

Chapter 8 - Elements of a Theory of Transformation

A fully developed theory of social transformation involves four interlinked components:

- 1) A theory of social reproduction (obstacles)
- 2) A theory of the gaps and contradictions of reproduction (possibilities)
- 3) A theory of trajectories of unintended social change (prospects)
- 4) A theory of transformative strategies (“what is to be done?”)

Social Reproduction

In capitalist society, social reproduction takes place through two sorts of interconnected processes which Erik calls:

- Passive reproduction – “is simply a by-product of the ways in which the daily activities of people mesh in a kind of self-sustaining equilibrium in which the dispositions and choices of actors generate a set of interactions that reinforces those dispositions and choices.”
- Active reproduction – “is the result of specific institutions and structures which at least in part are designed to serve the purpose of social reproduction.” (e.g. the police, the courts, the state administration, education, the media, churches, and so on.)

These two sorts of reproduction interact in important ways, constituting a system of variable coherence and effectiveness.

The basic (implicit) proposition of theories of social reproduction within most current emancipatory social theory is this:

Social structures and institutions that systematically impose harms on people require vigorous mechanisms of active social reproduction in order to be sustained over time.

This proposition is itself derived from three underlying claims:

1. The reality of harms: The harms specified in the diagnosis and critique of capitalism do not simply reflect the peculiar values and ideas of theorists; they ate to a greater of lesser extent, experienced my people as real harms (even though the cause might not be perceived).
2. Human capacities and motivations: People universally have certain basic capacities and motivations which would lead one to predict that when they experience things which are harmful to their lives, they will try to do something about it.
3. Obstacles: in the absence of obstacles, people will challenge the structures and institutions that cause them harm. The absence of challenges to oppression, therefore, requires an explanation – which a theory of social reproduction attempts to provide for an emancipatory social science.

(Note: Distinguishing the problem of social reproduction from the problem of social order – the counterfactual of Hobbesian social order is chaos, the counterfactual of social reproduction is social transformation.)

Four clusters of mechanisms through which institutions of various sorts affect the actions of people, individually and collectively are especially important:

1. Coercion
2. Institutional rules
3. Ideology
4. Material interests

These a) obstruct individual and collective actions which would be threatening to capitalist structures of power and privilege, and b) channel actions in such a way that they positively contribute to the stability of those social structures (supporting passive reproduction).

1. Coercion: Mechanisms which raise the costs of collective challenge

e.g. Regulations, illegality, state and non-state actors.

A key problem for a theory of social reproduction then is to understand the conditions which reinforce or undermine the effectiveness of coercive means of social reproduction (see discussion of hegemony).

2. Institutional rules: Creating gradients of collective action opportunities

Procedural ‘rules of the game’ which make some courses of action difficult to pursue and others much easier (where less risky are less likely to be threatening to the stability of capitalism). E.g. Capitalist democracy channels social conflicts in ways that tend to reproduce capitalist social relations.

3. Ideology and Culture: Mechanisms which shape the subjectivities of actors

Ideology = the conscious aspects of subjectivity (beliefs, ideas, values, doctrines, theories...)

Culture = the unconscious aspects of subjectivity (dispositions, habits, tastes, skills...)

Ideology contributes to social reproduction when beliefs that contribute to social stability are affirmed in the daily practices of individuals. Perhaps the most important aspect of belief formation bearing on the problem of social reproduction are beliefs about what is possible.

4. Material Interests: Mechanisms which tie the welfare of individuals to the effective functioning of capitalist structures

Joan Robinson: “The one thing worse than being exploited by capitalism is not being exploited.”

Within a well-functioning capitalism the material interests of almost everyone depend to a significant degree upon successful capitalist economic activity. This near-universal dependence of everyone’s material interests on the pursuit of profits by capitalist firms is perhaps the most fundamental mechanism of the social reproduction of capitalist society. So long as capitalism effectively ties the material interests of the large majority of the population to the interests of capital, other mechanisms of social reproduction have less work to do.

Coercion, rules, ideology/culture, and material interests should not be understood as four independent, autonomous clusters of mechanisms each of which additively contributes its bit to the process of social reproduction, Rather, social reproduction is the result of the complex forms of interaction among these processes. (e.g. Rules work best when believed to be legitimate or following them is seen to be in material interest. Coercion is more effective when rarely used because most people comply out of self-interest.)

Two important configurations: Despotic and Hegemonic

Despotic: Coercion and rules are the central mechanisms for social control. Ideology and material interests mainly function to reinforce coercion and rules. Order maintained primarily through fear. Transformative challenges blocked primarily by various forms of repression.

