

The Boutwood Lectures  
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Second lecture: The transformation of experience

In my first lecture, I outlined a program for the advancement of our democratic, experimentalist, and productive ideals and interests, by devices and in a language addressed to the circumstance of contemporary societies, especially of the European social democracies. This program rejects a return to the historical form of social democracy. However, it also refuses to acquiesce in the hollowing-out of the social-democratic project that now commonly goes under the label the third way.

I described this program in six large convergent directions: the financing and facilitation of the new; the endowment and the equipment of the individual worker and citizen; the democratizing of the market economy, that is to say, the decentralization of access to productive resources and opportunity; the organization of a caring economy and its superimposition on the production system; the development of an institutionalized high-energy politics requiring greater civic engagement and encouraging the accelerated practice of structural reform; and the independent organization of civil society outside the state but beyond the limits of private law.

The spirit of this program is the attempt to combine empowerment with connection. The forms of empowerment most readily available to us in the contemporary world are acquired at the price of disconnection from others. The forms of connection to which we have easiest access are sustained at the price of some belittlement, some diminishment of our powers of individual and collective self-transformation. What we should chiefly desire is to find ways to empower ourselves, individually and collectively, that also connect us, and ways to connect us that also empower us.

The chief instrument for the development and the execution of this program, understood as a direction rather than as a blueprint, is the quickened practice of institutional experimentalism: motivated, directed, and cumulative experimentation with the institutional forms that now define representative democracy, market economy, and free civil society. In the history of modern social thought our idea of structural discontinuity has ordinarily been associated with a conception of revolutionary or total change. Our commitment to gradualism has ordinarily been

connected with repudiation of the idea of structural reinvention. We must jumble these categories up. We should associate the disposition to structural discontinuity with an acknowledgement that the reinvention of structure ordinarily takes place step-by-step and part-by-part.

Social alternatives in the contemporary world have vanished in the form in which they were familiar to us: large-scale ideological abstractions like socialism. We must, therefore, recover and rebuild, from the bottom up, from the inside out, the practice of working alternatives out, in imagination and in reality. The solution is to imagine and to generate the alternatives as the extension or the deepening of the small-scale variations already available to us.

After the collapse of communism and the discrediting of traditional socialist ideas, there is a limited repertory of institutional alternatives available in each domain of social life. To understand this repertory, to explain its genealogy, to criticize it, and then to expand and renovate it is the true object of constructive social thought and action in the contemporary circumstance. Our goal, however, should not be simply to replace some institutions by others. It must also be to change the character as well as the content of the institutions, their relation to the constructive freedom or action by which we defy or reshape them.

We should not want institutional and discursive systems that are presented to us as brute natural facts on a take it or leave it basis. We should want institutional and discursive systems that lay themselves open to challenge and revision. Such orders of society and of culture allow us to attenuate the contrast between the normal activities by which we pursue our interests and ideals in a framework taken as given and the extraordinary activities by which we re-imagine and remake parts of this framework.

We have a fundamental stake in this transformation of the quality of institutional life: to make a social world that is a more suitable habitation for us as beings who exceed all cultural and social systems that we create and inhabit. Such systems are finite. We, relative to them, are infinite. There is always more in us than there is in them.

This interest of ours in arranging society and culture in a way that bears the imprint of spirit – spirit transcending circumstance -- can be made to converge with our moral interest in the relative equalization of economic circumstance as well as with our material interest in quickening of the pace of invention, innovation, and practical progress. The zone of possible intersection among these interests, translated into a project of cumulative institutional renovation, is the program and the practice that I here outline and defend.

Although I presented this program in terms that are specially directed to the circumstances of the contemporary European social democracies, I do not regard this proposal, defined in such general terms, as a local program. It is a universal program in its intentions. It is not just one of many ways; it is another way, a second way. Nevertheless one of the aims of this program is to facilitate the creation of real difference in the world, so that in the future the nature of the national difference in a world of democracies can more fully represent a moral specialization within humanity. The powers and possibilities of mankind develop, if they are to develop at all, in different directions, as unique forms of life, with distinct institutional embodiments. Thus the idea of many ways as the alternative to the One True Way may seem irresistibly attractive; it combines practicality with modesty. The thesis of the many ways is nevertheless false and dangerous.

In the circumstances of poorer as well as of richer countries, to democratize the market and to deepen democracy we must renovate, with the limited tools at hand, the institutional repertory available to us. If the contemporary societies are to become more truly different in the future – different on the basis of democracy and experiment rather than different solely by the force of tradition, compulsion, weakness -- they must pass through a common gateway of institutional innovations. I here call this threshold the second way. To pass through this gateway so that they then can become more truly different in the future. The need to pass through the gateway rests on two grounds: one, arising from the requirements of effective rebellion; the other, throwing light on a disturbing ambiguity in the idea of the many ways.

