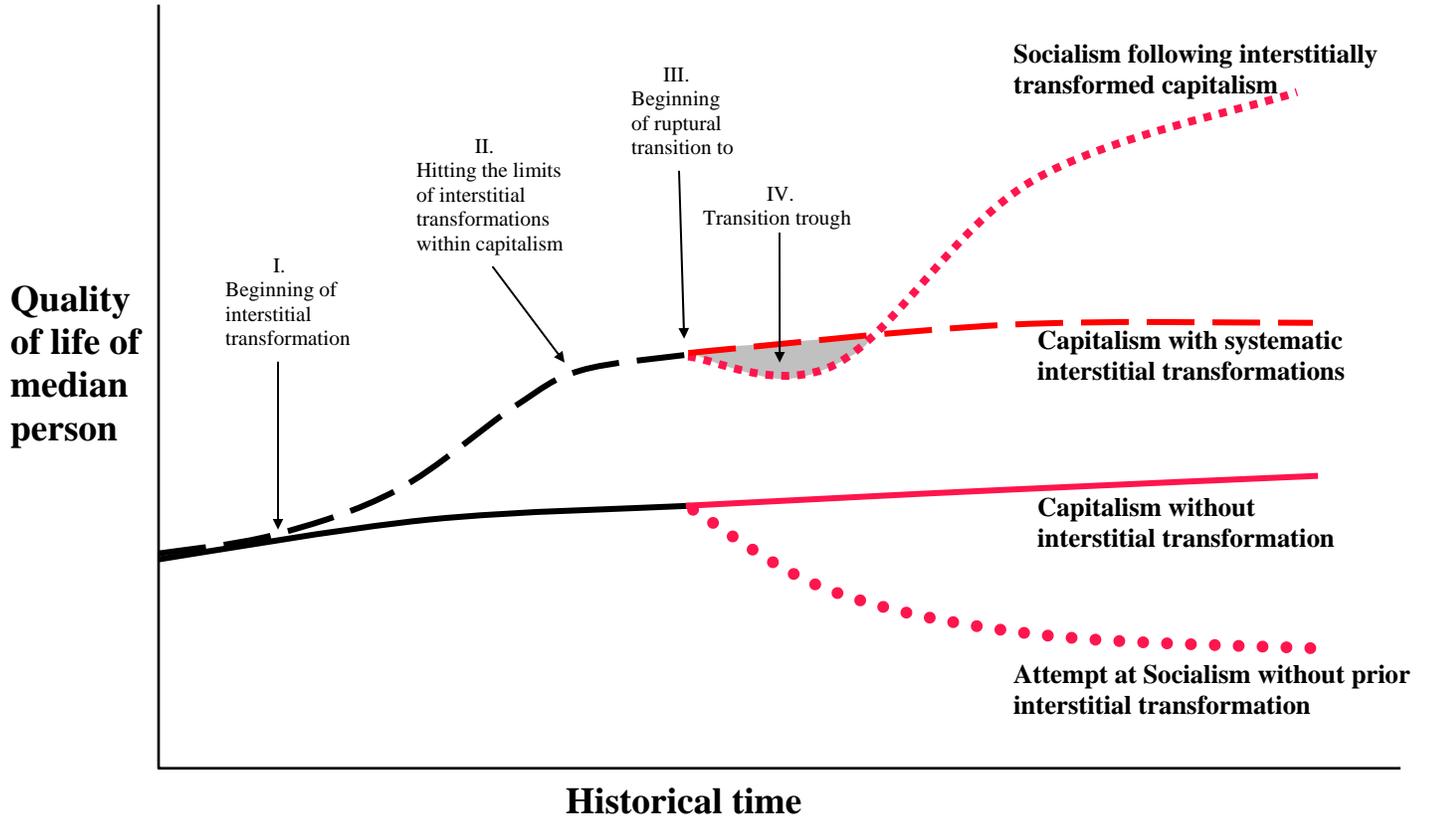


Figure 9.1
Interstitial transformations paving the way to rupture

