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Real Utopias and the Dilemmas of Institutional Transformation

Erik Olin Wright[1]

Abstract

The idea of 'real utopias' is a way of thinking about emancipatory alternatives to existing institutions of domination and inequality, about both the destinations to which we aspire and the strategies for getting there. This paper elaborates the values embodied in the idea of real utopias, explores the strategic problem of transforming society in ways that advance these values, and examines the dilemmas of creating real utopias in situations where the optimal design for ameliorating the harms of existing institutions is not the same as constructing real utopias.

Introduction

The idea of 'real utopias' is a way of thinking about emancipatory alternatives to existing institutions of domination and inequality, about both the destinations to which we aspire and the strategies for getting there. The term itself, of course, is an oxymoron, for utopia is a nowhere fantasy world of perfect harmony and social justice which could never actually exist in reality. A characteristic way of derisively dismissing a political proposal is to call it 'utopian'. Realists disdain such fantasies not just as distractions, but as

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dangers: 'the best is the enemy of the good'. This scepticism is well founded: utopian fantasies have sometimes lead political movements along extremely destructive paths. And yet, there is something crucial in the dream of utopia as an affirmation of our deepest aspirations for a just and humane world that does not exist. What we need to do is combine those utopian yearnings with the practical task of building real alternatives to the world as it is. The expression 'real utopia' is a way of capturing this tension between dreams and practice. It points to the possibility of building alternatives in the world as it is that prefigure an emancipatory world as it could be and help us to move in that direction.

In this article I want to link the idea of real utopia to the very difficult problem of emancipatory non-penal alternatives to existing social institutions of social control. I will begin by briefly discussing the values that underlie the idea of emancipatory alternatives. I will then give more theoretical precision to the idea of real utopias by locating real utopia within a conceptual space of alternative strategies for social emancipation. This will be followed by a few illustrative examples of real utopias. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the dilemmas of situations where the optimal design for ameliorating the harms of existing institutions is not the same as constructing real utopias.

Emancipatory Values[2]

The full agenda of an emancipatory social science – a social science that hopes to contribute to the collective project of challenging forms of human oppression – revolves around four interconnected components:

1. The *normative principles* of social emancipation.
2. The *diagnosis and critique* of existing institutions and social structures in terms of those principles.
3. A theoretical framework for analysing *alternatives to existing institutions* and structures that more fully embody the normative principles.
4. A *theory of transformation* that helps us understand how to get from here to there.

There was a time when many progressives, especially in the Marxist tradition, felt that it wasn't so important to develop explicit normative principles. The struggle against oppression should be waged under the banner of *interests*,

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[2] A fuller exploration of these values can be found in Wright (2010), Chapter 2.

especially class interests, not *values*. While I think the problem of interests remain important, in the 21st century the cohesion of any plausible political movement for emancipatory social transformation will have to involve strong moral commitments, not just a clear understanding of self-interest. If this is correct, then it is important to clarify the core values of social emancipation.

Three clusters values have been especially important in progressive struggles for social change: equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, and community/solidarity. These have a long pedigree in social struggles going back at least to the ideals of *liberté, egalité, fraternité* proclaimed in the French Revolution. All of these values have hotly contested meanings. Few people say that they are against democracy or freedom or some interpretation of equality, but many people still disagree sharply over the real content packaged into these words. Debates of this sort keep political philosophers very busy. I will not attempt here to sort out these debates. What I will do is give an account of these values that can provide normative foundations for social emancipation.

Equality/fairness.

Some ideal of equality is held by most people in contemporary capitalist societies, whether it be equality of opportunity or equality of legal rights, or some notion of equality of wellbeing. The Marxian ideal is captured by the distributive principle, 'To each according to need, from each according to ability'. One way of generalizing the value of equality in the first part of this aphorism is this:

> *In a just society, all persons would have broadly equal access to the material and social means necessary to live a flourishing life.*

There is a lot packed into this statement. The most important element is the notion of *equal access* to the conditions needed for human flourishing. Equal access is a more generous and compassionate idea than 'equal opportunity', for it recognises that people screw up and squander their opportunities but that, in spite of this, they should still have access to what it takes to flourish. Unlike views that say that people should bear full responsibility for the bad choices they make and suffer the consequences, the equal access principle takes the sociologically and psychologically more realistic view that, to a substantial extent, both good and bad decisions are the result of social and psychological forces, not things for which a person has any meaningful responsibility.

