



Dialogue and Isodemocracy: an Essay on the Social Conditions of Good Talk

MICHAEL MAYERFELD BELL

Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, USA

At the highest stage of capitalism, the most necessary revolution appears as the most unlikely one.—Herbert Marcuse¹

I don't know why, but a few months ago I found myself reading Herbert Marcuse, the 'improbable guru' of the 1960s, as *Fortune*, the popular US business magazine, labeled him at the time. *Fortune* found him improbable on two counts. First, his age: Marcuse in the 1960s was himself in his sixties, leading the decade of those in their twenties who said they trusted no one in their thirties, or above—except Marcuse and his paradigm-shattering *One Dimensional Man*. Second, his philosophy: a magazine like *Fortune* could hardly be expected, though, to approve of a writer who penned passages like the following:

We are again confronted with one of the most vexing aspects of advanced industrial civilization: the rational character of its irrationality.²

Or this one:

By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For 'totalitarian' is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests.³

Or this:

The fetishism of the commodity world, which seems to become denser every day, can be destroyed only by men and women who have torn aside the technological and ideological veil which conceals what is going on, which covers the insane rationality of the whole—men and women who have become free to develop their own needs, to build, in solidarity, their own world.⁴

Ripping good lines, steaming with the same liquid fire, as I once heard it described, with which Marx himself often wrote. But the 1960s have come and gone, quaintly registered now only in the gray hair of its dark-suited former

activists, dressed for consensus about what they take to be the actual nature of human satisfaction: the fortunes of capitalism. It is, of course, in the nature of the true guru to be improbable, right?

In any event, hardly anyone seems to read Marcuse anymore. And it was just by chance that I had picked up *One Dimensional Man*—actually, an extract from it in one of those readers on social theory that big sociology departments like mine assign to undergraduates. I was glancing through when my eye lit, thunderstruck, on the following passage:

Under the rule of a repressive whole, liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination. The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but *what* can be chosen and what *is* chosen by the individual. The criterion for free choice can never be an absolute one, but neither is it entirely relative. Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves.⁵

Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. It was one of those moments that sometimes happens in research when, through happenstance, you encounter an old map of the same terrain you are currently exploring yourself. Terrains change, and sometimes an old map shows features that are more heavily disguised today. At least, I found here words that described beautifully the very issue that I have been grappling with in this supposedly post-everything time: the contradiction between democratization and the widening social inequalities that are swallowing whole populations long before they reach the polling booth.

Here is surely the greatest unfulfilled promise of our times. Democracy is supposed to bring prosperity for all. It is supposed to provide a political system in which everyone's needs and concerns are addressed, for everyone has a vote and thus a voice in shaping the structures that organize our lives. The power of the majority which democracy unleashes is supposed to prevent raging inequality, since if the majority is oppressed then they can vote in a more equitable social order. As well, democracy is supposed to promote a spirit of broad social concern such that the interests of minorities are also addressed, avoiding the problem of the tyranny of the majority which Alexis de Tocqueville rumbled about long ago. Democracy is a slow system, and the promise was never for instantaneous change. Yet through its long process of public debate and step by step vote, the changes it brings about are supposed to be crafted fine enough that the wait is well worth it for all. Democracy, in other words, is supposed to provide the social conditions of good talk—of conversation in which all have the ability to speak and to be answered, to have their concerns and interests considered and addressed—and thus the social conditions of good care.⁶

It's a brilliant idea. Still, we must confront the grave truth that it doesn't seem to be working for billions of us. We live in a world of stupendous inequalities, with at best only contradictory indications that things are improving. *Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves.* It cannot be considered a time of good talk and good care when the concerns and interests of billions are so rarely heard and so rarely considered and addressed when they are heard.

Patience, patience, you may cry! Democracy is a slow system, and most of the democracies around the world are less than a few decades old, particularly those democracies where inequalities are most extreme. Do not be overly Hegelian or overly Marxist about that 'free election of masters' line. It is not an either/or world of revolutionary dialectics between masters and slaves. These things take time, unfortunately.⁷

There is something to this critique: dialectics tends to overly polarize and dichotomize the world, as I'll come to later. And it is true that haste has wasted many an opportunity for improving the human condition.

