SITUATED KNOWLEDGE AND SITUATED VALUES

CO-DESIGNING SOCIAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

An important feature of theoretical projects that aim to promote social justice is their commitment to empowering those in oppressive circumstances so that they can solve their own problems. One argument for this is that the oppressed have situated knowledge – both moral knowledge and empirical knowledge of the circumstances – that others lack. I argue in this lecture that another way to understand this commitment is by exploring how values evolve in the context of social practices and draw on the work of Marshall Ganz, and others, to provide a case study. If social values are contingent historically and materially grounded constructions, then change will involve a process of reconstructing existing values or constructing them anew in practice. I argue that such path dependency is compatible with values – and social justice – being objective, but not to be discovered by theory alone.

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Situated Knowledge and Situated Values: Co-Designing Social Justice

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1. Introduction

MOST, IF NOT ALL, SOCIETIES reproduce profound injustice and harm to many.[1] How does this happen? And how can the process of societal reproduction be effectively disrupted and replaced so that better systems emerge?

On the approach I have sketched elsewhere (Haslanger 2023), societies are complex systems – or clusters of interacting systems – that reproduce themselves: their hierarchies, their culture, and their structures. However, these systems are also dynamic and constantly evolving. On this view, social systems are networks of social practices, and practices are a primary site for intervention to achieve greater justice. Because social practices cannot continue without our participation, we can have an effect on how the systems evolve. But how should we engage in social transformation? And to what end?

Normative philosophy tends to be divided between questions about individuals (what can and should an individual do, morally speaking), and about states (under what conditions is the state legitimate, how should it organize us, what economy should it support, and when is it entitled to use coercive force)? Yet our day to day lives are governed mostly by

1 I use the term "injustice" and its cognates in a very broad sense to include social wrongs and social harms generally, and not just violations of rights or distributive unfairness. The term "social justice" seems to have this broad extension, but for ease of exposition, I will mostly just speak of justice and injustice.

social practices that structure our interaction We buy food and clothing; we rent or purchase homes; we transport ourselves from place to place; we raise our children and care for our pets; we rely on healthcare and education systems; we seek meaning, and beauty, and love. From a certain perspective, these are individual acts done for reasons, mostly good reasons, that are relatively transparent to us. But from another perspective, these actions are moves in complex systems of coordination that offer a limited choice architecture shaped by biological, geographical, economic, historical, and cultural conditions.

If we are considering interventions into our system of coordination, perhaps we should focus on law and public policy, for these focus on the common good and play a role in shaping and incentivizing our choices. But law and policy do not control what we do, nor should they. (The law should not dictate the division of labor in a family, for example, though it may incentivize some ways of doing it.) So we often cannot and should not rely on the state to solve our problems. More importantly, the vision for a democratically organized community is for it to govern itself, and self-governance is not always about passing and enforcing laws.

Social theory focuses on the variety of formal and informal practices that govern our lives; some of these practices are straightforwardly political, e.g., voting, paying taxes, attending a protest march. But others are only political in a very broad sense (the sense in which the political domain is the domain of power relations); even others are domain specific, e.g., religious practices. Practices involve three elements: a *group of individuals capable of social learning* (this includes some non-human animals); *material conditions* that constrain and enable the group in their various activities; and *a collection of social meanings* – what I call a cultural *technē* – that are public and are created, adopted, and improvised on by members of the community in order to interpret the material conditions and to coordinate and communicate. These three elements interact and form loops.

- The material world, when interpreted through social meanings, becomes a "resource" for us. This affects how we interact with it and, in turn, changes it.[2] For example: wheat becomes food, and we ground it for flour, and genetically modify it to tolerate draught.

2 Something becomes a resource when it is regarded as having (±) value, whether economic, aesthetic, moral, prudential, spiritual. I sometimes use the term "source" rather than "resource" because "resource" is associated with positive value.

- Material conditions may change (e.g., through natural disasters or unforeseen effects of human agency) and render existing social meanings impractical or dangerous, so the meanings evolve. The use of steroids and antibiotics in industrial agriculture may become so extreme that people no longer think of chicken as food.
- How we understand ourselves and frame our agency (our desires, identities, and commitments) is shaped through the material conditions we face and the meanings available; but we are also capable of changing both the meanings and the material conditions, together. Climate change and animal rights movements have changed how we think of food and what some of us are prepared to eat. The growth of plant-based food easily available is amazing!

On my view, an ideology is a cultural *technē* "gone wrong." This can happen in various ways. A cultural *technē* can prevent us from recognizing what is valuable or what is morally relevant, e.g., a cultural *technē* shapes the subjectivity of those who are fluent in social practices, and an ideological *technē* distorts our attention and memory. An ideological *technē* can also organize us in harmful or wrongful ways, e.g., by entrenching practices that are oppressive and render our efforts to coordinate counterproductive.

This conception of ideology is *functionalist* and *critical*. It is not, however, doxastic: an ideology is not a set of beliefs or even a set of propositions. Think of a language. A language consists of a grammar and a lexicon – a symbolic system – that is public and has a material apparatus (vocalizations, inscriptions, gestures). A language is not a set of mental states, though in learning a language we develop skills to communicate and beliefs about how to use it. If an ideology is more like a language than a set of propositions, then social critique is not mainly about showing that we have false beliefs. To critique a language is to evaluate what forms of speech and communication the language facilitates. (A language of insults and warnings would not facilitate collective knowledge production or social solidarity!) Similarly, to critique an ideology is to evaluate what forms of interaction, coordination, and communication the cultural *technē* facilitates and whether we should do better. This is partly an epistemic critique, but it is also metaphysical and moral: we should ask what ideology makes true by enlisting our agency and how we might resist.