The value of equality/fairness is also deeply connected to environmental concerns. On the one hand, *environmental justice* concerns the ways in which the burdens of environmental harms are distributed within a society. The value of equality/fairness implies that it is unjust for the burden of toxic waste, pollution and other environmental harms to be disproportionately borne by poor and minority communities. On the other hand, if we extend the value of equality/fairness to future generations, then they are also entitled to the same access to environmental conditions to live flourishing lives as the current generation. Issues like global warming can thus be seen as a problem of inter-generational justice: Future generations should have access to the social and material means to live flourishing lives at least at the same level as the present generation.[3]

Democracy/freedom
Democracy and freedom are closely linked ideas, connected through what can be called the value of self-determination:

> *In a fully democratic society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things which affect their lives.*

If the decisions in question affect me and only me, then I should be able to make them without interference from anyone else. That is what we call freedom or liberty. But, if the decisions in question affect other people, then they should be parties to the decision as well or, at least, agree to let me make the decision without their participation. Of particular importance are decisions which impose binding, enforced rules on everyone. These are decisions made by states, and for those kinds of decisions all people affected by the rules should be able to meaningfully participate in making the rules. This is what we normally mean by democracy: control 'by the people' over the use of the power of the State to impose rules on the way we live. But a democratic *society* (rather than simply a democratic state) implies more than this; it requires that people should be able to meaningfully participate in all decisions which significantly affect their lives, whether those decisions are being made within the State or other kinds of institutions. A democratic workplace and a

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[3] This is definitely an anthropocentric view of environmental ethics. There may well be other reasons to protect the environment aside from the harms – immediate and long-term – on human beings, but I regard these as of secondary importance.

democratic economy is as much a part of a democratic society as is a democratic state.

In this formulation the fundamental idea is that people should be able to determine the conditions of their own lives to the greatest extent possible. This is what self-determination means. The difference between freedom and democracy, then, concerns the contexts of actions that affect one's life, not the underlying value itself. Again, the context of freedom is decisions and actions that only affect the person making the decision; the context of democracy is decisions and actions which affect other people as well.

As in the case of fairness, the democratic ideal rests on the egalitarian principle of equal access. In the case of flourishing, the issue was equal access to the necessary means to live a flourishing life. Here the issue is equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions; in short, equal access to the exercise of power. This does not imply that all people actually do participate equally in collective decisions, but simply that there are no unequal social impediments to their participation.

Community/solidarity
The third long-standing value connected to emancipatory ideals is community and the closely related idea of solidarity:

> *Community/solidarity expresses the principle that people ought to cooperate with each other not simply because of what they personally get out of it, but also out of a real commitment to the wellbeing of others and a sense of moral obligation that it is the right thing to.*

When such cooperation occurs in the mundane activities of everyday life in which people help each other out, we use the word 'community'; when the cooperation occurs in the context of collective action to achieve a common goal, we use the term 'solidarity'. Solidarity typically also suggests the idea of collective power – 'united we stand, divided we fall' – but the unity being called for is still grounded in the principle it shares with community: that cooperation should be motivated not exclusively by an instrumental concern with narrow individual self-interest, but by a combination of moral obligations and concern for others.

The value of community applies to any social unit in which people interact and cooperate. The family, in this sense, is a particularly salient community, and in a healthy family one certainly expects cooperation to be rooted in both

love and moral concern. A family in which parents made 'investments' in children not because of any concern for the wellbeing of their children but only because the parents felt they would get a good financial 'return on their investments' would seem to most people to violate important family values. Religiously-backed moral precepts often embody this value: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' and 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. The heartfelt chant of the labour movement, 'An injury to one is an injury to all', expresses this value. Neighbourhoods, cities, nations, organisations, clubs, and any other setting of social interaction and cooperation are also sites for the value of community.

These three normative principles provide crucial motivations for wanting a different social world from the one in which we live, but they do not in and of themselves tell us much about the institutional properties of desirable alternatives or how to get achieve them. This is what a theory of real utopias is meant to facilitate.

Strategic logics of social transformation

Much social change in human history operates behind the backs of people as the cumulative effect of the unintended consequences of human action. To be able to have a 'strategy', in contrast, it must be possible to produce desirable social transformation through deliberate, intentional action. Different strategies of social transformation are embedded in different understandings of what precisely a strategy is thought capable of achieving. More specifically, strategies vary in terms of how encompassing and ambitious the primary goal of a strategy is thought to be.

