

Calculation and prophecy

The advancement of alternatives like these would amount to world revolution. It would not deliver world revolution in the form we have been accustomed by the prejudices of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought to associate with the idea of revolution: sudden, violent, and total change. The transformation would be gradual, piecemeal, and generally peaceful. It would nevertheless be revolutionary on several counts. It would overthrow the dictatorship of no alternatives under which we now live. It would do so by breaking the limits of the restricted repertory of arrangements for the practical organization of society that is our most vivid experience of a collective fate. It would combine, as every

revolutionary change does, a political and a religious transformation: a change both in the institutions under which we live and in the ideas about humanity that these institutions embody. The most important sign that we will have succeeded would be that we would have diminished the dependence of change on crisis.

That we have trouble in recognizing revolutionary alternatives for what they are is a direct consequence of the habit of misunderstanding directions as blueprints. A false dilemma paralyzes programmatic thought. A proposal that is distant from present ways of doing things is derided as interesting but utopian. A proposal that is close to established practice is dismissed as feasible but trivial. Lacking a credible conception of structural transformation, we fall back on a fake criterion of political realism: proximity to the existent. We fail to see what a programmatic argument rightly is: the vision of a direction and of the next steps. As we change in fact or reconsider in imagination our practices and arrangements, we revise as well our understanding of our interests and ideals. This thinking from the bottom up and from the inside up uncovers ambiguity in the midst of dogma and opportunity in the midst of constraint.

The idea of social alternatives remains caught within the slowly decaying corpse of the great evolutionary narratives of the last two hundred years of social thought with their now unbelievable ideas about

indivisible systems succeeding one another by force of inexorable laws. Such narratives, however, have been followed by the rationalizing, humanizing, and escapist ways of thinking established in the contemporary social sciences and humanities. These tendencies of thought have denied us a basis on which to think programmatically. We should not wait to be provided with that basis by a transformation in theory; we should build as we go along, under the discipline of our efforts to define and to take the next steps.

A set of proposals like these is a rushing ahead – ahead not only of how contemporary societies are now organized but also of what our present understandings allow us with confidence to say. It must draw energy and authority from two distinct types of appeal: one, calculating; the other, visionary.

The calculating appeal is to recognized class and national interests. The two most powerful such interests are the petty-bourgeois demand for a condition of modest prosperity and independence, often identified with the traditional forms of small business or professional independence, and the universal desire to uphold and develop national distinction, usually identified with national sovereignty. People cannot realize these two sets of interests today, in richer or poorer countries, without changing the practices and institutions that have served, up to now, as their vehicles. They cannot refashion these vehicles, how-

ever, without revising their understanding of those interests.

The prophetic appeal is to a vision of unrealized human opportunity. It is not a prophecy that anyone has to invent. It is already expressed in the romantic popular culture embraced all over the world. The storylines of this culture are sentimental, formulaic variations on themes of the high romantic culture of the West, nowhere more fully articulated than in the European novel. The protagonists both find and develop themselves by struggling against their social fate. Even when they fail to change the situation, they succeed in changing themselves. They discover that they have infinities inside themselves; they raise themselves up to a bigger life. They are not so ordinary after all; not the hapless puppets they at first appeared to be.

In one direction this prophecy speaks to the desire for stuff: for consumption and material exuberance. Franklin Roosevelt said that if he could place one book in the hands of every Russian child it would be the Sears Roebuck catalogue. However, if accumulating things may be an alternative to connecting with people, the opportunities afforded by a higher material standard of living may also serve as a passage to experimentation with a broader range of human powers and possibilities.

In another direction this prophecy voices a higher hope. It is the hope that society will recognize and

nourish the constructive genius of ordinary men and women; that, as a result, seemingly intractable problems will yield, one after another, to undaunted ingenuity; that the reform of society and culture will lift from our efforts at self development and cooperation the incubus of a rigid scheme of social hierarchy and division; and that none of us will therefore have to choose between surrender to subjugation and isolation from others, or between engaging with a particular world on its terms and keeping the last word, of judgment and resistance, for ourselves.

The basis of these hopes is an idea about ourselves: the idea that we are greater than all the particular social and cultural worlds we build and inhabit; that they are finite with respect to us, and that we are infinite with respect to them. There is always more in us – in each of us individually as well as in all of us collectively – than there can ever be in them.

No social order can provide a definitive home for the human spirit so understood. However, one order will be better than another if it diminishes the price of subjugation that we must pay to have access to one another. One order will be better than another if it multiplies opportunities for its own revision, thus attenuating the difference between acting within it, on its terms, and passing judgment on it from the outside, on our own terms. One order will be better than another if it enables us to shift the focus of lives

away from the repeatable to that which does not yet lend itself to repetition: to the perpetual creation of the new. Not the humanization of society, but the divinization of humanity, is the message of this prophecy.

It is a message both enigmatic and impotent so long as it remains disconnected from the driving forces of society and bereft of ideas about the next steps to take. Possessed, however, of such connections and such ideas, its subversive and reconstructive capabilities become all but irresistible.

After the ideological and institutional adventures of the twentieth century, with their terrible record of oppression in the name of redemption, much of humanity may have reason to be wary of proposals to reorganize society. It may prefer to resign itself to small victories in the defense of old rights or in the achievement of new advantages. The discipline of ruling interests and ideas has allied itself with a skepticism that masquerades as realism, creating, all over the world, a semblance of closure.

This sense of an end to ideological and institutional contests is, however, an illusion fueled by a lack of imagination. The interdependencies of the world open up opportunities for reconstruction at the same time that they impose obstacles to straying from the prescribed path. The meaning of any national experiment that is identified as the flawed bearer of a

powerful message about alternatives can now resonate around the world with sensational rapidity. Acts of defiance that seem impossible may, once practiced, seem inevitable.

For over two hundred years a vision of the ability of ordinary men and women to lift themselves up – to become not just richer and freer but also greater – has joined the savage contest of states, classes, and ideologies and the magnifying force of our mechanical and organizational inventions to set the whole world on fire. To our faithless eyes, unable to discern its glow in unfamiliar form, the flame may appear all but extinguished, or visible only as reaction, terror, and fantasy. It will nevertheless burn again, with a greater light. To what end our ideas and actions must now determine.