2. Path Dependency of Value and Critique

WHEN SEEKING SOCIAL JUSTICE, it is important to keep in mind that there are many acceptable ways to organize social life.[3] The goal is not to ask what practices are the *best* way and critique any that fall short. For example, the production and distribution of food is part of social life, and there are better and worse ways to do it. But it would be misguided to argue that three square meals a day is the best way to organize food consumption and all others should be judged by reference to this ideal.

Nevertheless, some ways of producing and distributing food are unhealthy, some exploit workers, some destroy ecosystems, some cause suffering and/or death of sentient beings. We need not assume that there is a *best* way to organize food production, consumption, and disposal in order to engage in critique. A normative social theory provides tools to identify ways in which our current practices are inadequate so we can do better. What counts as better will depend hugely on local factors, e.g., the geography, economy, cultural traditions, and human biology.[4]

To appreciate the open-endedness of social life, it helps to note that value is path-dependent. What's valuable depends, *inter alia*, on what is available to value. Jack Balkin makes this point:

> Values are not so much what humans have as what they do and feel. Human beings possess an inexhaustible drive to evaluate, to pronounce what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, advantageous and disadvantageous. Without culture, human values are inchoate and indeterminate; through culture they become differentiated, articulated, and refined. (1998, 27–28)

In developing this point, Balkin relies on examples of aesthetic value: the creation of different sorts of musical instruments and the different configurations of sound they produce enables us to cultivate different ways of hearing and attaching aesthetic value to music (1998, 28). It would not be possible aesthetically appreciate rock and roll without the invention of electric guitars; our aesthetic sensibility evolves in response to the creation of new sounds. Balkin extends this to moral sensibility and moral value:

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3 This section borrows from and elaborates on a section of Haslanger (2021).

4 This is why relying on the state to manage social practices is often counterproductive. See Ostrom (1990) and Agarwal (1992; 2009).

> We concretize our indeterminate value of justice by creating human institutions and practices that attempt to enforce it and exemplify it, even (and especially) if we recognize that all of these institutions are imperfectly just. Of course, because justice is an indeterminate standard, there is no necessary way to exemplify it. The value of justice does not tell us, for example, whether a democratic legislature should have one, two, or three houses. Hence the institutions that people construct to exemplify justice may be different in different eras and different lands. (1998, 30)

Justice, of course, is not the only relevant value in the social domain, e.g., flourishing is another. What kinds of flourishing matter and what realizes our capabilities for flourishing will differ across history and social context (Sen 1999).

I take it that Balkin's point is not just that there may be different ways of exemplifying well-defined abstract rules or procedures (be they aesthetic or political), but that our ultimate values are indeterminate and any attempt to render them determinate will be specific to cultural and material conditions, so may not be transposable to other conditions. (See also Khader 2019.) A cultural *technē* is an evolving (and contested!) specification of our "inchoate and indeterminate" drive to evaluate in response to our material (biological, geographical, economic) conditions. Contestation over meanings will, of course, reflect struggles of power and conflicting interests.

The considerations just sketched suggest two dimensions of indeterminacy, one diachronic and the other synchronic, that pull against the impulse to think that philosophers can, from an a priori standpoint, identify a determinate set of values that are normatively binding in particular circumstances.

- Synchronically, any "sense of justice" or appreciation of the "value of reciprocity" (etc.) that might provide a basis for moral theorizing *across social and cultural differences at a time* is indeterminate (Kymlicka 2002, 2–4; Dworkin 1977, 179–83); and our efforts to articulate it in a way that renders it determinate will inevitably incorporate particular socio-historical elements that make it apt for some contexts, or some communities, but not others.
- Diachronically, even if we are able to specify a conception of justice that is fully determinate and applies generally at a time, we are not in a position to *grasp the full range of possibilities that we might face and decide in advance what would be appropriate under radically different conditions*. The world poses challenges that our previous (or existing) understandings and sensibilities do not solve. Who could have imagined, even a century ago, the

> morally significant possibilities created by the biological sciences (assisted reproductive technology, cloning) and engineering (automobiles, space travel, cellphones, robotics, AI). Our sensibilities evolve in response to new conditions, and the evolving sensibilities – and critique of those sensibilities – is part of a process of determining what is just here and now.

The point here is not just that we are fallible, i.e., that there is a truth about the nature of justice (for all times, all conditions) out there waiting to be found and we have only fallible access to it. The claim is that what is just or unjust does not float free of our sensibilities and our practices, and the relevant practices are revisable, open-ended, and depend on our collective and critical efforts to go on, together, from here.

Path-dependency also allows that our indeterminate values are modified as we develop ways to concretize them. Perhaps the ways in which we concretize our ultimate values puts them in tension and one of them comes to take priority. For example, the value of honor has waned in the past century as greater emphasis has been placed on the values of equality, tolerance, and inclusion, especially in regions of increasing industrialization and urbanization (McKay and McKay 2012). And, over time, the indeterminate value of moral equality has shifted to mean more than just sameness of treatment. So our sensibilities evolve in response to our current challenges at both levels, while also maintaining a degree of continuity. It is important, however, that values vary in determinacy, for as long as our ultimate values are relatively indeterminate, there is logical space to agree while also having conflicts over how to concretize them.[5]

The fact that values can be both path-dependent and legitimate determinations of the value of justice or flourishing, still leaves us with normative challenges, however.