One way of thinking about the ambitiousness and scope of strategy is through the metaphor of society as a game. Strategies in response to the harms generated by social systems can be directed at what *kind of game should be played*, at what precisely should be *the rules of a given game*, or at the *moves within a fixed set of rules*.[4] Think about this in terms of a sport: different games give athletes with different physical characteristics different advantages and disadvantages, and thus they have interests in playing one kind of game over another. Consider two athletes, one 1.7 meters tall, with great strength weighing 150 kilos, the other 2.1 meters tall with great agility and stamina, weighing 80 kilos. They live in a world where only one sport is

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[4] This three-level analysis of the game itself, the rules of the game and moves in the game comes from Alford and Friedland (1985).

allowed to be played: American football or basketball. Clearly, if basketball becomes hegemonic, the heavy athlete becomes marginalised. Once playing a particular game, occasionally the rules themselves are called into question, and changes in the rules can also favour athletes with different attributes. For example, the change in the rules of basketball that allowed players to touch the rim of the hoop, which in turn made dunking possible, added to the advantages of height. And finally, given a set of fixed rules, the players of the game then adopt specific training regimes and strategies in their plays within the game. Dynamically, what can then happen is that players invent all sorts of new strategies and ways of training designed to exploit specific opportunities within the existing rules of the game. In time, these altered moves in the game begin to change the feel of the game in various ways. Sometimes these changes are seen as eroding the spirit or integrity of the game by spectators, players, or 'the powers that be' that govern the rules of the game. This can trigger changes in the rules which are then imposed as constraints on all players. Changes in the height of the pitching mound or strike zone in baseball to alter the balance of power between pitcher and batter, or changes in the rules about defences against the pass in American Football are familiar examples. Rules are altered to address what are seen as problems in the balance of power among players in the moves of the game.

Strategies of social emancipation can also be understood as operating at the level of the game itself, the rules of the game, or moves in the game. Let's call these the strategic logics of *Rupture*, *Reform*, and *Alleviation*:

Rupture: This is the classic strategic logic of revolutionaries. The rationale goes something like this: 'The game' is so deeply oppressive and unjust and the ruling class and elites so powerful and entrenched that it is impossible to make life significantly better for ordinary people in the existing system. From time to time small reforms that improve things may be possible when popular forces are strong, but such improvements will always be fragile, vulnerable to attack and reversible. Ultimately it is an illusion that the existing system of domination and exploitation can be rendered a benign social order in which ordinary people can live flourishing, meaningful lives; at its core, the system is unreformable. The only hope is to destroy it, sweep away the rubble and then build an alternative. As the closing words of the early twentieth century labour song *Solidarity Forever* proclaim, 'We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old'.

Reform: Social democracy in Europe and more generally the welfare state embody this strategy. The existing social system creates great harms. It generates levels of inequality that are unjust and destructive to social cohesion; it destroys traditional jobs and leaves people to fend for themselves; it creates uncertainty and risk in the lives of individuals and whole communities; it is organised through despotic workplaces; it harms the environment; it perpetuates deep social injustices based on race, gender, and other ascriptive attributes of people. Nevertheless, it is possible to modify the rules of the game by building counteracting institutions capable of significantly neutralising these harms. To be sure, creating and sustaining such institutions may require sharp struggles since they impinge on the autonomy and power of the capitalist class and other elites, and there are no guarantees of success in such struggles. To accomplish serious reform requires popular mobilisation and political will; one can never rely on the enlightened benevolence of elites. But in the right circumstances, it is possible to win these battles and impose the constraints needed for a more benign form of capitalism and other social institutions.

Alleviation: The existing social order is too powerful a system to destroy or even really tame. Truly taming capitalism would require a level of sustained popular mobilisation that is unrealistic, and anyway, the system as a whole is too large and complex to control effectively. The powers-that-be are too strong to dislodge and they will always co-opt opposition and defend their privileges. The best we can do is to try to alleviate the harms of the system at the micro-level of everyday life and individual suffering. This is the strategy of many grass-roots activists of various sorts: activist lawyers who defend the rights of immigrants, the poor, sexual minorities, and others; feminists who volunteer in half-way houses for battered women; environmentalists who protest against a toxic dump. It is also, in a different way, the strategy of much charity work that responds to the needs of oppressed communities through things like soup kitchens and homeless shelters. The rules of the game allow for moves that can help people; that is the best we can do.