Still, I am not convinced that it is the patient who will inherit the earth. Moreover, I think we need a more sociologically informed understanding of what it is that we wish to inherit. We want democracy, yes, definitely. It is a brilliant idea. But my reading of the sociological evidence suggests to me that we want something more. We want a *democracy of equalities*—what I will suggest calling *isodemocracy*—not the current democracy of inequalities. And we are a lot more likely to get it if we keep this goal firmly and actively in mind. What I will try to do in this paper is to provide some conceptual language for that active firming up. For mere patience may ultimately prove to be no more than mere silence for those billions of lives currently excluded from full participation in the good talk of the good conversation.

II

But before I take up in detail what I mean by isodemocracy, let me pause to remind us of the inequalities in prosperity which characterize the world today. The sociological evidence here is as overwhelming as it is tragic. Many of these figures are widely cited, but from the point of view of isodemocracy not widely enough.

One figure that gives, I think, great reason to doubt current directions is the ratio of the world's income commanded by the richest fifth of humanity versus that commanded by the poorest fifth. This is a number that the UN Development Programme (UNDP) has been tabulating semi-annually since the first *Human Development Report* in 1990. In that year, the income ratio of the richest to poorest fifth stood at 60 to 1. Perhaps it seems almost a matter of definition that the wealthy would have a much higher income than the poorest. But consider this. In 1960, the ratio of income of the richest fifth to the poorest fifth was 30 to 1, half the 1990 figures. This widening gap between rich and poor is an old trend. In 1913, the income ratio of richest to poorest fifths was 11 to 1; in 1879, 7 to 1; in 1820 3 to 1. But the age of the trend doesn't make it any more salubrious. And there are no signs that the gap is slowing in its rate of widening. In 1997, the most recent year for which the UNDP has published a figure, the income ratio of the world's richest fifth to the poorest fifth was 74 to 1.⁸

As stupendous as this wealth gap is, the above figures actually understate it, since they are based on comparing the wealth of the richest and poorest fifth of countries, not persons. There are, as we know, staggeringly wealthy and desperately poor people in practically all countries. It is much harder, however, to tabulate a figure comparing the richest and poorest persons in all countries, and to my knowledge it has only been done once, for 1990. In that year, when the income gap of the richest and poorest fifth of countries stood at 60

to 1, the income gap between the richest and poorest fifth of persons was 150 to 1.⁹

Of course, such big income gaps are not so significant if the income of those on the bottom remains adequate to sustain an ample livelihood. One often-used metaphor of the promise of the future is that a rising tide lifts all boats, big and small. Indeed, it has long been argued that the prosperity of those on the bottom rungs of the income ladder actually depends upon the presence of the very wealthy at the top to provide good employment to those lower down. Big income gaps, in this view, are not an indication of widespread destitution but rather are essential to preventing it. Many a generous tax cut has been bestowed on the rich based on versions of this argument.

But if some boats remain anchored to the bottom, a rising tide will only swamp them. Thanks to recent rises in the tide, the combined wealth of the world's 200 richest people hit about \$1000 billion in 1999—that's \$1 trillion, or \$5 billion each, double what it was in 1994. Meanwhile, the combined income of the 582 million people living in the 43 poorest countries in the world stood at \$146 billion in 1999—\$251 each, less than a dollar a day.¹⁰ In fact, the assets of the three richest people alone exceed the income of these 582 million and their combined \$146 billion.¹¹ Admittedly, we are comparing wealth to income here, which may overstate the difference somewhat. But when people are this poor, they typically have very little wealth aside from income, just a few possessions such as clothing and cooking gear. And these possessions are usually low in value, small in size, and old in condition. All told, some 1.2 billion around the world live on a dollar a day or less.¹² Some 2.8 billion—nearly half the world's population—live on less than two dollars a day.¹³

There were some improvements in these figures during the mid-1990s. In 1993, the number of people living on less than a dollar a day was 1.3 billion, and fell to 1.19 billion in 1996. By 1998, it was up slightly to 1.2 billion, but this still represents an improvement since 1993 in both relative and absolute terms. Yet it represents an overall slight worsening in the absolute number of the poor since the 1.18 billion living on less than a dollar a day recorded in 1987. Moreover, most of the improvements in the 1990s occurred in China. The number of those outside of China who live on less than a dollar a day has gone up steadily in every year since 1987.¹⁴ All told—that is to say, including China—the number of the desperately poor worldwide has doubled since 1960, although the proportion of the world population which is so poor has remained roughly the same since that time.¹⁵ Taken together, these figures indicate ambiguous progress at best.