> In different times and places, human beings find new ways to work evils on their fellow creatures, and to create monuments to brutality and repulsiveness. Thus, when I say that culture allows us to refine and articulate our values, I do not mean that culture necessarily makes us better people or leads unequivocally to what is good.… If we think that culture can develop or refine our tastes, we must concede that it may also debauch or coarsen them. (Balkin 1998, 31)

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5 As I see it, much of such conflict will end up being empirical or strategic. Though I allow that there are ultimate or fundamental moral disagreements. See Brandt (1959), Moody-Adams (1997, esp. ch. 1), Enoch (2009).

However, path-dependency does not leave critique without normative resources. The fact that ultimate indeterminate values are often agreed upon across contexts is a resource for critique. For example,

- *This is wrong!* Social critique can, at the very least, draw on our inchoate and indeterminate sense of justice to demand a better alternative to the current practices. For example, police violence (BLM), women's "second shift."
- *Why not here too!* The fragmentation of our social practices and relative (but incomplete) autonomy of social systems generate tensions and contradictions that can prompt reflection and reconfiguration of our normative resources. For example, work/home norms; double consciousness.
- *This is unworkable!* The point of coordination is to improve well-being – to achieve together what we couldn't do "alone." Plausibly, collective well-being is an ultimate value. When circumstances get very bad, it becomes clear that the terms of coordination are failing to even maintain basic well-being. For example, refugee camps, homelessness, industrial agriculture. In the extreme cases, we simply cannot go on this way: climate change.
- *This is so much better!* Experiencing a different way of life – due to travel, crisis, literature, art – can reveal that the default way of life is damaging and a different way of going on is more fitting with our ultimate values. For example, the Big Quit or the move to work from home under COVID. (Although evidence suggests that employment has rebounded, this doesn't take into account differences in attitudes towards work and ways of reorganizing priorities.)

These forms of critique will not necessarily be convincing to others, e.g.,

- if they do not share near enough ultimate values,
- if they disagree about what is feasible under current conditions,
- if they disagree about the likely outcomes of change,
- if they are deeply invested in the current practices, or
- if they are benefiting greatly from how things are.

Note, however, that social change can happen without convincing anyone of anything. (In fact, change is the default.) Even intentional social change can happen without convincing anyone of anything because we can start to do things differently for many different reasons, e.g., the material conditions change, we begin to notice something we hadn't noticed before, etc.

But there is an imperative to address systematic and structural wrongs, so we cannot just let things drift along; intervention is needed. Critical social theory is an effort to understand and promote *transformative social change*. The project is to work within and on behalf of social movements to achieve this. Disagreement is hardly surprising given a movement's critical aims – social movements would not be necessary if there was agreement that things should change. And social movements do not require *universal* agreement in order to get started; it is enough to convince *some others* that there are better ways to live together, and to make that happen. Transformative social change can happen, and be justified, in spite of disagreement and resistance. Although social movements should be guided by good reasons and seek to address objections by the opposition, they cannot and should not simply rely on argument. And importantly, moral disagreement is not, itself, a basis for moral skepticism.

However, of the concerns mentioned above, two raise practical and not just theoretical problems.

Loss of bearings due to investment in the current practices (Wells 2023). A movement must be sensitive to the fact that practices are valuable and produce goods that are internal to the practice. For example, a division of labor produces a division of expertise. Even if the division of labor is unjust, individuals marked for a particular set of tasks may develop a set of skills, a sensibility, solidarity with each other, by virtue of participation in a particular position in the structured set of practices. Goods may accrue to the participants, even if overall the structure is problematic and should be changed.

> Whatever its ultimate effect, discipline can provide the individual upon whom it is imposed with a sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity. . . . [For example,] women, then, like other skilled individuals, have a stake in the perpetuation of their skills, whatever it may have cost to acquire them and quite apart from the question whether, as a gender, they would have been better off had they never had to acquire them in the first place. Hence, feminism, especially a genuinely radical feminism that questions the patriarchal construction of the female body, threatens women with a certain de-skilling, something people normally resist: Beyond this, it calls into question that aspect of personal identity which is tied to the development of a sense of competence. (Bartky 1990, 77)

For example, part of the work of social reproduction has been the reproduction of gender roles. Moms who were skilled at raising girls and boys to conform to their assigned genders,

took delight in it, and identified with this role, have to adjust as gender becomes more fluid and complex.

Epistemic foreclosure due to uncertainty about options and feasibility. Social practices have significant epistemic effects: the schemas we employ to interpret the world are confirmed by the world they have shaped. Thus it becomes difficult to even see that schemas/practices are problematic, for they appear to be warranted, e.g., we allow Nestle to drain local springs in order to bottle water, leaving a less potable public water supply, giving people reason to engage in the practice of drinking bottled water; thus reinforcing the decision to grant water rights to Nestle. This is a self-reinforcing system that provides reasons for people to act as they do, and it is hard to see a way out. Imagination and willingness to think (and act) beyond the immediate reality are needed.

3. Social Change: Punctuated Equilibria or Incremental Transformation?

I'LL RETURN TO THE PROBLEMS of *loss of bearings* and *epistemic foreclosure*; but before doing so, we should address a concern about social change when faced with path-dependency. Plausibly, transformative social movements depend on micro-interventions that are responsive to the needs of individuals and their values, and build upon those relationships to change social relations and networks. This assumes that incremental transformative change is possible. But we should return to consider this more closely.