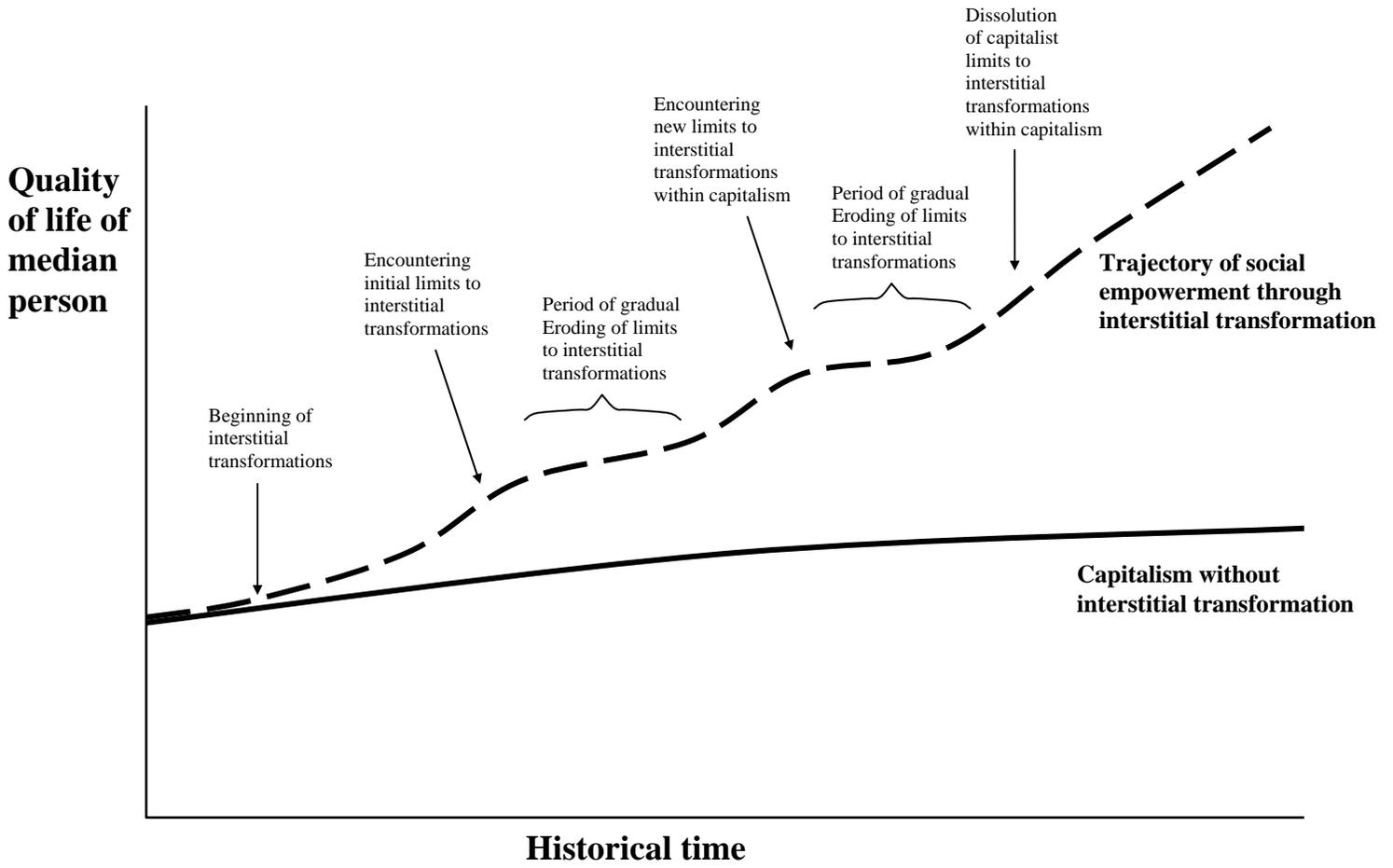


Figure 9.2
Interstitial transformations eroding capitalism's limits