

Alternative Societies

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Professorial lecture, Sussex University, May 2014

I'm going to be talking about alternative societies, but I wanted to start off briefly with sociology. I'm a sociologist, mainly. What first made me want to study sociology was that it seemed critical. By critical I mean it seemed to me that it looked beyond appearances to see what's behind them in terms of structures and causes. And sociology often seemed to show power and inequality when it looked beyond appearances. And critical also in the sense that it questions society as it is now and doesn't accept the way society is as necessarily the best way it could be. But being critical leads to the question, what's the alternative? If you're critical of the existing way society is how could it be better? So this lecture is about idealistic sociology.

I want to focus on some main themes. One is about communism after the collapse of communism. Another is about utopianism, not just in the future but also here and now. Another is about goals like human needs and self-determination. Implicitly behind all these is capitalism. I don't think capitalism is oriented to human goals and self-determination. It's about money and profit rather than human ends. And it's organised around capitalist and managerial power rather than self-determination. This isn't to say you can't achieve human ends and self-determination within capitalism. In fact one of the things I want to say is that you can. But they're not the ends of capitalism.

Utopianism

I want to start with Utopianism. The word utopian was coined by Thomas More at the start of the 16th century. It comes from ancient Greek and the various parts of the word mean a good place which is no place. So it's somewhere that is good and desirable, but it doesn't exist, and it may not ever exist or it may happen sometime in the future. It's often used in a negative way. So if you say something and someone says back to you 'that's utopian' that's usually a bad thing. It means that's unrealistic or it can't be achieved. But I think we should see utopianism in a positive way. Think of movements like feminism and the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the movement for working class representation in politics, for workers' representation in employment, by which I mean trade unions, and for the welfare state. All of these seemed radical and utopian in their early days. But people pursued them and these past utopianisms became real. It often strikes me that sneerers at radical protest and utopianism today sympathise with these historical radical and utopian movements and their achievements yet are

negative about radicalism and utopianism now. There's an inconsistency and lack of history in that perspective.

Utopias have various functions. They can be a basis for criticism of the present. So if you have a picture of an ideal society you can hold it up to present societies and talk about how present societies fail to match up. Or they can be a catalyst for change. So again you can hold up your picture of an ideal society and that gives people the energy to fight for that society. There are sociologists that have discussed utopias in terms of these kinds of functions, Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch, for example.

I think we really need utopianism for some questions, for example climate change. You can do things with capitalist incentives and technology to tackle carbon emissions. But climate change is such a fundamental and serious issue I don't see how it can be solved within current economic and social forms. We need an alternative society to tackle climate change. So one kind of utopia is ecotopias. There are also anti-racist utopias. It's difficult to find academic literature on these but Robin Kelley has written a great book called *Freedom Dreams* about anti-racist utopias. There are feminist utopias and a lot of these are in fiction. There are libertarian utopias of the right, which are about a society with a small state or no state, or a society of egoism and individualism, which is actually an alternative without a society, or a utopia where private property is even more unfettered than it is now.

At the other end of the political spectrum you can find Marx. Marx was a critic of utopianism, especially of utopian socialism. Marx said the problem with utopian socialism is that it has dreams about the future that aren't embedded in current economic and social developments and contradictions, in tendencies in society at the moment. I sort of agree with Marx about this. But I want to look at utopianism that is embedded in present contradictions, and at utopianism now and not just in the future.

Another criticism of utopias is that whole-society revolutionary utopias didn't work. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman talks about this and the obvious example is communism. This was a whole society utopia that didn't work out well. For people like Bauman people have lost the faith in utopias because of these whole society utopias that went badly. Another sociologist Manuel Castells has been talking in the last few years about alternative economic cultures. He makes a related point to Bauman's. He says people can't wait for the revolution. People want to live differently now. So Castells talks about alternative economic cultures such as barter (like Freecycle), co-ops, mutual help, and Castells made his name talking about networks in society, as opposed to hierarchies, and he talks about these alternative economic cultures being organised in network forms. So people

sometimes opt for these alternative economic cultures out of choice. They are ideologically committed to things like co-ops or mutualism. But sometimes they opt for them out of necessity. They don't have any money so they have to use bartering. Or they experience hell at work, so they have to get out and they form a co-op.