Research on structural and institutional change has, at time, assumed that social structures are like cement columns that endure and sustain society as a whole and cannot be changed easily.[6] As a consequence, social change occurs when "enduring historical pathways are periodically punctuated by moments of agency and choice." This is supported by some ways by a recognition of "path dependence." The structures set the conditions within which change occurs and in order to change the structures a "shock" or "critical juncture" is required (Mahoney and Thelen 2010, 7; see also Streeck and Thelen 2005, ch. 1). On this view of social change as "punctuated equilibrium," a ruptural social movement may be our best bet to

6 Note that in this literature the term "institution" is used very broadly to include formal institutions such as a university, or more informal structures of the sort I've been describing, such as families, or types of events such as meals. See Mahoney and Thelen (2010, 5–7); Thornton and Ocasio (2008).

achieve transformative social change. This may be something like a traditional revolution, but not necessarily a violent one. (It isn't exactly clear what Mahoney and Thelen have in mind.)

But of course it matters how one thinks of structures and their stability.[7] On the account I've offered, structures are not rigid; they are formed through practices that rely on culture and respond to material conditions. And culture is anything but "fixed." It is open-ended, always evolving, and responsive to our agency. This is true, even of the cultural "logics" and codified rules in a cultural *technē*, for rules require interpretation in practice to be applied.[8] In effect, "the practical enactment of an institution is as much part of its reality as its formal structure" (Streeck and Thelen 2005, 18). So the path-dependence I've described in the previous section does not commit us to the idea that transformative change requires "exogenous shocks." Instead, as Streeck and Thelen (2005) argue,

> significant change can emanate from inherent ambiguities and "gaps" that exist by design or emerge over time between formal institutions and their actual implementation or enforcement.... [And] these gaps may become key sites of political contestation over the form, functions, and salience of specific institutions whose outcome may be an important engine of institutional change." (19)[9]

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7 Mahoney and Thelen (2010, ch. 1) provide an excellent overview of how structures are viewed in the literature on institutional change, distinguishing sociological institutionalism, rational-choice institutionalism, and historical institutionalism. I agree with Hall (2010, 220) that all three approaches are important and in many ways compatible, and "synthetic models" that combine insights from all three are the most promising.

8 This follows from Wittgenstein's rule-following argument. Mahoney and Thelen (2010, 10–14) also describe several other factors that introduce gaps in institutions. Assuming the structures consist of rules or norms, compliance is variable; cognitive limits may make it difficult to anticipate consequences of having the norm; implicit norms are vague and allow for a variety of ways to "comply"; and not all norms or rules are enforced.

9 Mahoney and Thelen (2010, 10–11) argue that because institutions distribute resources – things valued – there will always be contestation. "Even when institutions are formally codified, their guiding expectations often remain ambiguous and always are subject to interpretation, debate, and contestation. It is not just that unambiguous rules are enforced to greater and lesser degrees. Rather, struggles over the meaning, application, and enforcement of institutional rules are inextricably intertwined with the resource allocations they entail."

This accords with research in history and political science challenging the assumption that "big and abrupt shifts in institutional forms are more important or consequential than slow and incrementally occurring changes.... [In fact,] gradual changes can be of great significance in their own right; and gradually unfolding changes may be hugely consequential as causes of other outcomes." (Mahoney and Thelen 2010, 2–3) The "punctuated equilibrium" models end up "obscuring endogenous sources of change and encouraging us to conceive of change as involving the "breakdown" of one set of institutions and its replacement with another" (Mahoney and Thelen 2010, 7). In particular, incremental changes can build up and give rise to more dramatic change, or make it possible for transformation rather than retrenchment to occur in the event of a shock. So although transformative ruptural change is sometimes contrasted with adaptive incremental change, this dichotomy is unfounded.

Arguably, the feminist movement provides an example of incremental transformative change. Let's take a moment to consider what the feminist movement in the United States has accomplished since 1970 (just over fifty years ago) just in the domain of law.[10] Women couldn't have a credit card in their own name or open a bank account (if married), without their husband's permission (1974) ; and they could be turned down for a loan on the basis of sex (1973).[11] If they owned joint property with their husband, the husband could make unilateral decisions about its disposition (1981). They could be fired solely because they were pregnant (1978) and were not protected from sexual harassment (1986). They could not charge their husbands for rape in all states (1993).[12] They could not, in all states, serve on a jury (1975).[13] They could not be enrolled as an undergraduate in several Ivy League schools (women were admitted to Yale 1969, Princeton 1969, Brown 1971, Dartmouth 1972, Harvard 1977, Columbia 1981). They could be evaluated based on different standards in

10 Dates in parenthesis indicate when the right was encoded in law. Sample lists can be found here: https://medium.com/@boosuzyq/10-things-that-women-couldnt-do-50-years-ago-in-the-u-s-8b6150268f06; https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/10/28/fact-check-9-things-women-couldnt-do-1971-mostly-right/3677101001/; https://historycollection.com/40-basic-rights-women-did-not-have-until-the-1970s/30/.

11 Dates indicate when a law was passed to grant the right or access in question.

12 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marital_rape_in_the_United_States.