A universal orthodoxy cannot be adequately resisted by local heresies. Only a universalizing heresy can successfully combat a universal orthodoxy as the liberals and socialists of the nineteenth century understood. The peculiar character of the present contest of collective identities, and of the national and ethnic animosities to which they give rise, lies in their relative emptiness. The will to collective difference is aroused as actual difference wanes. Actual difference diminishes because under the conditions of world history countries can remain strong and independent only by pillaging practices and ideas from others and because all are now subject to the worldwide seduction of a culture promising material gratification and moral fulfillment to the ordinary man and woman. What is the distinctive will that combines the pillaged practices with the local residues? It needs instruction, and cannot get it from traditions and preconceptions it has already begun irretrievably to dismantle.

Moreover, the idea of the many ways conceals an ambiguity. Established on one of two possible basis, a special way – any one of the many ways – turns out to be

precarious. Established on the other basis, it proves to be illegitimate as a route to the alliance of democracy with development. If the local heresies are adopted for merely pragmatic reasons, they will be abandoned at the first sign of difficulty and fail to resist the gravitational pull of the dominant solutions. (Consider any relatively successful example of the combination of economic orthodoxy, like Chile in the last two decades of the twentieth century.) If, on the other hand, the local heresies are anchored in reified or religiously-based collective identities, they may resist the dominant solutions. However, they will resist them only by losing communion with democratic and experimentalist ideals. (Consider any of the many contemporary societies, such as Iran, in which economic arrangements have been explicitly informed by a national theology.)

The second way can respond to two major opportunities. One opportunity results from the emergence throughout the world of a new logic of practical social coordination and innovation: a form of production characterized by the softening of hierarchical divisions between supervisory and executive roles, by the fluid mixture of cooperation and competition, and by the turning of production into a practice of permanent learning and innovation. This advanced form of production and learning now flourishes in the relatively isolated advanced sectors of richer as well as poorer economies.

The network of these advanced networks has now become the driving force in the world economy. The vast majority of mankind remains excluded from these advanced sectors even in the richest and most learned countries. The two great devices that have been available to soften the social consequences of the divisions between economic vanguards and economic rearguards – redistributive tax-and-transfer and the politically supported diffusion of small business and small property – have become inadequate to the task. Are we condemned merely to sweeten this division or can we begin to reshape and to overcome it, thus anchoring social cohesion in the arrangements governing economic growth?

We have an opportunity to generalize the reach of this new logic of production and innovation beyond the frontiers of the isolated sectors where it now flourishes. This generalization can take place only through the reinvention of relation between government and the private economy: the development of a new institutional repertory of forms of decentralized partnership between government and private enterprise. To this end, we must reject the choice between the American model of arm's-length regulation of business by government as well as the northeast Asian model of the formulation of unitary trade and industrial policy by a central bureaucracy and the business leaders it consults. We must work instead toward a form of strategic coordination between the state and private business that is

decentralized, participatory, market-deepening, pluralistic, and experimental. Such a form of coordination is worked out together by decentralized, independent public entities and ephemeral groups of firms. It works on the principle that every form of public help to the producer must be justified in part by its direct contribution to the entrance of new agents into the market and the radicalization of competition. Its characteristic product is not a master plan but a set of alternative and even conflicting strategic conjectures, allowed to coexist for the sake of seeing which work best. The aim is to democratize the market – to democratize it, not just to regulate it, nor merely to compensate, through redistributive programs, for its inequalities. This goal in turn leads into the other parts of the program of the second way.

Another major opportunity to open up the second way arises from the clash of collective identities. The peoples of the world want to be different. Increasingly, however, they are not. Collective identities are aroused and poisoned in the very process of being emptied of concrete content: nations and communities may hate one another all the more for becoming more alike, for wanting to be different and failing. The solution that converges with the interests of democracy and practical progress is to replace this fantastical or willed difference with the ability to create real difference. To strengthen this capacity is one of the purposes of a democratizing and experimentalist alternative. Such an alternative can help turn the national difference into a product of moral specialization within humanity. The turn expresses the truths that the roots of a human being lie in the future more than in the past and that under democracy, prophesy speaks louder than memory.