I want to look at multiple experimental utopias where people are trying out types of alternative society now in different places, as much as total utopias that cover the whole of society. And I want to look at localised and fragmentary utopias as well as overall ones that cover the whole of society. I want to talk about utopias as a process being tried now as well utopias as an end to be tried at some time in the future. And I want to look at utopias that are spatial, happening in spaces now, as much as temporal, in time in the future.

Communism

So that's something about utopia. I've also mentioned communism and I want to say a bit more now about this. Although Marx criticised utopianism, communism is often seen as the biggest attempt at a utopia. It was an attempt to create an ideal society that has not yet existed. So this fits with the definition of utopia I mentioned earlier, a good place which is no place. Communism is about collective ownership based on need, as opposed to private ownership for profit which is what capitalism is. I'm not one of those people on the left who thinks you can look at so-called actual communism and say it had nothing to do with socialism or communism and that we can just carry on being socialist without paying any attention to what went wrong with actual communism.

Marx did see communism as a society where state power had dissolved, and that is very different to what actual communism was like. But actual communism did try to do planning for need, which is a communist aim, and state ownership on behalf of the people, which is one type of collective ownership. So I don't think you can say that socialism can just carry on regardless not affected by learning from what happened in these societies. If you're interested in alternative societies we need to look at what happened in these cases and see if we can learn from it. One lesson is that these societies got stuck at a statist repressive transitional stage. Marx said we would have to go through a statist repressive stage to get to communism, where we would have to fight against attempts at counter-revolution and people trying to defend private property. But these so-called actual socialist societies got stuck at this stage. So I think we need to think whether this is the right means to alternative societies.

Also Marx said we have to go through capitalism for the preconditions for communism to be developed. One of these is collective consciousness, which you

need for a communist society to work. This develops under capitalism, which creates a fully developed proletariat with a collective consciousness and this sort of collective, communistic consciousness can be the basis for a fully developed one under communism. Actual communism in places like the Soviet Union, China and Cuba where there were revolutions, happened in peasant societies not capitalist ones so they hadn't gone through the capitalist stage Marx said they needed to. One of the problems that people like Che Guevara and Mao tried to address was that when they were building a communist society the communist consciousness that was needed had not been developed and they were concerned about how to build that consciousness.

So I think there are two lessons we need to learn from actual communism if we're thinking about alternative societies. One is about non-authoritarian means for getting to alternative societies. And another is about an alternative where collective consciousness is developed now and not left to some later date when the alternative society exists.

One person who criticised communism was John Stuart Mill. Mill was writing before actual communism had happened in the Marxist sense. He said revolutionary communism was irresponsible and too confident in its own infallibility, in trying to create a system which hasn't been tried and tested, and where its details are unknown. Marx quite openly said he wasn't going to lay out in detail what a communist society would look like because that had to be collectively decided by people themselves. So Mill favoured gradualist experimental socialism now, where you try it out here and there and see how it works before you try to implement it on a whole society scale. And Mill favoured a pluralist society with private property rights existing alongside other forms. What Mill says is relevant to the rest of what I'm going to say tonight.

So I've talked a bit about utopianism and communism. I want to talk now about types of alternative society you can find within capitalism, so about forms of utopia now, or empirical utopias. I want to look at ones that are practical and feasible, despite being utopian. I want to mention five areas where you can find types of alternative society - co-operation, in relation to food, work, mobility, and in politics. Five is a lot and I'm using these as examples of alternative society rather than as the subject of in-depth analysis.

Co-ops

There are lots of kinds of co-ops, such as consumer co-ops but I think one of the most interesting types is workers co-ops. This is where businesses are owned collectively by workers. So we have some examples in Brighton. Infinity foods is a workers co-op. Magpie, who run the Shabitat store on the Lewes Road, is a

workers co-op. We have a bike hire co-op here on the campus which is run by students and some of the people who organise that are here tonight. I mentioned communism as collective ownership earlier on and co-ops are a sort of collective ownership on a small scale.