Wealth, of course, is not the same as well-being. What we care about (or ought to care about) is not wealth itself but the capacities we have to function well in the world, as Amartya Sen has argued so eloquently in many books.¹⁶ Wealth is not the only thing that gives us these capacities, Sen points out. Nor is wealth merely a matter of what is in the wallet or in the bank account. Indeed, likely hundreds of millions of us do not even have wallets, let alone bank accounts. Particularly for the poor, networks of community exchange and non-monetarized resources such as communal forests and grazing land can be strong and important bases of wealth. Neither should we neglect the importance of good household management skills that can make money go a long way. Much of wealth thus remains outside of the monetarized economy.

One widely used way to get a handle on well-being versus wealth is through the HDI—the ‘human development index’ tabulated annually by the UNDP. The HDI combines measures of health, access to knowledge, and standard of living into a single overall number that can be compared across populations. A figure of 0 is the worst a population can do; 1 is the best. The UNDP tries to keep the HDI simple and understandable, so they use only four measures: life expectancy for health, literacy and school enrollment rates for knowledge access, and GDP (gross domestic product) per capita for standard of living. Their figures show that wealth and HDI sometimes do not closely match. For example, Vietnam and Guinea have almost identical GDP per capita but widely divergent HDI figures—0.671 for Vietnam and 0.394 for Guinea.

The presence of these differences underscores the vital point that even poor countries have considerable freedom in how they make use of their resources. Good household management is a feature of some national governments too. Nevertheless, the overall correlation between the HDI and monetary wealth of countries is quite strong. To some extent, this correlation must be expected, given that GDP per capita is fully one-third of an HDI score. But there is more going on here than what the statisticians call ‘co-linearity’.

Comparing a country’s global rank in GDP per capita with its global rank in HDI helps illustrate this. The UNDP likes to divide the 174 countries it ranks into ‘high’, ‘medium’, and ‘low’ HDI countries. Of the 46 high HDI countries, 85% have an HDI rank that is within 10 of their GDP per capita rank. For example, Canada, the number one country in HDI, is eighth in the world in GDP per capita. Similarly, 71% of low HDI countries stack up within 10 of their GDP per capita rank. These close associations demonstrate the powerful role of money as a source of well-being.¹⁷

But only 43% of medium HDI countries have an HDI rank within 10 of their GDP per capita rank. For example, Cuba’s HDI rank is 40 places *above* its GNP per capita rank, while South Africa’s HDI rank is 54 places *below* its GNP per capita rank.¹⁸ The association of well-being with monetary wealth is thus strongest at either end of the economic ladder. What this pattern suggests is the following: when a country is rich, it can easily afford good overall standards of well-being for its population. When a country is poor, it is hard pressed to make many improvements. When a country has some money, but not a lot, it has more flexibility than the poorest countries in what it can do—although it will still face significant constraints.

Indeed, in this world of an increasingly monetarized economy, wealth in money terms is the preeminent source of constraint in the building of human well-being. Consider hunger and malnutrition. Recent estimates indicate that there are some 800 million malnourished people in the world, the overwhelming proportion of them in poor countries.¹⁹ In the 43 poorest countries, the average person consumes 2099 food calories a day, while the average person in the 29 mainly wealthy countries of the OECD—the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development—consumes 3380 food calories a day.²⁰ Hunger and malnourishment among children is especially worrisome since the effects can last a child’s lifetime, limiting mental and physical development. Forty percent of children under five are underweight in the 43 poorest countries, and 30% worldwide, while essentially none are underweight in the rich countries. As a result, a third of children in developing countries suffer stunted growth. In the 43 poorest nations, nearly 1 in 10 dies before her

or his fifth birthday.²¹ In sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps the poorest region in the world, 15 out of 100 die before her or his fifth birthday.²²

Poor people often have poor shelter, poor water, poor sanitation, and poor healthcare. One billion people around the world are without adequate shelter; 100 million have no shelter at all, including many children.²³ Twenty-seven percent of the world lacks access to safe water supplies—36% in the 43 poorest nations, but essentially zero in the wealthy countries.²⁴ More than 2.4 billion lack access to adequate sanitation.²⁵ Some 95% of the 33.6 million people afflicted with AIDS live in the developing world.²⁶ Similar figures apply to malaria, giardia, hepatitis A and B, and other diseases that even modest spending on better healthcare and sanitation could prevent.