These three strategic logics have defined the main responses to injustice and oppression in capitalist societies. There is, however, a fourth, less familiar strategy: *erosion*. While this logic is sometimes implicit in political strategies, it is not generally foregrounded as the central organising principle of a response to social injustice:

Erosion: The strategy of erosion is grounded in a particular understanding of the concept of 'social system'. Consider capitalism as an economic system. No economy has ever been – or ever could be – purely capitalist. Capitalism is defined by the combination of market exchange with private ownership of the means of production and the employment of wage-earners recruited through a labour market. Existing economic systems combine capitalism with a whole host of other ways of organising the production and distribution of goods and services: directly by states; within the intimate relations of families to meet the needs of its members; through community-based networks and organisations; by cooperatives owned and governed democratically by their members; though nonprofit market-oriented organisations; through peer-to-peer networks engaged in collaborative production processes; and many other possibilities. Some of these ways of organising economic activities can be thought of as hybrids, combining capitalist and non-capitalist elements; some are entirely non-capitalist; and some are anti-capitalist. Some are highly functional for capitalism itself; others are irrelevant to capitalism; and some are in real tension with capitalist relations. We call such a complex economic system 'capitalist' when it is the case that capitalism is dominant in determining the economic conditions of life and access to livelihood for most people. That dominance is immensely destructive. One way to challenge capitalism is to build more democratic, egalitarian, participatory economic relations in the spaces and cracks within this complex system where this is possible, and to struggle to expand and defend those spaces by changing the rules of the game within capitalist society. The idea of eroding capitalism imagines that these alternatives have the potential, in the long run, of expanding to the point where capitalism is displaced from this dominant role. Erosion thus operates at all three levels of the game: it envisions a fundamental transformation of the game itself – the long-term objective is an alternative game embodying the values of equality, democracy and solidarity; it recognises both the necessity and possibility of changes in the rules of the existing game in order to expand the prospects for counter-system alternatives; and it engages in moves within the existing rules of the game to build emancipatory alternatives in the spaces where this is possible.

The relationship of these four strategies to the metaphor of society as a game is illustrated in the figure below:

	Target of strategy		
Strategic Logic	*The Game Itself*	*Rules of the game*	*Moves in the game*
Rupture	X		
Reform		X	
Alleviation			X
Erosion	X	X	X

Four Strategic Logics of Social Emancipation

As a guide to practical action, the strategy of erosion embodies a distinction between what can be called *ameliorative reforms* and *emancipatory* reforms. Ameliorative reform looks at the problems and injustices in the world and seeks ways to make things better. Emancipatory reform also looks at the problems and injustices in the world, but then envisions a world in which emancipatory values are realised – an alternative game – and seeks ways to solve present problems by building constituent elements of that alternative world. This contrast is similar to what Andre Gorz called 'nonreformist reforms' in his book, *Strategy for Labor*. Gorz (1967) writes:

> A reformist reform is one which subordinates its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy. Reformism rejects those objectives and demands— however deep the need for them—which are incompatible with the preservation of the system.
> On the other hand, a not necessarily reformist reform is one which is conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands.
> In other words, a struggle for non-reformist reforms—for anti-capitalist reforms—is one which does not base its validity and its right to exist on capitalist needs, criteria, and rationales. A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be.

An example of the contrast between simple ameliorative reforms and emancipatory reforms is the difference between two public policy responses to poverty: food stamps and unconditional basic income (UBI). Food stamps for the poor relieve hunger, and they are certainly a vital ameliorative policy in the context of poverty and hunger in the United States. But food stamps are not building blocks for an emancipatory alternative: the ideal world is not one in which food stamps would play a role. Unconditional basic income, on the other hand, also relieves hunger. Like food stamps, it helps neutralise harm in the world as it is, but it is also a critical element of a more egalitarian, solidaristic alternative. An unconditional basic income introduced within capitalism is a change in the rules of the game in a capitalist economy (i.e. an economy in which capitalism is dominant), but it also introduces one element of the rules of the game of an alternative to capitalism.

Real Utopias

Real utopias are the institutions and proposals that contribute to this long-term strategy of erosion of the dominant structures of domination, inequality and oppression through emancipatory reforms from above and activist practices from below. Real utopias can be found wherever emancipatory ideals are embodied in existing institutions, practices, and proposals.

Existing Institutions
There are many examples of actually existing institutions that embody to a greater or lesser extent emancipatory ideals in spite of their existing within capitalist societies. Two prominent examples are public libraries and worker cooperatives.