People who get involved in co-ops don't necessarily do it for very ideological reasons. Some do it because they believe in co-operation. But when I ask people who are in co-ops what got them involved some say they had a terrible job and they wanted out of it and so they started a co-op. This is a human well-being issue and I mentioned human well-being earlier on as a good goal. Or they say they had a terrible boss, so they wanted collective self-determination, and I mentioned self-determination earlier as an objective. I mentioned Castells saying that opting for alternative cultures can come through choice or necessity, and there are some examples where it comes more out of necessity.

One of the interesting things that has happened in the last few years is the development of free co-operative universities, and in the UK maybe the most developed example is the Social Sciences Centre in Lincoln. These are universities that are run co-operatively for educational ends. They are in part a response to marketised higher education, which is expensive. Students have to pay a lot of fees now. They are also a response to marketised universities where control by citizens of the university, students and staff, has been reduced and universities are run more now by managerial power. So free universities are about universities run by their members, by co-operative control. They are a response to universities which are run like businesses to make money, rather than with goals of education and the public good. Free co-operative universities are universities which are about education and the public good again. We have an example in Brighton which is the Free University Brighton. You can google it and find their website. The motto of the Free University Brighton is 'education for love not money' which pretty much summarises what I'm trying to say here.

I want to also mention some other perspectives on alternative education which maybe don't use the word co-operative to describe what they do but which I would put in the category of co-operation. Lots of you will know about A.S. Neill's school Summerhill which still exists and is run by his daughter. Summerhill is best known for the fact that lessons are voluntary so students don't have to go to them. But Neill also talked about fitting the school to the child rather than the child to the school. And he talked about happiness above education. So these are goals which are about human ends. In fact it's striking that Neill as a head of a school was not all that into education and teaching, he was more interested in human well-being as the first priority.

Another educationalist I like is the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire who wrote a great little book called *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire was into democratic dialogical education. He was about education where students set the themes and the job of teachers is to problematise those themes. So the curriculum is student-led and the role of the teacher is to respond to that. Another favourite of mine is the great book *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich. Illich talks about education in networks outside institutions like schools and universities and taught by those who aren't certificated. So it's not necessarily done by people like me and many of you who have lots of letters after our names but by anyone who has the knowledge to teach, even if they have no qualifications.

Lots of us here, academics, are quite critical of power, and we complain about lack of consultation and lack of accountability. But if it's giving students power and giving away our own authority we're against doing that. There is an inconsistency there. We use discourses of consumerism to reject accountability to students. We say we shouldn't ask students about our courses because that is just the market and consumerism. But rather than rejecting accountability to students for these reasons we should be using ideas of democracy to embrace it.

One of the really interesting things I've been following in recent weeks is the struggle by economics students at Manchester, and now it seems at many universities internationally, to challenge the one-dimensional neo-classical curriculum they are taught. But in rejecting that curriculum they are also challenging something else which is the power and authority of their teachers to control the curriculum. Neill, Freire and Illich were all about the role of students in determining the curriculum.

Food counter-cultures

I said I wanted to talk about food in relation to alternative societies. Food may seem a funny example to use when talking about alternative societies, but I want to talk about food counter-cultures, especially freeganism, which is about bin or skip diving, where people go into supermarket bins and take food thrown away there. This is food which is past its use-by or sell-by date but is still perfectly edible. But freeganism is about more than just getting good food that's been thrown away. It's also a counterculture with important meanings.

It's anti-waste, so it has an ecological meaning. It's against the gluttony of the rich in capitalism, where we are rich and produce more than we need, while there isn't enough for the poor. One of the nicest articles about freeganism is by Edwards and Mercer called 'Gleaning not Gluttony', and that title summarises the issue well. Skip divers don't just eat the food themselves, they give it away to the poor, so there's a poverty and equality agenda. Skip divers often target bigger

corporate supermarkets, those with the least good environmental and labour rights records, so there's an ethical agenda. They take food distribution and consumption out of the market. So they decommodify food and are about distribution on the basis of need, not through the market or for profit. So freeganism is a basis for counter-cultural values and ethics for an alternative society. But actually it's about more than ideas for an alternative society but about actual alternative practices being done now which are the basis for an alternative society.