Knowledge access is often low among the poor too. In 1998, 113 million children were out of school worldwide, mainly in poor countries.²⁷ Literacy rates around the world average 78.8%, but only 50.7% in the 43 poorest nations.²⁸ These figures represent important improvements over earlier decades, but remain deplorably low. Access to knowledge remains particularly low for women and girls in many poor countries, despite recent improvements. For example, the number of girls enrolled in school is 77% the number of boys in South Asia and 83% the number of boys in sub-Saharan Africa. In comparison, the percentage of girls enrolled in school is nearly at a par with boys—97%—in high income countries.²⁹

In light of the above, it comes as no surprise that life expectancy is so much lower in poor countries than wealthy ones. Life expectancy in poor countries has improved significantly in the past 25 years, and at faster rates than in wealthy countries, especially due to improvements in infant mortality and maternal health. Nonetheless, life expectancy in the 43 poorest nations was 51.9 years in 1998, while it was 76.4 in the OECD nations. (Worldwide, life expectancy was 66.9 in 1998.) In Sierra Leone, one of the poorest nations on earth, life expectancy in 1998 was 37.9 years.³⁰ Less than half of the population of the 43 poorest countries can expect to live to 60, while 87.5% of the population of the OECD nations can.³¹ Thirty percent of the 43 poorest nations will not even reach 40, while only 4% of OECD inhabitants will not.³² Life, then, is not cheap, as the infamous Vietnam War-era phrase had it—rather, it is very, very dear.³³

Although wealth in monetary terms is such a huge factor in inequality, there are certainly other highly significant ones. Take gender inequality, which often finds expression through wealth inequalities but also goes beyond them.³⁴ For example, although the enrollment of girls in schools is nearly 100% that of boys in the wealthy countries, it is not fully 100%. Moreover, in Latin America, a region of only moderate wealth, enrollment of girls actually exceeds that of boys, by a couple of percent.³⁵ Although this is the only region where enrollment of girls is higher than boys, it indicates that gender inequality manifests itself in more than monetary terms.

Similar patterns pertain to the differing workloads of men and women and to the presence of women in parliaments around the world. Although disparities are higher in most poor nations, female worktime exceeds that of males in *every* country surveyed, except Finland and Israel.³⁶ Women hold 14% of parliamentary seats worldwide, but only slightly more—15.1%—in OECD nations, again indicating that gender discrimination is more than a product of differences in wealth. As Mino Vianello and Elena Caramazza note, men

dominate ‘in all times in all societies in all areas of public life’.³⁷ And when it comes to domestic violence, there is no evidence at all of an association with national wealth, with a generally consistent 1 in 3 women worldwide subjected to violence in an intimate relationship at some point in their lives.³⁸

Race and ethnicity are also inequalities that can find their means of expression in terms other than wealth disparities and its associated effects, at least wealth disparities between countries. In Canada, one of the wealthiest of countries and the number one country in HDI rank, the life expectancy of an Inuit male is just 58 years—in contrast to the average 75 years for all Canadian males.³⁹ In South Africa, the HDI of blacks is half that of whites.⁴⁰ Both of these are differences that largely emerge from the wealth inequalities so often characteristic of racial and ethnic repression; Canadian Inuit and South African blacks are far poorer than Canadian whites and South African whites. But inequality between racial and ethnic groups expresses itself in more than wealth and its associated effects. For example, in the USA, sentencing rates and the use of the death penalty show racial disparities that go well beyond what can be understood in economic terms.⁴¹

The same can be said of regional differences within a country, particularly rural–urban differences. The well-known associations of rurality with lower rates of healthcare, schooling, electrification, and life expectancy run parallel to the well-known discrepancy in wealth between rural and urban regions. Yet it is doubtful that equalizing wealth between rural and urban areas would in itself eliminate these problems—if nothing else, the dull constraints of geography present too great a barrier to transportation and communication. But eliminating the wealth discrepancy likely would help a great deal.