Public libraries might at first glance seem like an odd example. They are, after all, a durable institution found in all capitalist societies. Nevertheless, they embody principles of access and distribution which are profoundly anti-capitalist. Consider the sharp difference between the ways a person acquires access to a book in a bookstore and in a library. In a bookstore you look for the book you want on a shelf, check the price, and if you can afford it and you want it sufficiently, you go to the cashier, hand over the required amount of money and then leave with the book. In a library you go to the shelf (or more likely these days, to a terminal to see if the book is available), find your book, go to the check-out counter, show your library card, and leave with the book. If the book is already checked out, you get put on a waiting list. In a bookstore

the distribution principle is 'to each according to ability to pay'; in a public library the principle of distribution is 'to each according to need'. What is more, in the library, if there is an imbalance between supply and demand, the amount of time one has to wait for the book increases; books in scarce supply are rationed by time, not by price. A waiting list is a profoundly egalitarian device: a day in everyone's life is treated as morally equivalent. A well-resourced library will treat the length of the waiting list as a good signal that more copies of a particular book need to be ordered. Libraries can also become multipurpose public amenities, not simply repositories of books. Good libraries provide public space for meetings, sometimes venues for concerts and other performances, and a congenial gathering place for people. Of course, libraries can also be exclusionary zones that are made inhospitable to certain kinds of people. They can be elitist in their budget priorities and their rules. Actual libraries may thus reflect quite contradictory values. But, insofar as they embody emancipatory ideals of equality, democracy and community, libraries are a real utopia.

Worker cooperatives are a different kind of example of a real utopia. Two important emancipatory ideals are equality and democracy. Both of these are obstructed in capitalist firms, where power is concentrated in the hands of owners and their surrogates, and internal resources and opportunities are distributed in a grossly unequal manner. In a worker-owned cooperative, all of the assets of the firms are jointly owned by the employees themselves who also govern the firm in a one-person-one-vote democratic manner. In a small cooperative this democratic governance can be organised in the form of general assemblies of all members; in larger cooperatives the workers elect boards of directors to oversee the firm. Worker cooperatives may also embody more capitalistic features: they may, for example, hire temporary workers or be inhospitable to potential members of particular ethnic or racial groups. Like libraries, they often embody contradictory values. But again, they are a real utopia to the extent that they embody anti-capitalist emancipatory ideals.

Practices

Another place we can find real utopias is the concrete activities of people living and working together. This is the real utopia of lived experience. It is found in natural disasters where people in a community come together in mutual aid. It is found in the joy of collaborative creativity in artist performances in music, theatre dance. It is found in the exhilaration of solidarity and connection experienced in social movements and struggles. The feminist cry 'sisterhood is

powerful' is a claim about the collective capacity to change the world, but also about the real utopian realisation of the value of community in the form of sisterhood-in-struggle. Comradeship, sisterhood, brotherhood – these are powerful expressions of emancipatory struggles. They all express both the longing for a world where people feel deeply connected working together for common purposes, and the actual experience of such connection in the process of struggling for that world. When such lived experience is shared among participants in a social movement and becomes expressed in music, art, stories, and other cultural forms, we can talk about the real utopian dimension of culture.

Proposals

Real utopias can also be found in proposals for social change and state policies, not just in actually existing institutions and practices. This is the critical role of real utopias in long-term political strategies for social justice and human emancipation. Two examples are unconditional basic income and tax-funded journalism vouchers for a democratic media system.

We have already introduced the idea of unconditional basic income. Unconditional basic income gives everyone, without conditions, a flow of income sufficient to cover basic needs. It provides for a modest, but culturally respectable, no-frills standard of living. Unconditional basic income directly tames one of the harms of capitalism – poverty in the midst of plenty. But it also expands the potential for a long term erosion of the dominance of capitalism by channelling resources towards non-capitalist forms of economic activity. Consider the effects of basic income on worker cooperatives. One of the reasons worker cooperatives are often fragile is that they have to generate sufficient income not merely to cover the material costs of production but also to provide a basic income for their members. If a basic income were guaranteed independently of the market success of the cooperative, worker cooperatives would become much more robust. This would also mean that they would be less risky for loans from banks. Thus, somewhat ironically, an unconditional basic income would help solve a credit market problem for cooperatives. It would also underwrite a massive increase of participation in p2p collaborative production and many other socially productive and useful activities that do not themselves generate market income for participants.[5] This would include the arts as well as political activism.

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[5] 'p2p' refers to peer-to-peer forms of networked cooperation that have emerged in the internet age.