You can also find countercultures in communes or intentional communities and in urban social centres like the Cowley Club in Brighton, and Paul Chatterton at Leeds has written about this. And you can find countercultures in squats and community gardens which are about creating public spaces for community need and resisting those spaces being turned into private spaces for profit. One example is the Lewes Road community garden near where I live. The Occupy movement has also been about this kind of thing.

Less paid work

I said I would talk about work in relation to alternative societies, but I mainly want to talk about doing less work. We have high consumption and production in societies like ours, to produce profit and we fetishise work, and see work as noble and talk about people who don't work as idle and work-shy. But this is leading to long hours of work, especially in the UK where we have especially long working hours.

But the problem of work isn't just hard work, or lots of hours or the pace of work. A recent Danish study, and there have been other studies like this, looks at depression and work and says it's the boss not the workload that's the problem. Low control at work is associated with health and well-being problems. So it's an issue of self-determination, which I mentioned earlier on.

We could have less paid work in society. This could reduce production and consumption. With less work we would produce less, and have less income to consume, with environmental benefits. It would give us more free time for our own autonomous activity, so more self-determination. Self-determination comes not just through collective ownership and control at work, which is how many on the left have seen it, and I'm not arguing against this, but also in autonomy from paid labour altogether. What we could do outside paid work may be work. So we may choose to spend our time outside paid work doing things like writing poetry or on the allotment. This is still work but it's autonomous work. But we would also do non-work things like spend more time with friends and family. André Gorz wrote a great book about this called *Farewell to the Working Class* in the

early 1980s and he's written other books about it like *Reclaiming Work* and *A Critique of Economic Reason*. Gorz argued what may seem a contrary thing, that less work can make sure people have more work. He said we can all work less so all can work, so a society based on less paid work can be a solution to unemployment. We redistribute working time from those who have it to those who don't, so those who have too much work can work less, and those who don't have work have some work.

How feasible is this? There are some practical things we could do to make a society with less paid work possible. We could have a universal basic income and a decent living wage so people are paid enough money that means they don't have to work so much. We could tighten up on legal maximum working hours. In Britain the legal maximum is 48 hours a week, which is not exactly a very low amount. Technology could shorten working hours. We could use technology to produce the same amount of stuff but with less work. But actually technology is used mostly for increasing productivity while we still carry on working long hours. Marx, Keynes, Gorz, and Bertrand Russell all talked about technology being used in the future for reducing working hours. It didn't end up being used enough for that but it could be.

There are precedents for having less paid work. There are quite a lot of examples of reducing working hours and I don't have time to discuss them. But possibly the most famous one is the French attempt to introduce a 35 hour week in the 2000s. I read the other day about Gothenburg City Council in Sweden where in some of their departments they've reduced the working day to 6 hours without cutting pay on the basis that someone will be just as productive in 6 hours, if not more so, than they will be over a longer working day of 8 hours or so. The New Economics Foundation in Britain has published a pamphlet called *21 hours* where they talk about examples of attempts to reduce working hours. 21 hours is the average working week in Britain, it includes people who work part-time, but the New Economics Foundation are saying this should be the norm or maximum, which is currently often around 40 hours or so for many people rather than the average.

There are class dimensions to this. A society with less paid work could create greater equality between workers and non-workers if work is redistributed from those in work to the unemployed. It can also give greater autonomy from the employer-employee relationship, which is also a class-equalising thing.

There could also potentially be dimensions which could improve gender equality. A society with less paid work could free men for more domestic and childcare responsibilities. Women have been quite successful at getting out of the private sphere and into the public sphere and paid work. But it hasn't really been reciprocated by men playing more of a role in the private and domestic sphere.