I could go on, but I think it is time to ask what we should make of all this. I would suggest the following:

- That wealth inequality is a tragically significant *source* of many other inequalities, such as inequalities in health, schooling, and longevity.
- That wealth inequality is a tragically significant *means* of many other inequalities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and rurality.
- That there are indeed other tragically significant sources of inequalities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and rurality, which often find means other than wealth inequality.
- That nevertheless wealth inequality in this increasingly monetarized and economistic world is of preeminent significance because of its double role as both source and means of so many inequalities.

III

But the theoretical point here is not to reduce everything to social class. Rather, we misunderstand the role of economics as a source of power in the world if we see it as only relevant to class. Inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, region, age, physical appearance, abilities and disabilities, and more all forcefully express themselves in economic terms—as do inequalities based on class. In this sense, class should not be seen as an economic category but as a social category, as a structured nexus of history, culture, habitus, and (like gender, race, ethnicity, region, age, and the rest) economy. Class in this sense is not separate from status, as Weber had it; class *is* a status. We typically remark

upon this and other statuses most strongly when we see them aligning with economic inequalities.

Also, although the empirical evidence for economic inequality that I cite above is mainly based on wealth in monetary terms, it would be wrong to leave the matter there. Indeed, in the paragraphs above, I have already shifted from the language of ‘wealth in monetary terms’ to the language of ‘wealth’ and ‘economics’. Wealth and economics *are* more than matters of money. (And well-being *is* more than a matter of wealth and economics, as I will be arguing in the coming sections.) The ‘four capitals’ model—human capital, social capital, ecological capital, and financial capital—that has become popular among critics of standard approaches to development is helpful in making this point.⁴² (Some writers use a similar ‘five capitals’ model that divides the ‘physical capital’ of the built infrastructure from financial capital.)⁴³ A single-minded focus on financial capital as the basis of wealth all too often leads to the simple-minded Neoliberal assumption that stimulating financial growth produces greater human well-being, as many critics of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have observed.

So let me define my terms as follows: by ‘economics’ and ‘wealth’ I mean economics and wealth in the classical sense recently revived by Amartya Sen—as the resources which give us our capabilities to secure our well-being.⁴⁴ Those resources come in many forms, not only money.

But in a way the Neoliberals are right too. Or, more accurately, they have been partially successful in remaking the world in their own image. Having more money in the world does not necessarily indicate greater human well-being. In their obliviousness to inequality, Neoliberals have failed there. But in the world the Neoliberals have thrust us into, not having much money—either at the level of the country, the region, or the household, or divided along the lines of class, race, gender, and other social statuses—likely does strongly correspond with less human well-being. Life was always precious. But thanks to Neoliberalism, life is increasingly dear too.

IV

I have been so intent on establishing the significance of economic difference (economics broadly understood, as I describe above) as a factor in inequality and well-being because it seems that many today are ignoring its importance in the achievement of democracy. *Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves.* Our collective unwillingness around the world to fully confront the importance of this point has led to some tragic distortions. Democracy has become a word that is equally loved and abused. Most countries call themselves a ‘democracy’ or a related term like ‘republic’. All but 7 of the 174 countries tracked annually by the UNDP held national elections of some sort between 1990 and 1999; all but 16 between 1995 and 1999. Typical voter turn-out these days is well above 50%, often into the 80s and 90s, even in the poorest countries.⁴⁵ Thus, most of us seem to want democracy, and most governments make at least token efforts to go along with this wish. But the meanings we see governments hiding in their conceptions of democracy are often very much not what we want. Democracy is a term that has been stretched to cover so many things—often quite oddly shaped things—that it is worn thin in many places around the world. Some mending is urgently needed, lest it burst asunder.

Part of the problem is that democracy has traditionally referred to achieving equality of political standing through government by the people, and not to equality of economic standing. Indeed, much of the point of democracy has been to give equal political standing to those of different economic standing, while not necessarily redressing those economic differences. I don't mean this as a cynical observation, at least not completely so. If we had waited until we had economic equality before we established the right to vote, we would never have gotten anywhere. But in the current day, this traditional understanding has given legitimacy to efforts to promote the expansion of an economic order predicated on inequality at the same time as promoting the expansion of a political order that is supposedly predicated on equality. The result is that we have democracies of inequalities.