Hegemonic: ideology and material interests play a more central role. Active consent of subordinate classes and groups more important. They believe that willingly participating in reproducing the existing structures is both in their interests and the right thing to do. Dominant class seen as providing “moral and intellectual leadership”. Institutional rules more complex and carry a greater burden (contain arbitrary or self-destructive forms of repression, facilitate class compromise and rough ideological consensus, channel behaviour of the elite in positive ways – not just subordinate classes.)

These are ideal types. Most actual capitalist systems contain both. (e.g. In the United States today, despotic reproduction plays a key role with respect to certain segments of the population, especially inner-city minorities – as evidenced by the high level of imprisonment of African-American young men. Meanwhile, a substantial segment of the “middle class” participates enthusiastically in social reproduction. For much of the working class it takes a mixed form.

Limits, Gaps, and Contradictions

One of the central tasks of emancipatory social science is to try to understand the contradictions, limits and gaps in the systems of reproduction which open up spaces for transformative strategies. Four important themes:

1. Complexity and inconsistent requirements for social reproduction

The process of social reproduction is faced with dilemmas and trade-offs in which solutions to one set of problems create conditions which potentially intensify other problems. There is no stable equilibrium possible in which all the conditions are simultaneously met in a satisfactory way such that all the tensions are resolved, and this creates openings for strategies of social change.

2. Strategic intentionality and its ramifications

Active social reproduction involves intentional strategic acts of people grappling with problems and struggling over the power to define the shape and practices of institutions. Consequently: a) institutional design is the result of struggle over design rather than simple imposition, b) there is often inadequate knowledge about the effects of alternative institutional designs and practices, c) unintended and unanticipated consequences accumulate. That “people make history, but not just as they choose”, applies to elites as much as the masses.

3. Institutional rigidities and path dependency

Mechanisms of ‘internal’ social reproduction render institutions relatively rigid. They help sustain the basic structures of power and inequality within themselves. This leads to a lack of responsive capacity.

4. Contingency and unpredictability

Although learning capacity and adaptive capacity are the hallmarks of well-designed institutions, even well-functioning liberal democratic institutions are plagued by institutional inertia, and the contingency and unpredictability of socioeconomic and political changes continually disrupts smooth adjustments.

Underlying Dynamics and Trajectory of Unintended Social Change

The actual trajectory of large-scale social change that we observe in history is the result of the interaction of:

1. Cumulative unintended by-products of the actions of people operating under existing social relations
2. The cumulative intended effects of conscious projects of social change by people acting strategically to transform those social relations.

This confluence of trajectories of unintended social change with deliberate strategies of transformation has marked every major contemporary episode of emancipatory transformation. (e.g. Changes in gender relations resulting from both intentional efforts coinciding with the unintended influence of technological and employment patterns. Or the Civil Rights Movement coincidence with end of sharecropping and agricultural mechanisation in the Southern States.)

A major problem: any plausible strategy for fundamental emancipatory transformation has to have a fairly long time-horizon. To have a coherent long-term strategy we need at least a rough understanding of the general trajectory of unintended, unplanned social changes into the future. This is a daunting theoretical task!

There is thus a disjuncture between the desirable time-horizons of strategic action and planning for radical social change and the effective time/horizons of our theories. We may be able to provide rigorous and convincing explanations for the trajectory of change up to the present, but still have almost no ability to explain very much about what the future holds in store.

Strategies of Transformation

1. Ruptural: envision creating new institutions of social empowerment through a sharp break within existing institutions and social structures. A radical disjuncture.
2. Metamorphosis:
 - a. Interstitial: seek to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches and margins of capitalist society.
 - b. Symbiotic: strategies in which extending and deepening the institutional forms of popular social empowerment simultaneously helps solve certain practical problems faced by dominant classes and elites. These strategies have a contradictory character to them, both expanding social power and strengthening aspects of the existing system.

	Associated political tradition	Pivotal collective actors	Strategic logic respect to the state	Strategic logic respect capitalist class	Metaphors of success
Ruptural	Revolutionary socialist/communism	Classes organised on political parties	Attack the state	Confront the bourgeoisie	War (victories and defeats)
Interstitial metamorphosis	Anarchist	Social movements	Build alternatives outside of the state	Ignore the bourgeoisie	Ecological competition
Symbiotic metamorphosis	Social democratic	Coalitions of social forces and labour	Use the state: struggle on the terrain of the state	Collaborate with the bourgeoisie	Evolutionary adaptations