Tax-funded journalism vouchers are one way of solving a problem faced by democracies within capitalist systems: the domination of news media by large capitalist corporations. Democracy requires vibrant, high-quality news media that is autonomous from centres of power. A media system dominated by capitalist corporations violates this requirement. Robert McChesney has proposed the idea of giving every tax-payer an annual tax-financed voucher that can only be used to support non-profit news journalism organisations.[6] Various criteria would need to be established to certify that a news organisation was in fact a legitimate candidate for these vouchers. The critical issue is that the organisation should be non-profit and that it actually produces news, but other criteria could be added. Such a system has the advantage over directly funded public sector news because it would have autonomy from the State and create much more diversity in the publicly-supported news sector The proposal harnesses the power of the State to extract the resources for a democratic media, but it assigns to citizens, on an equal basis, the responsibility for allocating the resources to specific organisations. It would create a democratically-grounded media system capable of effectively competing with corporate media.

The idea of real utopias is thus a way of evaluating institutions that exist, our experiences of future possibilities in our present activities, and proposals for new initiatives. It defines a destination, a process and a strategy.

Dilemmas of Optimal Design

A real utopia is an institution, practice or proposal which satisfies two conditions: first, it embodies at least some of the normative principles of a utopian aspiration, and second, it constitutes a possible building block of a future, emancipatory alternative to the present world. In this sense it is not simply a bridge between the present and an imagined future; it is importing into the present pieces of a possible emancipatory future. In the examples of real utopias above, the particular institutions and proposals we discussed satisfy both conditions. Publicly-funded libraries which make various kinds of materials available to people free of charge and which involve, where needed, some kind of rationing on a waiting list, would be a desirable element of a society that fully realises the values of equality, democracy and community. Worker cooperatives would almost certainly play some role in a democratic economy, at least if an emancipatory alternative to capitalism still had a role

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[6] McChesney (2014), chapter 12.

for markets[7]. Similarly, unconditional basic income is a plausible mechanism for distributing part of the income people receive in such a society, and citizen vouchers for journalism organisations is plausible mechanism for allocating resources to news media. In each case, the real utopia both embodies emancipatory values and constitutes a component of the institutional configuration of the destination.[8]

There are situations, however, in which it is much more problematic to try to build the future we want inside of the world as it is. This occurs when, for some specific institution, the optimal design in terms of promoting human flourishing depends on the surrounding social conditions. The optimal institutional design in a context of high social inequality, thin democracy, and weak community can be quite different from the optimal design in a social context of low inequality, deep democracy, and robust community. In such a situation it may be very difficult to build real utopias within existing social contexts, not just because of the political obstacles to emancipatory reforms but because of the contradictions between the intended and unintended consequences of such reforms.

An example: real utopian schools

A good example of the difficulties posed by the context-dependency of real utopian institutional designs is education. It is one thing to think about what sorts of schools would best meet the needs of children in a world with a strong sense of community and civic engagement, robust democracy, and broad economic and social equality, and quite another in a society with weak communities, thin democracy, high inequality and significant poverty. Consider the proposal for the conventional public school run by the State to be replaced by charter schools, organised by groups in civil society and financed by publicly funded vouchers.[9] The idea is that groups of people in civil society can get

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[7] Some anti-capitalists argue that a democratic economy is inconsistent with any role for markets. This is most notably the position of Albert (2003) and Hahnel (2012). For a debate between my views and those of Robin Hahnel, see Hahnel and Wright (2016).

[8] The claims that these examples are indeed real utopias should, of course, be treated as conjectures. There will be people who for one reason or another will object to the claim that these examples are constitutive elements of an emancipatory alternative. Nevertheless, they do embody in significant ways emancipatory values that are in tension with capitalism, and at least they constitute institutional bridges to a possible future that can be built in the present.

[9] For a discussion of the difficulty of specifying a real utopian design for education, see Jaime Ahlberg and Harry Brighouse (2004) 'Education Not a Real Utopian Design' in *Politics and Society*, Volume 42, No. 1 pp 51-72.

together to form a school, govern it as they choose, and have it funded by vouchers that come with the students they attract. In some versions of this kind of proposal the physical space for the school would still be provided as a public amenity, but the board of directors of the charter school would hire staff, decide on the curriculum, and so on. In a way, this proposal is to schools what the citizen news voucher is to journalism: a way of combining the State's capacity to mobilise resources for some socially important good while letting citizens directly decide on the allocation to specific projects. It would seem to advance the values of democracy and self-determination, and perhaps the value of community and equality depending on the details of the design of the system.