The basic flaw in the view that equality in political standing is sufficient, of course, is that there are so many other ways to exercise political power than through the vote. In an economic world, political equality is ultimately not possible without economic equality. Political equality is not the same as equality of political standing. Or, perhaps better put, equality of political standing is more than a matter of one-person-one-vote. It is just as much a matter of who is in a position to influence the decisions over what will be voted upon, as well as what will not be voted upon. And in a representative democracy, as every modern democracy must be at least to some extent, it is just as much a matter of who is in a position to influence the votes of representatives, as well as who is in a position to become a representative. In all these matters, economics talks.

I offer nothing new here. This is all common wisdom to anyone who pays the slightest attention to the daily course of political business in the world's democracies. To put it in theoretical terms, the ideal dimensions of power cannot be separated from the material dimensions of power.

Socialism, of course, has long recognized this connection. But socialism is a term that has fallen into widespread ill repute. And given how this term is conventionally understood, to some extent rightly so.⁴⁶ Let us not speak in terms of 'actually existing socialism' or 'actually existed socialism', but rather of the socialisms we think we got. And the socialisms we think we got had a totalizing and deterministic cast that largely extinguished the very democratic goals that made them such candles of hope for millions. This totalizing determinism largely emerged out of a single-minded focus on the material dimensions of power, while largely ignoring the ideal dimensions. As a result, the socialisms we think we got sought to establish equality of economic standing through economics by the people, without the parallel creation of equality of political standing through government by the people. And without equality in the ideal dimensions of power, economics by the people inevitably tempts corruption and suppression by a politics that is not by, of, or for the people.⁴⁷

For the past decade, the capitalist democracies have swaggered with triumphant smugness over these failures of the socialisms we think we got. Yet fault lies in both extremes. Politics requires more than economics, and economics requires more than politics. The socialisms we think we got may have been overly materialistic in their idealism, but the capitalist democracies of today are overly idealistic in their materialism. It makes no more sense to assert, as the capitalist democracies implicitly do, that equality in political standing is enough to guarantee economic well-being than it does to assert, as Soviet-style

socialism implicitly did, that equality in economic standing is enough to guarantee political well-being.

To put it simply, we need them both, if we are to provide broad human well-being. We need a system for the social organization of power that pays explicit attention to both its material and ideal dimensions, and the interaction between them. This is the goal that I would call *isodemocracy*—a democracy of equalities, of both economics and government by the people. Democracy, at least as it is typically conceived today, is not enough.

Now, by ‘economics by the people’ I am not calling for a return to Soviet-style economics, what is often called, usually with pejorative intent, ‘central planning’ or a ‘planned economy’. I do not intend here to be prescriptive about how to achieve isodemocracy, only to provide the social-theoretical foundation for establishing its importance—if, again, we are to create a society that provides the conditions for broad human well-being. But I do think it important that we inspect the pejorative phrase ‘planned economy’ with care. Does anyone think that liberal capitalism happens without planning? Why then do private businesses so endlessly lobby the political machinery of the state? Why then do the politicians of liberal capitalist countries so endlessly promote any economic successes they feel they can claim as their own? In that memorable phrase from Bill Clinton’s first presidential election campaign, ‘it’s the economy, stupid’. Thus, we are distracted from the main issue at hand when we seek to distinguish Soviet-style economies from liberal capitalist ones on the basis of whether they are ‘planned’ or not. Rather, the issues from an isodemocracy point of view are who has a voice in that planning and to what ends is the planning conceived. By ‘economics by the people’ I mean only that this planning strives to be by all, as best this can be accomplished among the population of an entire country, and thus for all.

Of course, many of the great agencies of our lives do recognize that much of the world is desperately poor by almost any measure. Take the World Bank: oblivious as it often is, the Bank is very serious about its goal, ‘a world free of poverty’, which it runs as a kind of slogan across the top of its homepage on the web. It is also very much aware of the importance of democratic institutions in reaching that goal, and devoted the 1997 edition of its annual *World Development Report* to the role of the state in development, and argued throughout the report that democratic state institutions are central to development. Development, of course, is the World Bank’s view of how to solve the problem of poverty. For the World Bank, the logic goes like this: poverty is bad, development will solve it, and democracy is central to the achievement of development.