However where women are in relationships with men, which is only one sort of living arrangement women are in, but where they are in relationships with men they are often the lower paid one so a society with less paid work could involve them being the one to take more time off, so reinforcing gender divisions. So there are possibilities in less paid work for greater gender equality, but gender equality won't be solved by restructuring paid work. It needs much wider cultural change. I want to make a similar point about racism, in relation to the next area I'm going to talk about.

Open borders

I want to talk now about an alternative global society that has open borders, where people can move internationally completely freely.

When people talk about having an alternative global society in sociology they often talk about one based on global government or on a global cosmopolitan culture. I'm pretty sceptical about proposals along these lines, mainly because I don't think they take into account the power and inequality that are involved in these things. I'm more interested in an alternative global society that is based around open borders.

Societies like ours justify themselves on the basis of freedoms, such as economic freedom, or freedom of speech, assembly, and belief. One we advocate less is freedom of movement, and political philosophers like Phillip Cole have written well about this. We support the right to emigrate, so so-called liberal societies have often criticised communist states for restrictions on people leaving, but we put tight restrictions on people coming in, so not supporting the right to immigrate into our own societies. We criticise for not letting people out, but we won't let people in. So there's an inconsistency there. We don't remove the rights of those within national boundaries to move for greater opportunities. So if people from Kent want to come to Sussex to look for better life chances we don't say 'look at all those people from Kent coming over here and taking our jobs' and we don't respond by locking down the Sussex county borders. But we do restrict the rights of people to seek better life chances across national boundaries. This is inconsistent.

Restrictions on migration are inherently discriminatory, they are by their very nature, because they determine rights to move according to skills, family connections, income, and place of birth. This involves the rich keeping out the poor. So we are a rich country and when people come here we keep people out if they don't have enough money, so it's the rich keeping out the poor. And in relation to restrictions by place of birth there's a racialised dimension to immigration restrictions. If you live in a country where most people have brown

skin the chances of you needing a visa to come into the UK, and it being difficult to get that visa, are much higher.

Borders are a site of racism, and having open borders will remove a site of racism. But they won't remove racism itself. This is an issue of culture, consciousness, psychology and history, as people like Frantz Fanon have argued very powerfully.

These are arguments for a global society of open borders, about freedom, obligations, consistency and opportunities. There are also some good empirical arguments about why open borders would be a good thing for a country like the UK. There's a fallacy about a set number of jobs which migrants take. In fact migrants are entrepreneurial. If you're a migrant in the UK or the USA you are twice as likely to start up a small business as someone who is a British or American citizen. Migrants pay taxes and spend wages, so create growth and jobs. Average wages don't drop with migration, there's a lot of academic research on this. There may sometimes be a drop in wages at the bottom end of the wage structure with migration. But who's cutting wages at the bottom end of the pay scale? It's not migrants who are cutting wages in such cases, it's employers. So the solution isn't closing up our borders. The solution is strong trade unions and a good living wage, well enforced, to make sure wages don't drop. European migrants, who are talked about a lot recently in terms of migration into the UK, are less likely to claim benefits than British. Their net contribution to public services, taking into account the tax they pay in and the value of the services they use, is greater than for the British.

What would happen if we did have an alternative global society with open borders? Would there be mass chaotic migration? It's very unlikely there would be mass migration if borders were opened. There isn't in the EU with relatively open borders. In the postwar period the British went to Caribbean countries and offered people citizenship and jobs and higher wages. But even in this situation where a border was opened and people were actively encouraged to cross it only 0.6% of people in Caribbean countries between 1950-80 emigrated. People are not just economic self-maximisers looking for higher wages. I mentioned narrow neo-classical economics earlier on and this is the classical economics view, that if you take a country with low wages, and open the borders to one with higher wages, all the low waged people will just flood across to the place with higher wages. I also mentioned sociology at the start and sociologists can tell you this is not how people work. People also have roots and communities they're tied to and don't move just because there's more money.

So open borders can be part of an alternative global society, which helps people to pursue the objectives I mentioned earlier, of human needs and self-determination.