These may seem nearly empty abstractions. They nevertheless have powerful practical implications. One of these consequences has to do with the character of globalization. The present global order is being organized on the principle of freedom of movement for goods and capital but not for people. Labor remains arrested within the nation-state or within a community of relatively similar states like the European Union.

The effects of this contrast between the mobility of things and the imprisonment of people are far-reaching. One of these effects is drastically to restrict the equalizing and liberating potential of globalization. Another effect is to slow the transformation of national difference by democracy. In a world of democracies each nation-state or community of states should develop a distinct range of forms of life. If they now need to pass through similar innovations in the ways they empower individuals, democratize markets, and deepen democracies, it is only so that they may later become more truly and more freely different.

Because such distinct forms of life, with their embodiment in institutions and practices, represent a partial, slanted version of humanity, the individual must free to

rebel against them and to escape them. The freedom of the individual to leave one of these worlds and to join another one is a precondition of the legitimacy of each of them. Otherwise, the strong will and the intransigent imagination will be crushed and diminished, and prophecy will find it impossible to speak louder than memory.

I have so far described the second way as a project in political economy. It intends to initiate, although by gradual means, a fundamental change. Such change, has regularly depended on calamity, especially war. It is one of the goals of this program to make change less dependent on crisis. However, humanity has not yet loosed this dependence. For this reason, the material interests served by the innovations of the second way are not enough to support the advance; they can always be accommodated, in part and for a while, by the established institutional order. The conviction and the energy for transformation cannot rest on such interests alone. They need to be informed, reinforced, and inspired by a vision of unrealized human opportunity.

Every momentous change is at once political as well as religious. The program of the second way requires us to reorient politics, to reorganize the world economy, to reshape our understanding of society, and to reorient our moral experience. Consider each of these domains in turn.

Take first the reorganization of politics. Two types of political action are familiar to us in modern history. There is the revolutionary or radical politics in which a cadre of personal leaders mobilizes an energized majority to bring about large-scale institutional transformation. It is a limiting case; often no more than a fantasy. Then there is the routine politics by which professional politicians negotiate deals among the large organized interests while conciliating the unorganized with modest transfer and symbolic concessions. It is style of politics predicated on the absence of crisis and on the moderation of social and ideological conflict. We need a third type of politics: a transformative politics combining negotiation among the organized interests with the mobilization of the disorganized majority. Such a politics should have as its object the piecemeal but cumulative transformation of the institutional structure of society. It should dispense with crisis as the condition of change.

This transformative politics does not replace not the replace our ordinary interest-seeking activity by a mythical idea of selfless devotion to the common good. It deepens, or rather extends, this ordinary activity. As a result, much of the exceptional practice of changing parts of the established setting of action and thought gets absorbed into the normal practice of pursuing your interests or going about your job within that setting.

Transformative politics is therefore a species of a practice that should become omnipresent in the life of a democratic and experimentalist society. It is a practice that diminishes the distance between our framework-preserving and our framework-transforming activities.

Turn now to the second of the four domains in which I proposed to explore the idea of the second way: the reorganization of the world economy. The world economy is now organized on principles hostile to the emergence and the advancement of a progressive alternative such as this one. More generally, the present world economic order remains slanted against the future creation of real difference.

The arrangements and the dogmas of the present world economic order enforce and accelerate convergence toward the institutions and practices established in the rich North Atlantic democracies. To change this situation, three sets of reforms are needed.

The first reform concerns the international economic organizations, especially the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These agencies should not be allowed to operate as the long arms of the dominant project in political economy. Insofar as they have universal responsibilities, they must have minimal powers; their role should be to uphold the clearing mechanisms and to provide the bridge loans that help keep the international economy open. To the extent they help define and support particular trajectories of national development, they must be made pluralistic. Either they must be broken up into many rival organizations or they must become shells accommodating teams of technicians ready to help countries and their governments to work out the strategies of national development they may embrace.

The second reform has to do with the reorientation of the world trading system. This system should not have as its generative principle the maximization of free trade as free trade is now understood. Free trade is a means, not an end. The objective of the global trading regime should be to maximize development possibilities and alternatives generated in national experience and national debate. For example, the present regime presupposes a concept of property that outlaws, under the label of subsidy, many forms of market-deepening coordination between government and private enterprise. In this way it helps freeze into place the existing international distribution of comparative advantage among countries.

