

Strategies for purposive degrowth transformations **Nowtopias and non-reformist reform**

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Socioecological transformation

In response to the emerging challenges our societies are facing, the concept of socioecological transformation, is being increasingly used in both research and policy. Such debates diverge from more conventional proposals of techno-fixes to an otherwise intact system and power geometries, by simultaneously addressing environmental concerns and issues of social justice, so supporting a more radical, emancipatory future pathway (Brand 2016).

Several future visions stand out in these debates, featuring themes such as the commons, food sovereignty, direct democracy, environmental justice; and degrowth. Degrowth is oft quoted to provide a “repoliticized” vision for the radical transformation of society (e.g. Asara et al. 2015, Petridis et. al 2015).

But how is this transformation envisioned by such movements to come about? Some consider the shift to a “degrowth-like” future as potentially analogous to the one from the feudal to the capitalistic society, when new connections were established between economic practices and political/institutional developments that supported them (e.g. Kallis 2015).

Several radical scholars, have proposed an array of strategies to achieve purposive transformation. Notably, Erik Olin Wright (2012) identifies 3 strategic logics of transformation:

***Ruptural transformations**, that envision creating new emancipatory institutions through a sharp break with existing ones;*

***Interstitial transformations**, that seek to build new forms of social empowerment in capitalist society’s niches and margins;*

*and **Symbiotic transformations**, that involve strategies through the state that help open up greater space and support for these interstitial innovations, by extending and deepening institutional forms of social empowerment.*

Concrete utopias

Before exploring the interplay between strategies for social transformation, let us first turn to the study of utopias for some quick insights. Unlike utopias of spatial form that endanger being authoritarian and a-temporal, and utopias of social process that totally exclude space, *concrete utopias* (Bloch, Lefebvre, Levitas) are closely linked with the present.

I endorse the definition of Levitas (2005) of utopia as “*the expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living*”. According to Levitas, utopia involves the reconstruction of society, *imagined otherwise*; so the primary function of utopia is the education of desire (Levitas 2005). Concrete utopias anticipate what is possible, on the ground of existing potentials in the future, so they not only *envision* but also *embody* alternatives (Muraca 2014). The challenge then is: how a utopian project be grounded on existing practices but as the same time leave space for imaginary alternatives? Wright refers to those cases as *real utopias*: institutions that “*envision the contours of an alternative social world that embodies emancipatory ideals and then look for social innovations we can create that move us toward that destination*” (Wright 2012: 9). His examples are: *participatory budgeting, solidarity finance, worker-owned cooperatives, unconditional basic income, Wikipedia, public libraries* and others.

Nowtopias

In a parallel development, and somehow synonymous with interstitial transformations, *nowtopias* refer to the (already happening) solidarity economy alternatives that reclaim and reinvent work against the logic of capital (Carlsson and Manning 2010). The term *nowtopia*, more broadly, came to refer to practices that aim at bringing about desired futures – such as degrowth. Commonly cited examples include *cohousing projects, producer-consumer cooperatives, social education and healthcare centres, open source technologies*, etc.

Rather than seeking to first define and then make alliance with the subject that is relevant for transformation, the basic idea is that *by participating* in such ventures, a new collective political subject is created. Nowtopias can be described as prefigurative, emancipatory initiatives that embody an alternative model of societal organisation in practice. They are essentially concrete utopias, that is, institution-building initiatives that simultaneously anticipate and effect desired-for futures (Levitas 1990).

However, nowtopias risk ending-up becoming mere “exit strategies”. One way to deal with this criticism is by critically considering their relevance for emancipatory transformations. Evidence from historical work studying past transformations suggests that influential and key institutions of the modern world were devised and developed at the margins of what used to be centre of cultural and political activity in the past, such as

the reinvention of money at the Frisian edges of the Roman Empire at the time of the latter's domination of western world culture and politics (Pye 2014). This approach requires us to put an emphasis on understanding those processes, conditions and institutional means by which transformational initiatives developed "at the margin" end up becoming relevant for transforming dominant systems and their imaginaries (Petridis and Zografos 2015).

Non reformist reform

Another way to overcome this criticism is by seeking to link nowtopias to *non-reformist reform*. According to Andre Gorz who has coined the term, this includes reforms which are incompatible with the preservation of the system and "*are not conceived in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands*" (Gorz, cited in Muraca 2013).

So while "reformist reforms", such as corporate volunteerism or humanitarian aid, legitimize existing power structures, accumulation dynamics, and political processes; 'non-reformist reforms,' in contrast, open wide the doors for further contestation, empower the social movements and demands, and identify areas of structural contradiction (Bond 2008). They propose a way to overcome the historical problem of dualism between tactic *now* and strategy *after*, and "*intend to simultaneously make life better within the existing economic system and expand the potential for future advances of democratic power*" (Wright 2012:20). They do so by giving a role to the state, as an institutional catalyst, to create space for the transformative subject to emerge.