This kind of funding and governance model could be a normatively attractive way of organising schools *in a world in which the values of equality, democracy and community were already broadly in place*. Certainly, schooling, like other institutions in such a world would involve much more democratic practices in their governance and be more deeply connected to the communities in which people lived. Charter schools organised by parents and others in a community could be a way of advancing the value of self-determination, and the funding for any particular school could then be determined by the number of students enrolled. But in a society like the United States, it is far less obvious that this kind of voucher and charter school system would be desirable. A universalised voucher system could easily end up being a substantial subsidy for expensive private schools, if schools were allowed to receive funds from other sources. If charter schools were free to set their own curriculum and admissions criteria, they could intensify the tendencies towards self-segregation on cultural, ethnic, ideological and religious grounds. Self-governing charter schools could become institutions of social exclusion regardless of how internally democratic and egalitarian were their practices. The result could easily become an educational landscape in which the real access to the educational conditions to live a flourishing life became even more unequal. An institutional design that would embody emancipatory values in a just world could undermine those values in the present world. The negative unintended consequences could overwhelm the intended consequences.

Now, there certainly could be ways of imposing constraints on charter schools and the use of vouchers that could significantly reduce these risks. A public authority could impose curriculum constraints on charter schools, forcing them all, for example, to teach scientific evolution. Schools could be

prevented from receiving extra funds from parents, thus reducing the risks of schools having grossly unequal resources. Furthermore, one can imagine all sorts of devices being instituted to reduce the ability of charter schools to self-segregate. So it is possible, perhaps, to design a voucher and charter school system that would promote values of equality, democracy and inclusive community even in an adverse social context if the right sorts of state-enforced regulations were in place. My point here is not to pass definitive judgment on charter schools and vouchers, but merely to show that their real utopian potential may be highly contingent on the nature of the social context in which they occur and the fine-grained details of the design of the rules of the game under which they operate.[10]

Another way of framing this issue of the problematic context-dependent effects of a real utopia is to return to our initial discussion of society as a game with rules and moves. The central strategic idea of real utopias is that it is possible to modify existing rules of the game in ways that have two kinds of consequences. First, the altered rules could potentially be part of an alternative game. And second the altered rules set in motion new sorts of things that people can do by virtue of the new rules. The cumulative effect of these new moves in the game is to potentially expand the social density of people actually engaging in more emancipatory social realities. This is the reasoning in the idea, for example, that an unconditional basic income – a change in the rules of the game of distribution in a capitalist economy – enables people to engage much more easily in the moves-in-the-game of building worker-owned cooperatives, and thus expand the scope of a cooperative market economy within capitalism.

The claim that there are contexts in which there are serious contradictions between the intended and unintended consequences of a real utopian institutional design means that the new rules of the game unleash moves in the game that subvert the emancipatory purposes of the altered rules. A school system reform that makes it easy to create and fund charter schools could be motivated by the desire to replace bureaucratic, hierarchical governance of schools with more participatory forms of civic engagement, and nevertheless make it easier for people to organise schools on the basis of exclusionary, sectarian principles.

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[10] For a discussion of a real utopian proposal that includes charter schools funded by vouchers, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Recasting Egalitarianism: New rules for communities, states and markets*, volume III, The Real Utopias Project (1998) London and New York: Verso.

Real utopian social control in a world of poverty, inequality and anomie[11]
The issue of deviance and social control poses deep (and interesting) challenges to the idea of real utopias. It is easy enough to formulate a substantial agenda of important ameliorative reforms of the criminal justice system and other institutional contexts that bear on deviance and social control. Many current practices violate conventional liberal norms and clearly generate great harms. To list only a few familiar examples: drug abuse should be decriminalised and regarded as a public health issue requiring good quality treatment available for addicts; mass incarceration in the United States should be ended for nonviolent crimes; police should be prevented from using racial and ethnic profiling; solitary confinement should never be used as a punishment, and the physical isolation of someone in detention from others should only be occur when there is a danger to others[12]; torture should be prohibited in all cases. There is no need to invoke emancipatory ideals to argue for these kinds of reforms. The difficulty is in formulating in a coherent and rigorous way an agenda of emancipatory reforms that would create real utopian institutions of social control.

In the case of education, as argued above, while we can, with some confidence, formulate many emancipatory design features that would work well within a just and democratic society, it can sometimes be much more difficult to figure out how those emancipatory features would actually work in a deeply unjust social environment. In the case of deviance and social control, it is much less obvious for some issues how to even specify the relevant institutional designs in a just society.