13 This didn't happen until 1975 when decided in *Taylor v. Louisiana* by the Supreme Court.

educational programs, and they could be offered less scholarship money simply based on sex (1972). Unmarried women could not access birth control (1972) and could not get an abortion (1973 – well, that's been reversed, of course). In 2008, just fifteen years ago, women were not allowed to file for pay discrimination (2009), serve in combat positions in the military (2013), or marry other women (2015).[14] Beyond law, much more has dramatically changed. For example, "in 2019, 45 percent of women ages 25 to 64 held a bachelor's degree and higher, compared with 11 percent in 1970. In 2019, 5.4 percent of women in the labor force had less than a high school diploma . . . down from 34 percent in 1970."[15] Although we still have yet to see a woman elected president, we have our first woman vice-president; and in 1970 there were 11 women in Congress, and in this term there are 150. Of course, gender norms and expectations have also changed dramatically across the board.

While I've listed these gains as a way to demonstrate the point that the feminist movement has made a difference, it has not made a difference to all women. White affluent able-bodied heterosexual cis-women have benefited the most, sometimes at the expense of benefits to minoritized others. And matters that have been more important to minoritized women have been neglected, e.g., reproductive justice, prison and immigration reform, settler colonialism. What many call the "White women's movement" has failed along many dimensions, and where it has succeeded formally, the implementation of the legal advances has been uneven based on race and class. Moreover, most of these changes fall within a liberal paradigm and it is no longer clear (especially given the Dobbs decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*) that the gains are secure.

For the past couple of decades feminists have been working more in coalition with other marginalized groups to address the biases and failures of the movement. I, myself, think that the movement didn't adequately address loss of bearings, and the epistemic foreclosure left it unable to see options that would have been more empowering and liberatory for all. I believe that much could be gained if the feminist movement were to utilize – in coalitional settings – some of the methods I will sketch below.

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14 For more along these lines, see https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2017-01-20/timeline-the-womens-rights-movement-in-the-us.

15 https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-databook/2020/home.htm.

The changes brought about by the feminist movement do not take the form of punctuated equilibrium (though, admittedly, it looks like a lot happened in the 1970s), but rather look more like incremental (and ongoing) transformation. Does this mean that the change has not been transformative? If "transformative" means that that we have achieved our goal of creating a just society, then certainly not. But presumably, transformative social change can be a process. This is not to say that all forms of social transformation can occur incrementally, or that it is the best way. A further question is whether having a *goal* of ruptural change might be the best strategy, even if, often, the change will be incremental. In particular, it might seem that a broad ruptural strategy is necessary to accomplish the many forms of incremental change that will make for genuine transformation.[16]

But there are many studies that show that ruptures and revolutions, and even strategies of ruptures and revolutions, are not necessary in order to achieve dramatic and enduring change, and sometimes incremental change is less likely to prompt backlash and regression. It takes a long time, but social transformation is a marathon, not a sprint. As Deva Woodly says, the Movement for Black Lives must be prepared for the "longue durée":

> While there are inflection points where the movement makes dramatic, immediate impacts, the real work of movement is long-term. The goals of this radical movement include policy changes, but the goals are undergirded, in a deep way, by the belief that the structuring ideological systems of the twentieth century and the institutions and practices that formed to make the consequences of those ideologies real in people's lives need to be dismantled and built anew. This is a colossal proposition and, if it is successful, will be the work of several generations. (2021, 236)[17]

But how does incremental transformation occur, and what is the role of a social movement in promoting it? How can a social movement build the popular support and resources needed to engage in such strategies? How can it sustain commitment over the long haul?

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16 Thanks to Robin Celikates for pushing me to think about this.

17 Also, "important to remember that any way of arranging power that starts from the world as it exists will require long-term and ongoing commitment to adapting to the realities of structural inequality and social difference in order to approach just political and social relations" (Woodly 2021, 34).

How can incremental change go from being adaptive to transformative, especially when things seem to be getting worse and time may be running out?

4. Social Movements: Activism and Organizing

ON THE VIEW OF THE SOCIAL WORLD I have been developing, the goal of transformative change is to change structures, and to do this we should be aiming to change practices. In the terms I've provided, what's needed is a change in the public cultural *technē* – the social norms and meanings – that guides our collective interpretation of and response to the material conditions. This can happen in several ways. We can disrupt the material conditions so that the old meanings have less power; or we can directly challenge the meanings and logics. This can begin when an individual's or group's actions prompt attention to the problem, e.g., in civil disobedience or other forms of protest, but ultimately we need new practices to replace the ones that have us in their grip.

In the contemporary context (at least in the United States), sometimes the term 'social movement' is equated with activism, understood as disruptive resistance and associated often with ruptural change. In response to this trend, Astra Taylor (2021) has affirmed the importance of activism, but has also called attention to the fact that in recent years *activism* has too often become disconnected from *organizing*.

> To be an activist now merely means to advocate for change, and the *hows* and *whys* of that advocacy are unclear. The lack of a precise antonym is telling. Who, exactly, are the nonactivists? Are they passivists? Spectators? Or just regular people? In its very ambiguity the word upholds a dichotomy that is toxic to democracy, which depends on the participation of an active citizenry, not the zealotry of a small segment of the population, to truly function. (Taylor 2021, 38)

She insists that organizing is essential to any movement:

> Organizing is cooperative by definition: it aims to bring others into the fold, to build and exercise shared power. . . . Raising awareness – one of contemporary activism's preferred aims – can be extremely valuable (at least I hope so, since I have spent so much time trying to do it). But education is not organizing, which involves not just enlightening whoever happens to encounter your message, but also aggregating people around common interests so that

> they can strategically wield their combined strength. Organizing is long-term and often tedious work that entails creating infrastructure and institutions, finding points of vulnerability and leverage in the situation you want to transform, and convincing atomized individuals to recognize that they are on the same team and to behave like it. (Taylor 2021, 39)

Organizing provides opportunities to create new practices and build new skills, and develop strategies of resilience in the face of new circumstances. This can disrupt ideology. As I've mentioned, ideology, on my view, is not a set of beliefs; it is the set of tools that we reach for when we occupy a *habitus*. Organizing involves new ways of seeing and feeling (that comes with critique) and new ways of acting (that comes with practice). One of the ways that ideology disempowers us is by narrowing our sense of possibility, constraining our imaginations, and bridling our agency. Through collective efforts to create new tools – both cultural and material – we can become agents of social change.