The third reform regards the relation between the mobility of capital and the immobility of labor. I have already referred to the anti-liberal hypocrisy that calls free system money and goods are free to roam the world while people remain imprisoned within the borders of states. An economist would say that the efficiency

cost of a policy enforced price differential, or so-called price wedge, is proportional to the square of that wedge. In the world today, these policy-enforced price differentials for commodities or financial assets rarely exceed two to one, but the price differentials for the returns to labor regularly exceed ten to one. No reform in the world would have a greater equalizing effect than the gradual acquisition by labor of freedom to cross national frontiers in the name of freedom as well as of equality. It would be impractical and self-defeating to press for an immediate and unrestricted right of migration. However, our practical and our moral interests point in the same direction: toward giving capital and labor together freedom to move, in small, cumulative increments.

How can a reform of the world economy guided by these three sets of reforms plausibly come about? Envisage a three-step sequence. The first step is for alternatives -- real alternatives -- to be established in particular nation-states, especially in some of the large marginalized continental countries -- China, India, Russia, Indonesia, and Brazil -- that are now the natural seats of resistance in the world. Almost alone they command the combination of the practical and spiritual resources with which to imagine themselves as different worlds, even though each of them has recently been inhibited in the achievement of this potential for deviation and rebellion. The second step is that there is pressure, as a result of this exercise in national heresy, to change the rules of the international economy. The third step is that this change of the rules in turn encourage the further advance of heresy in the institutional setting and the strategic orientation of national development. If, however, the European community should conspire with the United States to impose institutional uniformity and convergence upon mankind, then it will be our task in the rest of the world to defy this Metternichian settlement and to overturn it.

I now come to the third domain of transformation that needs to accompany and to confirm advance in the direction of the second way: revision of our practices of social and historical understanding. Suppose a progression in three moments.

First, we must repudiate the scientific or pseudo-scientific prejudice that would model social analysis on the image of natural science. Our study of nature is irredeemably entangled in antinomies that have become manifest in the history of modern philosophy. These antinomies ultimately arise from the disconnection of thought from action: the scope of a way of thinking that extends far beyond the horizon of our immediate existence and activity. Such antinomies express the most basic fact about us: that we are something relatively infinite caught within finite realities: the body, society and culture.

On one side, we face the antinomies of time. If time is an illusion, then so are our causal judgments. However, if time is for real and the universe has a history, then our causal judgments lack a secure basis in general laws, because these laws will also have a history.

On the other side, we confront the antinomies of experience. When we reason we may conclude that we have no direct access to the world, but remain prey to the phantasms of our minds. When, however, we experience, it is reasoning that comes to seem fantastical, and we go on to live undaunted in the world of the manifest.

In our study of society, however, we can be relatively free of these antinomies. We can hope to gain, in relation to our social and cultural artifacts, a more god-like position. We can know them from within as their makers. This relation may increase in immediacy as we succeed in creating structures that have as one of their defining attributes to ease their own remaking, to diminish the distance between our framework-preserving and our framework-changing activities.

Is not to affirm any intellectual prestige or hierarchy but to inhabit more fully the world we are in that we should cast off pseudo-scientific prejudice. We should understand and practice social knowledge as centered on itself: a way of understanding more direct, more complete, and less contradictory than that the knowledge we can hope to gain of nature. We can then enable ourselves to repudiate a false distinction forced on us by the scientific prejudice, the distinction between practical insight and theoretical knowledge.

We should see our theoretical knowledge of society as the deepening or extension of our ordinary practical acquaintance with social life, rather than as its overcoming by higher insight. The task of the imagination is to do the work of crisis without crisis, placing the actual under the light and the pressure of the possible. Seen in this way, imagination of things human is inseparable from human action and, in particular, from transformative action. For it is by putting pressure on the established social world, and by discovering transformative opportunity in the midst of recalcitrance and constraint, that we break the spell of the actual over our minds. Theory can continue this work; it cannot begin it. And it shares with the practical thinking that arises immediately from our efforts and engagements a crucial feature: our ability to imagine the next steps, and thus to place established reality within a penumbra of proximate and accessible variation, never depends on the power to discern the remote moves, much less to map out the horizon of the possible. A list of possible social worlds forms no part of such knowledge; the concept of such a list is a superstition weakening our powers of resistance and of insight on the pretext of arousing them.

The second moment of this intellectual transformation is the recovery and reconstruction of the idea of structural discontinuity. It is the formative arrangements and beliefs of a society change discontinuously; that they are at once faithful and contingent. In the history of modern thought this idea has become mixed up with the dogmas of historical fatalism: for example, that there are indivisible systems like capitalism; that each such system conforms to an internal logic; and that they succeed one another according to some pre-established evolutionary sequence, driven by irresistible laws of change.