Consider the problem of how to deal with people who behave in ways that harm others, particularly when the harms involve physical violence. It is certainly the case that in any future real society, no matter how fully it embodied the values of equality, democracy and community, there will be people who pose a serious threat to others, and some of these situations would be impossible to handle simply through the informal enforcement of social norms. What is the emancipatory institutional design for such

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[11] I am not an academic expert on the subject of deviance and social control. My comments here are therefore intended to frame an agenda of problems rather than provide even a provisional sketch of answers.
[12] 'Solitary confinement', as practiced in penal systems, involves many forms of deprivation other than simply being physically separated from other people. While it might still be sometimes necessary for a person to be physically separated from others because they are dangerous to others, the conditions of that separation should minimise the sense of social isolation and should not involve other deprivations.

circumstances of social control? Should such situations be dealt with by specialised personnel with special training? Or can the 'police' function be carried out by ordinary members of communities as part of their civic responsibilities? If a person commits harms and poses a threat, should they be confined within specialised institutions analogous to what we now call 'prisons'? What exactly would be the design of an 'emancipatory prison'? These are certainly difficult questions to answer with any degree of confidence.

What is more, as in the case of education, even if we can find solid answers to some of these design questions for a just world, it will not always be the case that attempting to put in place those design features in the existing world would have desirable consequences. It might be the case, for example, that if a society were characterised by a strong realisation of the values of equality, democracy and community, then a deprofessionalised, community-based police force would be desirable, while in the world as it is, this would set in motion destructive forms of vigilantism. In a just world, arbitration and mediation processes of various sorts could be the primary basis for resolving most disputes, without the encumbrance of complex procedural due process with lawyers and professional judges. But in our world, unless very carefully designed, such processes could easily become a way of denying people without power the possibility of redress of grievances. Or consider the problem of prisons. In a truly just world, the idea of using incarceration as deterrence for harmful deviance would probably be rejected.[13] If it were necessary to detain someone for reasons of public safety, the form of detention should be designed to still provide as full access as possible to the conditions for a flourishing life, given the physical constraint of detention. Since the point of detention would not be retribution but simply preventing the person from creating more harms to others, there would be no justification for material deprivations. In a world of high levels of inequality, poverty and oppression, such a design of non-punitive institutions of detention could create perverse incentives for some people to seek detention.

None of this means that it is impossible to bring the values of human emancipation to bear on the problem of deviance and social control, as

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[13] I say 'probably' here because one of the pivotal components of a just world is deep democracy, and this means that in a just world people will have to figure out the trade-offs they face in more fully realising the values of equality/fairness, democracy/freedom and community/solidarity. Since there certainly will be trade-offs, people might still decide that the deterrence function of punishment is worth retaining, even though this might violate some standards of fairness or freedom.

illustrated in a number of the articles in this volume on the idea of non-penal real utopias. The core values of equality/ fairness, democracy/ freedom, and community/ solidarity remain vital standards for the diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists. And they remain essential for any assessment of ultimate goals for social transformation. The idea of real utopias is a useful way of linking a conception of emancipatory alternatives in an imagined future to strategies of transforming institutions in the present. But, in seeking to bring forth a new game of human flourishing, we must always be attentive to the complex interplay between our desired changes in the existing rules of the game and the array of positive and negative consequences of new moves of the game that those changes may set in motion.

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Reimagining Citizenship: Justice, responsibility and non-penal real utopias

Emma Bell and David Scott[1]

Abstract

This article regards exclusive conceptions of citizenship as the principal stumbling block to developing alternatives to repressive penal policies. Indeed, exclusive communities foster mistrust and suspicion of the Other, leading to punitive responses to 'outsiders'. It is therefore argued that the very notion of citizenship needs to be 'reimagined' in such a way that it is genuinely inclusive and encourages shared responsibility, thus enabling us to go beyond exclusive communities and penal policies generative of irresponsibilities. The idea of an inclusive citizenship of the common, founded on justice and responsibility, is promoted as a real utopian vision. Transformative justice is put forward as one means of realising this vision by allowing citizens to collectively institute a genuinely new penal rationality.

Introduction

As has long been recognised, any attempts to develop alternatives to current penal practices are seriously hindered by the social distance created between offenders and a mythical law-abiding majority. The commonplace treatment of the majority of offenders as non-citizens precludes meaningful dialogue and debate with 'the citizenry'. In recent years, debate about penal issues amongst those who are seen to be worthy of citizenship has often been reduced to base populism (Pratt, 2007). Consequently, if we wish to move beyond exclusionary responses to 'crime' and social harm, the very notion of citizenship needs to be 'reimagined' in such a way that it is genuinely pluralist and inclusive, incorporating all those affected by harmful behaviour, whether they are

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