

# Back to the Future

The Transformative Social Innovation of Ethics in a  
Capitalist World

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# Outline

- The problematic relationship between Social Innovation and ideas of Social Transformation
- The innovative possibility of ethics for the prefigurative practices which are harbingers of transformation
- Religion as a potentially “radical” ethical framework in this context
- The “Great Refusal” and the critique of consumption
- Conclusion

# Social Transformation

- We all share an idea of the necessity of social transformation given the multi-crises we confront
- However there is no agreement of what that social transformation “should” look like in process or realization
- Often solidarity is built on an “anti” framework
- Solutions, when articulated, are specific, often isolated, innovations and are “shoe-horned” into transformation
- The domination of established frameworks of thought used to understand these movements

# Social Innovation

- “Social innovation is, by definition, a transgression of rules and standards that may lead to a transformation of the prevailing order.” CRISES
- What about the transgression of the rules and standards of movements for social transformation? Can we rethink motivations and goals of social actors?
- Two questions for frameworks of understanding:
- Economics – might there be multiple ways of “doing” economics?
- Ethics – is there room for a diversity of positions?

# Established Frameworks

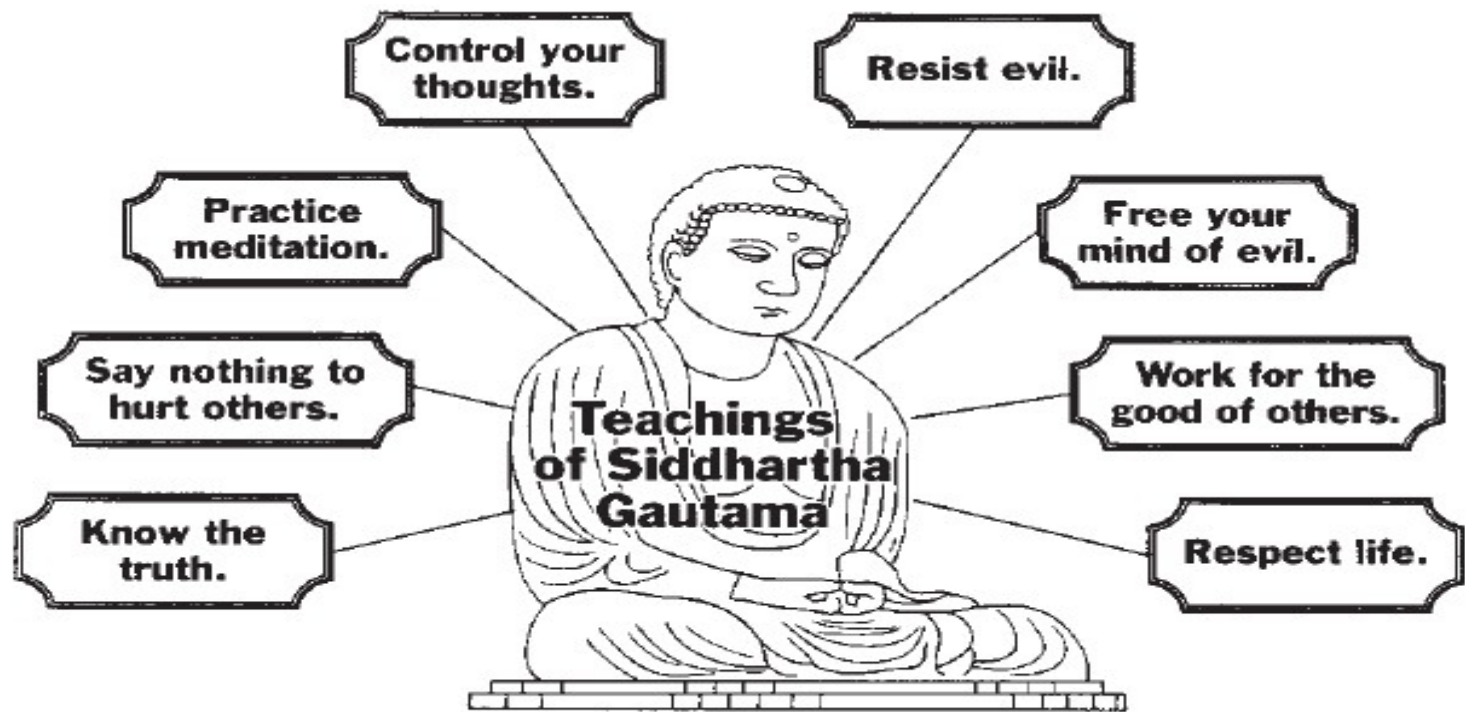
- The discourse on social innovation and transformation usually avoids economics and ethics for a focus on impacts and social benefit within established frameworks
- Theoretically domination of market and social democratic state dominate as models despite crises
- Despite this, “traditional” worldviews and alternate conceptions of economics are looked at with suspicion – oppressive or unrealistic
- However much social innovation and potential social transformation activity is motivated from other locations

# The Heart of a Heartless World

- “*Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.” (Marx)
- Forgotten message is the two-sided nature of religion
- More, formal religion, is distinct from religious ethics
- Innovation at the level of practice from the latter