5. Social Change through Co-Design

THERE ARE MANY KINDS OF MOVEMENTS that address different circumstances and different communities. I'm going to sketch one approach to *organizing* and argue that it provides a way to change practices in a way that is sensitive to the path dependence of value and also addresses the *loss of bearings* and *epistemic foreclosure*. This is not to say that it is the only or the best way to achieve these ends, depending on the circumstances. But it is at least a springboard for thinking about how critical theory be implemented in practice.

I teach in a program at MIT called D-Lab ('D' is for many things, including 'dialogue,' 'design,' 'dissemination,' and 'duct-tape'). The program seeks to address global poverty challenges through co-design that is inclusive, accessible, and sustainable. A substantial motivation for the program is to provide an alternative to standard forms of neo-colonial and neoliberal "development." Such programs have often assumed that liberalism and capitalism provide the only, or the best, framework for a good life, or, more cynically, they seek to create new workers and new markets to exploit in the pursuit of corporate profit. Such programs often impose top-down policies that are not well-informed about the local circumstances, and are rightly regarded as paternalistic, ethnocentric, and extractive. (Ostrom 1990; Agarwal 1992, 2009). Some claim to empower communities, but have often a limited sense of local

agency, values, or capabilities; again, cynically, they use the language of empowerment to recruit entrepreneurs to invest in communities for profit.

D-Lab was founded by Amy Smith, a mechanical engineer, whose vision is that "impact is not just the product of innovation, it's the *process* of innovation." The basic strategy is to partner with local organizations and promote creative capacity building by teaching design. It is likely that you have heard the saying, "If you give someone a fish, they eat for a day. If you teach someone to fish, they can feed themselves for a lifetime." We elaborate this further at D-Lab:

- If you give someone a fish, they eat for a day, if their culture allows them to eat (that kind of) fish.
- If you teach someone to fish, they can feed themselves, until the water is contaminated or the shoreline is seized for development.
- If you teach someone to think critically and be politically conscious, then whatever the challenge they can organize with their peers and stand up for their interests.
- If you engage them in the design process, they become agents of change in their communities, affecting relationships, social norms, and material conditions.

I will sketch the two steps in the methodology most relevant to our concerns here. The first step is to engage the community in public narrative; the second is teach them – and help them implement – the design process.

Public narrative: I've argued elsewhere (Haslanger 2021) that a crucial step in undertaking social change is consciousness raising. The term "consciousness raising" however, is misleading, for it sounds like something you "do" to another: you "raise" their consciousness. You correct their "false" consciousness. As I understand it, however, consciousness raising is a collective process by which a "desiring negation" is transformed into a justified complaint, and ultimately a demand. (See also Mansbridge and Morris 2001.) Iris Young (1990) describes the starting point:

> Desire … creates the distance, the negation, that opens the space for criticism of what is. This critical distance does not occur on the basis of some previously discovered rational ideas of the good and the just. On the contrary, the ideas of the good and the just arise from the desiring negation that action brings to what is given. (6)

> Each social reality presents its own unrealized possibilities, experienced as lacks and de-

> sires. Norms and ideals arise from the yearning that is an expression of freedom: it does not have to be this way, it could be otherwise. (6)

Marshall Ganz has developed a method for the initial stages of movement work he calls public narrative (2011). On Ganz's view, public narrative is valuable because it enables participants to connect values with action.

> Narrative is not talking "about" values; rather, narrative embodies and communicates those values. It is through the shared experience of our values that we can engage with others; motivate one another to act; and find the courage to take risks, explore possibility, and face the challenges we must face. (2011, 234)

The activity has three steps:

1. Individuals come together and each narrate a *story of self* that shares the individual's experience with the challenge and the values that have made a difference for them at important choice-points. The process is not just a spontaneous outpouring; participants are given tools to think about their experiences, identify the choice points, and find ways to articulate the values that mattered in making decisions.

2. After everyone listens to the stories of self from others in the group, they collectively create a *story of us* that finds similarities among the stories and the values of the participants. This too, is a scaffolded project that encourages participants to compare the different social positions that affected the stories and how those positions are related.

3. Then, given the shared story that connects their experiences and their values, the group develops a *story of now*.

> A story of now articulates an urgent challenge – or threat – to the values that we share that demands action now. What choice must we make? What is at risk? And where's the hope? In a story of now, we are the protagonists and it is our choices that shape the outcome. We draw on our "moral sources" to find the courage, hope, empathy perhaps to respond. (Ganz 2011, 231)

The story of now is not just an articulation of the challenge or an exhortation to be "for" something. "In a story of now, story and strategy overlap because a key element in hope is a strategy – a credible vision of *how to get from here to there*" (Ganz 2011, 231).