Politics

I want to mention one final area where there are possibilities for alternative societies within capitalism and this is in politics. I've mentioned Occupy in passing and I won't talk about that again but this is one area where in politics alternative societies come up. But people who have agreed with me so far may disagree with what I want to say next. This is that I think social democratic reformism has a place in building alternative societies.

Social democracy built institutions for human well-being and the public good, such as the welfare state, public housing, the NHS, and free education. Tony Judt has written a nice book about this called *Ill Fares the Land*. I don't agree with everything Judt says, for instance he would not be keen on the open borders I've mentioned. But he says the welfare state is one of greatest achievements of human history. Yet in countries like the UK we built the welfare state in the 1950s and 60s, but in the 1970s and 80s we started dismantling it just as it had been constructed. This is despite the great benefits it has had for my generation and my parents' generation, which my grandparents never had, and sadly it looks like my children won't have either. And the breakdown of the welfare state under austerity has affected women especially.

I think the welfare state provides non-capitalist alternatives within capitalism. I don't think it's just about countering the worst of capitalism and keeping capitalism going, which is a common left criticism of it, although I think it is about those things. But I think it's also about building up non-commodified institutions so the balance of society is more socialist and introducing alternative non-capitalist social arrangements within capitalism. There is more of a tradition of this perspective in Scandinavian social democracy than there is in British social democracy, of social democracy gradually introducing non-capitalist social arrangements within capitalism until the balance of society is much more socialist overall and we have more of an alternative society.

Many in protest movements and Occupy are fighting now to defend the welfare state. Unfortunately social democrats are complicit in the dismantling of social democracy. Social democrats have become not social democratic.

In terms of politics what I have been saying involves a mix of Marxism, anarchism and social democracy. Some days I wake up and think I'm a Marxist, and some days I wake up and think I'm an anarchist, and some days I wake up and I think I'm a social democrat. I used to think I had a problem and I should try to work out what I think. But actually these three perspectives can all be the bases of alternative societies within capitalism. I've talked about a transformation away

from capitalism, and this is the Marxist bit. I've also talked about autonomous initiatives from below and this is the anarchist bit. And I've just discussed reformism via the state and this is the social democratic bit. These perspectives are often seen as opposed, and they can be, but I think they can all be part of alternative societies within capitalism.

I want to conclude now and return to the themes I mentioned at the start. I've talked about co-operation, especially in relation to education, food counter-culture, a society based on less paid work, open borders, and social democracy. To some people here there will be nothing new in what I'm saying, but old ideas are often the best ideas so I don't apologise for saying old things if they're the right things. There are good critical questions that could be raised about what I've said, and I'm aware of what some of these are, but in the time I've had I wanted to focus on the positive. I've been talking about alternative societies based less on money and corporate and managerial power and more on human needs and self-determination. The examples I've used have all been about these goals. What I've talked about have involved communist and utopian principles but within capitalism, here and now.

I want to finish by saying something about John Holloway. I don't agree with everything he says but he's written an interesting book called *Crack Capitalism* which was published in the last few years. Holloway uses the word 'crack' as both a noun and a verb. So he says you can find cracks in capitalism, where non-capitalist things go on, like some of the things I have mentioned, co-ops, freeganism, squats, Occupy and so on. But you can also crack capitalism as a verb, you can make cracks like these. He talks about alternative societies being built in the present and not in some distant future. He talks about alternative societies or cracks being made by ordinary people not leaders. He talks about them as prefigurative. So types of alternative society are experimented with now and if they work out well, they can be a basis for a bigger alternative society in the future, which is a bit like what I was saying about Mill's proposals for co-operative experimental socialism. I quite like what Holloway says about crack capitalism being a politics of misfitting. People who don't want to devote themselves to making profits for private actors don't fit in so they have to find new alternative ways, and so this misfitting becomes the basis for alternative societies within capitalism. And he talks about dignity and he sees dignity as in self-determination. He says lots of us lack dignity because we don't have much self-determination in our lives. This is what I've been talking about, alternative societies which are about putting humans first, and where we can have dignity of self-determination.