Poverty *is* bad; the World Bank is right about that. But the Bank does not see poverty, and economic inequality more generally, as an aspect of democracy itself. Now, I don’t mean to contribute unduly here to the academic industry of World Bank bashing. The World Bank has come a long way, particularly in the last few years (although the same could not be said of the International Monetary Fund, which still pursues almost exclusively a structural-adjustment-without-doubts agenda). But because the World Bank and so many other world institutions have missed the democratic implications of economic equality, development remains exclusionary, a system for increasing capital accumulation rather than decreasing poverty.

There is a widely cited index of democracy that is a further case in point. Devised by political scientists Keith Jagers and Ted Robert Gurr, ‘Polity III’,

as it is called, tracks the progress of democratization for 177 countries from 1960 to 1994. The index allows democratization to be displayed on a simple graph, and, not surprisingly, it shows the OECD countries right up at the top, and for some time, with various other regions arrayed below, the Middle East and North Africa at the bottom. But despite this variation in overall levels of democracy, Polity III also shows increases in democratization for all regions since the mid-1970s, and with particularly large increases in Latin America and Eastern Europe.⁴⁹

I am not trying to argue against the conclusion that democracy has grown stronger throughout the world in recent decades, and particularly in Latin America and Eastern Europe. I think societies have gotten more democratic, and this is a good thing. However, some other things are not so good. The Polity III index is based on five components: regulation of political participation, competitiveness of political participation, competitiveness of executive recruitment, openness of executive recruitment, and constraints on the chief executive. These are good components, but how different might the results of the index look if it included measures of economic equality, almost all of which show a dramatic worsening of conditions? For example, the HDI for every country in the former Soviet bloc has dropped since 1990, aside from Hungary, Poland, and the Czech and Slovak republics, in some cases dramatically. But Polity III for the same period shows a dramatic increase for countries in this region, as they emerged from the Cold War.

Under our current understandings of what democracy is, it is not necessary to take economic equality into consideration both as a measure and a source of democracy and human progress. (And let me remind the reader again that I mean economics in the sense of resources and capabilities, not money alone.) The point of the concept of isodemocracy is to make the importance of this measure and source necessary and explicit—so it cannot be forgotten or ignored.

V

Equality in both political standing and economic standing is the goal of isodemocracy, but its means must be non-totalizing and non-deterministic, and thus open to continual reorientation. The course and development of the social world, and indeed the physical world, cannot be predicted in the way that positive science once hoped. Neither scientific socialism, in the sense that Engels meant, nor scientific capitalism, as modern economics has become, can be said to have achieved lasting success in establishing iron laws of social organization. Even when reduced to an epiphenomenon of money, social life is not so easily roped to the ground and locked into the cattle pens of predictive science.

Nor should we have asked social science (or indeed all science) to be so predictive. We shape the world to fit our expectations for the future, and thus every prediction tends to be self-fulfilling. A social scientific prediction may not be successfully self-fulfilling, given the resilience and orneriness of social life. Indeed, none that I know of ever has been successful, at least not completely. Rather, they are self-fulfilling in the sense of leading us to reorganize our lives in ways that we believe will bring us in line with our expectations—even if those ways may systematically bring us in just the opposite direction. A

prediction thus all too easily becomes totalizing and deterministic, albeit often in an unforeseen manner, as in the case of Neoliberalism and the erroneous Neoclassical prediction that economic development would eliminate poverty and economic inequality.

The problem of prediction is apparent right in the etymological root of the word, at least in English: *pre*-diction, a kind of speech before speech. If we rely on speech before speech, we will never get to speech itself. Prediction thus shuts off debate. It limits the conversation about the ordering of our lives to those who are in a privileged position to speak before others. It leads to the authoritarianism of monologue.

Prediction, then, is no substitute for *diction*, for continual conversation that articulates the views and interests of all, to the greatest extent possible. *To the greatest extent possible*: this is an important qualification, for we must always be aware that there remains more to be said. This is the central problem with predictive government. It so rarely acknowledges the limits of its conversations and thus its knowledge. It is because of these limits—limits of time, to be sure, but also of inequalities of economic and political standing—that we need ever more conversation, ever more diction, about the views and interests of all.