The story of now can take several meetings of the group to develop and several rounds of feedback and revision. The goal is to articulate

> the urgent choice faced by "us" that requires action: a challenging vision of what will happen if we do not act, a hopeful vision of what could be if we do act, and a call to choose commitment to the action required. The "choice" we offer must be more than "we must all choose to be better people" or "we must all choose to do any one of this list of 53 things". A meaningful choice requires action we can take now, action we can take together, and an outcome we can achieve. (McDonald 2022)

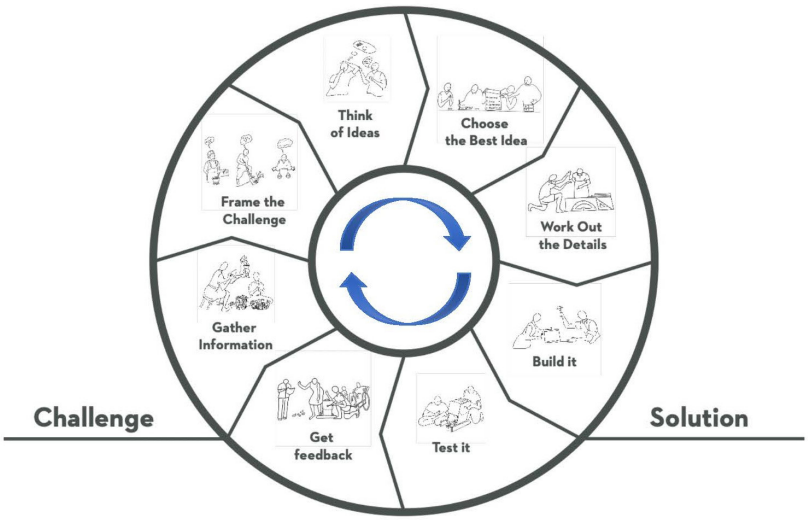
The story of now becomes a basis for collective action. Let me give you two examples.

> In Kenya, where we work, girls tend to drop out of school at puberty. The community organization we work with, wanted to encourage girls to stay in school. (The county as a high rate of teenaged pregnancy, HIV/AIDS infection (27 percent of women have HIV), and lower education rates for girls.) So the organization gathered girls in groups (some in school and some who had dropped out of school), and use the public narrative technique. The girls were asked to share a story of self in going through puberty. Many of them shared their confusion and fear when starting to menstruate, not knowing what was happening to them, not knowing what to do or who to tell, feeling shame. They were mostly facing the experience alone. As girls told their stories, they learned that others had had the same experience, and they realized that the fear and shame was common, as was the desire to help other girls avoid the same experiences and to know that they aren't alone. The story of now developed a sense of urgency to do something to help other girls and to work together to make it happen.

> In Colombia, where we work with artisanal gold miners, the story of self exercise focused on the experience of gender-based violence. In pulling together the stories of self to the stories of us and stories of now, they were able to reconstruct a map of the gold supply chain and where along that chain women were most vulnerable to GBV. "Starting with excavation, each design team tapes their segment at the front of the room and describes the actors, actions, and connections in their segment of the supply chain. As each consecutive segment is displayed, the entire supply chain begins to develop" (McDonald 2022). The process was an exercise in systems thinking.

It is important to emphasize that the "stories" are not just about personal "sharing." They are structured activities that give the participants skills to identify choice points and articulate values; they involve comparative analysis of where vulnerability occurs and why; and they call on the group to consider what power they have in the setting and how they can build on what each has to offer to address the issues. In addition, the workshops teach skills in listening, coaching others to find their voice, offering constructive feedback, and sorting through disagreements to find common ground.

Design: The next step is to teach the group the design process. Given that the group has developed a sense of urgency to "do something" and a commitment on the part of the participants to work together, the next step is to concretize and implement the desire. Participants are supported with materials and tools to co-create prototypes and ventures to accomplish this. The design process obviously differs depending on whether you are engineering a tool or a service and the kind of challenge that is to be addressed. But the cycle is similar:



The method for teaching the design cycle involves several elements not described in the figure. Hands-on exercises are used to brainstorm (among other things):

1. Who are the stakeholders and how should they be involved? Are there others who aren't currently in the group whose perspective matters and should be included in the group? Are there others who might offer support or create hurdles?

2. Thinking outside the box: How can ordinary objects/activities be used in new ways? What things are considered "waste" that might be reframed as resources? What might be adapted to suit the new purposes?

3. What hands-on skills and tools are needed to build the prototype? Can they be taught to everyone in the group?

In our projects, the emphasis is on solutions that can be designed and implemented with what's at hand. This can involve training anything from welding to sewing, from computer coding to brickmaking. Afterward, participants use these skills and technologies in their homes and share them with their communities. This promotes affordability, sustainability, and local control.

> Returning to Kenya, the girls who participated in the public narrative exercise took on two projects. First, a poster campaign to inform girls of the changes that come with puberty. Second, the design and production of reusable sanitary pads to be made available at a low price to the community. The girls also learned how to sew by hand and were given opportunities to participate in a local innovation center that provides more training in and materials for sewing. Evidence suggests that "Programs that strengthen beliefs about girls' and young women's abilities and future economic opportunities led them to delay childbearing."[18]
>
> Follow-up data shows that in the schools where the workshops were held girls who had started their periods were absent 5% less during the following term than the year before. The study emphasizes, however, that "The lack of access to reproductive health education is not the only factor affecting girls' school attendance and performance, conditions in rural Kenya, like distance to schools, lack of public transportation, deficient access to adequate nutrition, the normalization of sexual violence, teenage pregnancies, weather conditions, and cultural beliefs about the role of girls in society are some of the many barriers Kenya still must overcome to accelerate educational inclusion." (Sood et al 2023)
>
> In Colombia, the workshop yielded a national movement of women artisanal and small-scale miners that in April 2023 hosted their second national conference in which

18 J-PAL n.d.: "Nearly half (49 percent) of all adolescent pregnancies in developing regions were unintended as of 2016, meaning that the pregnancy occurred earlier than girls and young women wanted or when they didn't want it at all. Pregnant adolescents face a higher risk of maternal mortality than women in their twenties, and their babies are more often born prematurely, weigh less, and are more susceptible to neonatal and infant death."