Proposed examples of reforms that could potentially be termed non-reformist, include: *a reduced working week, maximum and minimum income, institutional support of worker cooperatives, legislative protection of the commons and commons licenses, experimentation with mild forms of representation, etc.*

But, can we know from the outset whether a reform is (non-)reformist? In one of his preferred examples, Gorz stated that the demand for 500,000 new housing units to be built every year in France, to meet people's housing needs, could be either a neo-capitalist reform, if it involved public subsidies to private enterprise, or an anti-capitalist reform, if the construction was a socialised public service on territory confiscated from landowners. (Nowadays we would possibly dismiss this option altogether on ecological grounds!)

Therefore, in an effort to propose a non-reformist reform typology, we can only make some tentative proposals. So we hypothesize a reform is "non-reformist" if:

- It results from bottom-up social movement demands
- It is a demand that has a place in the current, *but also* in the desired society.
- It covers a basic need (according to a consensus on universal/fundamental needs?)
- It gets us closer to an emancipatory vision, or puts us in a better position to reach it

Crosscutting issues

Moving on, I would like to highlight two issues that I consider critical concerning the interplay between different strategies for radical transformations in an emancipatory direction.

1. Work

First is the role of work. Any emancipatory proposal needs to position itself towards the burning issue of employment, and this perhaps constitutes the main link between nowtopias and non-reformist reforms. Nowtopias in a way try to redefine work, while some of the most critical non-reformist reforms are those that directly tackle the issue of employment. If we take the example of worker cooperatives we see it fits well our tentative classification system: They result from bottom-up action, can survive in the present, but also in the envisioned, desired society, they cover the need of creation and have a clear emancipatory vision. Proposals supporting solidarity economy practices fall essentially in the same category of providing work *imagined differently*. While the main goal of such proposals is the reduction of unemployment, they simultaneously support an alternative model of social and environmental relations.

2. Role of (direct) democracy

Second is the importance of democracy. Discussions about democracy are relevant at two levels: first, when considering its the role for the governance of future “degrowth” societies; and second, when considering its role for *achieving* purposive transformation.

Merging Illich and Ellul’s work on complex technological systems, with Castoriadis’ political philosophy on autonomous societies, Latouche has argued that reducing the scale of the economy, re-appropriating technological tools and self-instituting new spaces of choice and social interaction outside of market money exchange are part and parcel of a deepening democratization process, where the objective is not just to consume and produce less, but to do so in a socially emancipatory and democratizing way (Zografos 2015).

On the whole, degrowth advocates seem to support some sort of a direct democracy version of democracy (e.g. Cattaneo et al. 2012). However, direct democracy is regularly challenged as a romantic and not applicable ideal, as an impossible utopia. Nevertheless, examples or attempts at direct self-rule exist both currently and in the historical record. Beyond the oft-quoted example of the ancient Athenian democracy (e.g. Castoriadis 1984), Germanic assemblies or ‘things’, such as for example the medieval Icelandic Althingi (Alþingi), provide a historical example of regular, assembly-based decision-making applied for relatively large territories and in the absence of central authority or

enforcement (Karlsson 2000). Similarly, the ongoing Indian radical ecological democracy experiment (Kothari 2014) is a contemporary example of popular self-rule based on constant engagement that combines direct with delegative democracy – similar observations could perhaps also be made for the recent Kurdish experiment in the autonomous region of Rojava (Graeber 2014).

Those examples suggest that direct democracy can be constituted as a “nowtopia” within (or in the precincts of) contemporary systemic conditions, rather than being an unfeasible dream. But perhaps less conspicuously, the fact that such examples have not emerged out of revolutionary breaches with contemporary systemic conditions, also suggests that such nowtopias may come about via ostensibly less radical action, such as via non-reformist reforms (Petridis and Zografos 2015).

So, the proliferation of popular, self-organised initiatives that seek to achieve more meaningful and democratic life outside capitalism as well as closer citizen control and participation to politics, suggests that direct democracy is highly relevant for current quests of political and ecological transformation. The key question here is to identify *which non-reformist reforms could facilitate a transition to a direct democratic system of governance*.

Conclusions

To conclude, in order to advance our understanding on the potential synthesis and complementarity of strategies for purposive socio-ecological transformation, there is a need to examine more closely those institutions that “*put us in the best position to do more later*” (Wright 2012: 21), and those practices and reforms (call them nowtopias, real utopias, etc.) that, while they can survive and root in the present system, at the same time prefigure and embody an alternative form of social relations, and in this way facilitate the conditions for an emancipatory subject to emerge and popularise.

..and some discussion points:

- On a theoretical level, is a non-reformist reform typology possible? Can we propose specific examples of real utopias and, following Wright, evaluate their: *desirability*, *viability* (longer term sustainability), and *achievability* (how do we move from here to there)?
- Concrete utopias constantly face the danger of being either crushed or co-opted by the state. What can we learn from the (in)ability of grassroots initiatives to influence national reforms, and the recent failure of (Latin American, and more recently the Greek) governments to provide a non-reformist strategy?

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