We must rescue the idea of structural alternatives from such illusions. At the same time, we must assert the idea of structural alternatives against the practice of the positive social sciences. As now practiced in the universities, these sciences regularly deride the idea of structural alternatives, and rationalize the established social order. Their dominant spirit is a right-wing Hegelianism. It is a spirit inimical to the imagination of transformative possibility. For that reason it is also a mystification of social and historical experience.

The third moment in this intellectual turn is the confusion of genres. Each of the social disciplines is chained, to its own methodological agenda. Separated as they are, these disciplines are unable to confront their own limitations except when forced to face them by some shaking up in the world.. How can we best bring them up short, the better to make them face their imaginative shrinking of the possible? We best combine these disciples and subvert them by trying to understand present reality and transformative possibility in a single situation, a single country, a single moment, a single circumstance. The overthrow of the superstition that sees social knowledge as a lesser version of natural science, the recovery of the idea of structural alternatives, and the confusion of genres describe the gradual development of an intellectual climate propitious to the development of progressive social alternatives. We cannot move in a direction like that of the second way without equipping ourselves with such methods and ideas. To approach the understanding of society in such a spirit is both an expression of our ability to turn the tables on our contexts and a requirement for continuing to do so. It is a form of enlightenment without which we cannot make ourselves more fully free.

The final domain in which to address the development of an alternative is the criticism and redirection of our moral experience. I proceed metaphorically, by a series of equivalent formulations.

The first formulation has to do with the relation between our capacity to recognize the mutable character of social life and our willingness to accept the immutable conditions of human existence. We want a form of life that allows us

more fully to recognize that everything in the organization of society is contingent. We must disrespect the institutional orders that contain us, the better to respect one another as beings who transcend these limited and limiting structures. Through this deliberate practice of institutional iconoclasm, we come to see all the more clearly the unchanging features of our existence as persons who will waste and die. Such a consciousness of our own humanity is both condition and consequence of a change in the organization of society. At the same time, however, it also an independent discovery of the mind, animated, in the development of this belief, by a single and wide purpose.

The second formulation has to do with the relation between two sources of human sadness. We are sad because the intensity of our desires immeasurably exceeds their objects. The objects of our desires are relatively trivial in comparison to their intensity, with the result that we find ourselves belittled and humiliated in the circumstance of ordinary life. However, we are also sad because we demand from one another more than we can give one another. Like the porcupines described by Schopenhauer, we freeze when apart, wound one another when together, and move uneasily back and forth in search of the uneasy middle distance. This unease in the company of others is the second great source of our sadness.

Our aim in the reconstruction of moral experience should be to deal with the first source of sadness in a way that allows us to address the second source. We can do so by developing forms of thought and of life that make us more fully the masters and that give us objects worthy of our energy. These social and cultural works must be distinguished by another pair of attributes. They should arrange our affairs as to blunt the conflict between the requirements of innovation and of cooperation. And they should afford us an experience of community that turns difference into a device of union, dispenses with sameness of experience or outlook, and thrives on heightened reciprocal vulnerability.

Now, this reshaping of experience can be described in a third form, related to the shape we should desire our lives to exhibit. In a society that is relatively free, relatively equal, and relatively rich, each of us could become many different people. We must nevertheless settle on a particular course of life. We must otherwise settle the better to become a single self. Each of us must therefore mutilate himself.

We must nonetheless continue to feel the hurt at the point of amputation, and learn to experience the ghostly movements of the missing limb. Later on, in a particular course of life, organized around compromises, we begin to give such compromises the power to define us. Having done, we begin to die little by little. A mummy forms around us; mutilated at the beginning, we are mummified toward the end.

To continue to live until we die, and to be sure to die only once, we must rip this mummy apart from the inside out. Before we can conceive the desire and develop the power to do so, we must unsettle ourselves, deliberately and repeatedly. It is a responsibility of the state to help us organize a life in which this uncompromising ambition becomes thinkable and feasible in the ordinary conditions of an ordinary human life. What great force could drive us into so hard a campaign?

Our greatest achievements in science, in art, and in politics arise from our disposition to subvert ourselves: to turn, for better and for worse, against ourselves. The task is to bring our self-subversion to the center of human experience, expunging its poison and increasing its fecundity. Society and culture should help us live out clearly and courageously this ordeal of self-subversion, unsubdued, unshaken, unterrified -- resigned yet unresigned -- struggling with the world and with ourselves, dreaming with eyes wide open, longing, striving, searching, seeking, until, restored to a child-like zeal and intensity, our hearts of stone turned into hearts of flesh, we learn to hear in the cry of every newborn a prophecy of the marriage of greatness with love.