> 148 women representing an estimated 1,000 members came together to design a plan for achieving widespread formalization for women artisanal and small-scale miners and environmental remediation in the heavily polluted communities in which they live. (McDonald, personal correspondence)

Development through co-design, as D-Lab practices it, is a form of local interstitial organizing that addresses some of the problems with more standard development programs. It also is compatible with the aims of critical theory and points to some ways that critical theory might be developed to enable and support "on the ground."

- It draws on *situated knowledge* – knowledge of local challenges, culture, and resources. Those who are engaged in the trainings learn at least as much as the community partners and all are changed as a result.
- The knowledge gained can also be *critical*. Community members are shifting perspectives by engaging in the project of public narrative, entering into dialogue with members of other groups, and learning skills that change the possibilities for agency. This can prompt paradigm shifts. This can also help with *epistemic foreclosure* for gaps in current practices are identified and stakeholders engage in creative efforts to address them together by reconsidering what resources are available and what skills they can bring to the project.
- It draws on *local norms and values*, while providing opportunities to realize the values in different ways. As argued above, core values are typically indeterminate and can be realized in multiple ways. Co-design allows the community to find creative new ways to realize their values, and in doing so, existing social norms are reconsidered. This helps with the *loss of bearings* both by providing opportunities for agency in shaping new social practices and relations, and utilizing specialized skills in new ways.
- It teaches *transposable* skills that can be used to address multiple challenges. Design thinking is broadly useful. It transforms *desiring negation* (Young 1990) to agency. We are often unsatisfied with how things are, but feel that change is impossible. With new skills, things that were taken to be inevitable are recognized to be contingent.
- It builds *self-confidence and buy-in*. Learning new skills together is empowering individually and also collectively. It builds community through a recognition of shared values and collaboration in acting on them. (Ganz 2011) When the design addresses the existing challenge, it inspires *commitment* to both the process, the community, and the outcome.
- It changes *practices* and *social relations*, and this changes *structures* (cultural and material). Learning new skills and designing together reveals that those considered incompetent

(e.g., women!) are not. Those who have not otherwise had access to skills gain recognition and respect by using them.

- It allows for entrepreneurship, but doesn't require it. It can be *locally sustainable*.

It is sometimes suggested that such work is yet another form of (neocolonial?) paternalism. This, however, is unconvincing. The skills learned are ones that communities use to address challenges they identify in ways that realize their values. Both the aims and the methods for change emerge from the community in dialogue.

6. Conclusion: Transformative Change?

IN §3, we discussed the difference between change by punctuated equilibrium and by incremental transformation. I argued there that not all incremental change is adaptive and genuine incremental transformation is possible. We considered incremental changes to material conditions and to culture as potential points of intervention. Applying the framework of incremental change proposed by Streeck and Thelen (2005, 30) to the case of Kenya, we can see incremental changes to material conditions:[19]

> *Drift*: the changed impact of existing rules [practices/structures] due to shifts in the environment (girls having higher attendance in school);
>
> *Conversion*: the changed enactment of existing rules [practices/structures] due to their strategic redeployment (sex ed materials provided to girls, giving girls agency to create together);

and incremental changes to culture/meanings:

> *Displacement*: the removal of existing rules [practices/structures] and the introduction of new ones (silence and ignorance around puberty and menstruation);

19 Streeck and Thelen suggest five modes of incremental change: displacement (slowly rising salience of subordinate practices), layering (new elements attached to existing institutions), drift (neglect of institutional maintenance during periods of change), conversion (redeployment of old institutions for new purposes), exhaustion (gradual withering away of institutions over time). (These glosses are taken from their excellent chart (Streeck and Thelen 2005, 30).

> *Layering*: the introduction of new rules [practices/structures] on top of or alongside existing ones (making menstrual products and information more accessible).

The important question remains, however, whether and when small changes of this sort build on each other to create transformative change. I've argued that it *can*, and we have evidence from Colombia that sometimes it does; but have not made the case that this particular effort in Kenya will. Plausibly, such efforts will be most likely to have transformative effects if they are combined with others and have stable support. In Kenya, the organization we work with has developed multiple projects to empower girls and women and the resources are available to continue with comprehensive sex education and sanitary pad making. The organization has also been successful in supporting girls as they continue in school and earn college degrees. These are important steps toward status and recognition in the community that can give them influence in local decision making. And there is evidence that when women hold office in local communities, they are more likely to work to "increase provision of public services and improve perceptions of women as leaders" (J-PAL n.d.).[20]

There are many ways to promote structural social change, some more just, and some more effective, than others. I've argued that meso-level intervention into the practices that constitute structures, guided by situated knowledge and situated values through co-design, is a strategy for social transformation that is feasible and morally sound.

20 Note that these studies were concerned with the impact of gender quotas on governmental representation (also Telingator and Weeks 2019).

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