# History

- Three examples
- First, Catholicism and the innovations of Desjardins federalism of parish, Distributivism (Rerum Novarum) and innovations of Mondragon.
- Second, Satyagraha, which is credited to Gandhi, but has deep roots in Hinduism and the concept of truth and non-violence – insistence on truth/soul force
- Third, Buddhism and the “eightfold path” – working for the good of other people



The Eightfold Path



# Transformative Ethics

- It is not the formal religious institutions which innovate
- Further, there is a distinction between formal religious ethics (approved or heretical) and the “common sense” religious ethics
- The latter is the ethical basis upon which significant social innovations are motivated
- Also an important site of prefigurative thinking for social transformation
- “Traditional” world-views can be radical sites of innovation, often more so than more “rational” ethical frames

# Innovation of Indeterminacy

- Arguments therefore for “solidified” ethical positions are not always useful in the field of practice
- Tendency to see social innovation and transformation from the “top” down – Scott *Seeing like a State*
- Definitions, impositions of models and policies, economic theory all adopt this stance
- What innovation and transformative possibilities lie in seeing things differently?

# Marcuse's Contribution

- "How can the administered individuals — who have made their mutilation into their own liberties and satisfactions... liberate themselves from themselves as well as from their masters? How is it even thinkable that the vicious circle be broken?" (ODM 250-251).
- In other words the remarkable fact, observed by Lukacs almost a century ago, that those who have the most interest in social transformation have not achieved it
- The issue, for Marcuse, is not their failure but the failure of platforms, parties, and paternalism to understand
- He looks for actions which challenge, and better yet, prefigure future societies on their own terms

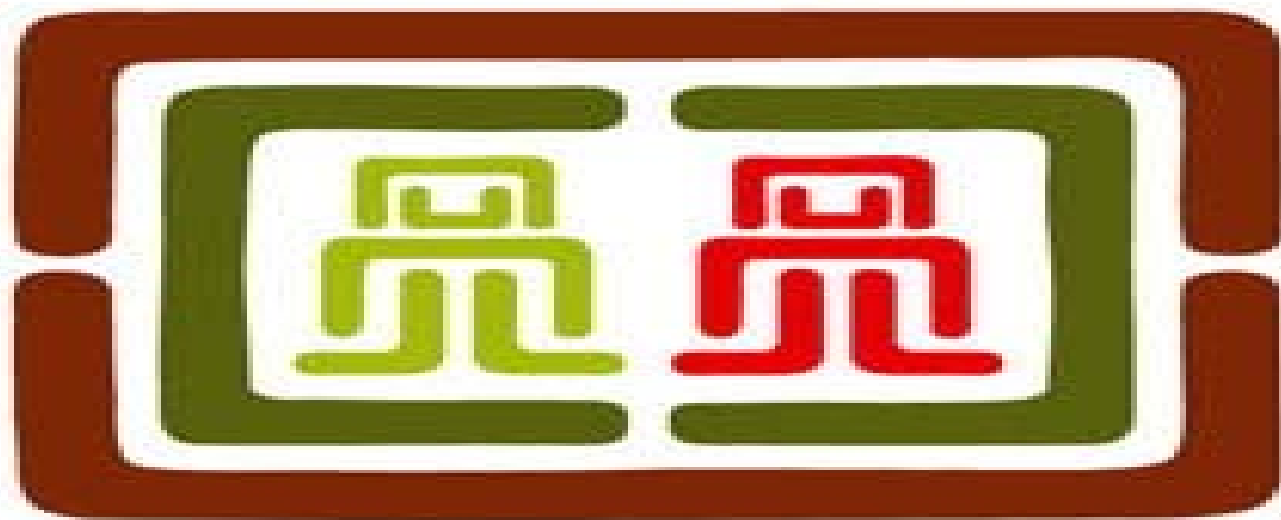
# The Great Refusal

- “In ODM (256f), the Great Refusal is fundamentally political, a refusal of repression and injustice, a saying no, an elemental oppositional to a system of oppression, a noncompliance with the rules of a rigged game, a form of radical resistance and struggle. ... the Great Refusal is based on a subjectivity that is not able to tolerate injustice and that engages in resistance and opposition to all forms of domination” (Kellner)
- This refusal may be motivated by a range of ethical positions
- Social transformation occurs from the innovation of linkages between refusals
- The refusal to participate in commodification – new economic relations – only can be worked out in practice

# Fair Trade Example

- Fair Trade's two streams both rooted in Christian Religion
- Distribution through ATO's who are also religiously motivated
- Formalizing the label has the benefit of "scaling up" but also leads the label into ethical quagmires - consumption
- Innovation continues, but again from an ethical standpoint – CLAC
- Commodity market is one means to transformation but the priority is "local added value"

**Comercio Justo**  
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# Conclusion

- Social innovation and transformation are open questions, initiated from a range of motivations - including religion
- Radical social and economic innovation is often motivated from “traditional” ethical frameworks especially in the face of the face of hegemony of the ethical values of liberalism and economic neo-liberalism
- Looking at social innovation as societal, international, “great refusal” helps reveal both the diversity of movements in their own terms and for the prefigurative potential of these diverse practices

Questions?

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Thank you!