In other words, the means of isodemocracy is *dialogue*. Isodemocracy depends upon the creation of the social conditions of good talk, open to continual challenge and creativity and reorientation, and resisting the totalizing and deterministic forces of predictive monologue.⁵⁰

Let me be clear, though, that I am not trying to disparage voting in arguing for the importance of dialogue as the means of isodemocracy. Voting is a form of dialogue, a powerful and vital one. But if voting is the principle form of dialogue, it will be insufficient in itself for the flourishing of broad human well-being. *Free election of the masters does not . . .*

Let me also be clear that I am not trying to speak against science when I critique prediction. Rather, I am critiquing prediction. I take the essence of science to be careful, reasoned thinking that is always open to further careful reasoning as more information and interpretations emerge. The essence of science, then, is not prediction, as we have long been told, but rather diction and the continual rewriting of the dictionary of social life. Dialogue is not anti-science, then; it's what science *is*, or should be. In this sense, science is also part of the means of isodemocracy.

The conditions of this continual diction are that everyone who wishes to speak must have the opportunity to do so, and that their words are taken into account by others.⁵¹ For that, we will need the twin equalities of material and ideal standing, of economic and political justice, else most of us will never be heard, let alone be taken into account. In other words, the ends of isodemocracy are inherently part of the means.

Which is a paradox. In order to have dialogue we need equality, and in order to have equality we need dialogue.⁵² Isodemocracy is, of course, a utopian and thus unattainable goal that we will never completely agree about. But this is precisely why, when pursued with dialogic means, it is non-deterministic and open to social growth and enriched by challenge and critique. If we explicitly recognize its paradoxical unattainability, a utopian goal becomes a form of organizational strength, because we are inviting to difference and disagreement, and thus to change. For there is, or should be, no last word on anything—including dialogue and isodemocracy.⁵³

VI

So, then, is dialogue enough? Democracy may not be enough, but is isodemocracy through dialogue (with its necessary corollary of dialogue through isodemocracy) itself sufficient?

There are at least two good reasons for saying no, it isn't—that we will need to do more, much more, to even approach the unattainable goal of isodemocracy. First, there is the implication that a dialogic approach to social change is even slower than democracy, requiring even deeper wells of patience, and a peculiar tolerance for long meetings and conferences. Second, there is the implication that we give up on radical structural change by embracing a dialogic approach, squandering the importance of material change in favor of the idealism of mere talk, and—worse—squandering human lives as we waste time in dialogue. These two reasons lead to a third: that what we will require to reach even a semblance of isodemocracy is nothing short of *revolution*.

Now there's an unfashionable word, the kind of word favored by improbable gurus. Let us return to Marcuse, then, and *An Essay on Liberation*, one of his last works.

For the world of human freedom cannot be built by the established societies, no matter how much they may streamline and rationalize their dominion. Their class structure, and the perfected controls required to sustain it, generate needs, satisfactions, and values which reproduce the servitude of the human existence. This 'voluntary' servitude (voluntary inasmuch as it is introjected into the individual), which justifies the benevolent masters, can be broken only through a political practice which reaches the roots of the containment and contentment in the infrastructure of [humanity], a political practice of methodological disengagement from and refusal of the Establishment, aiming at a radical transvaluation of values.⁵⁴

Heady stuff, but look at the record of what the 1960s built: raging cynicism and individualism, and essentially no clear progress on relieving the appalling economic inequalities of the world. There have been significant reductions in inequalities of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, but least in their economic dimensions; the gains have mainly been in greater equality of political standing. Indeed, the problems of economic inequality have gotten worse by most measures, and—remembering the double role of economic inequality as a source and means of injustice—that has put further reductions in other inequalities very much at risk. The revolution never came, and I suspect that now most believe it never will.

Herein lies the real problem of Marcuse's work: not that it is improbable, but that it fosters a *sense* of improbability, of hope crushed by the scale of it all. There is an all-or-nothing character to his dialectic logic and rhetoric. Listen to his phrases: Refusal of the Establishment. A radical transvaluation of values. Human freedom cannot be built by. Servitude can only be broken through. Even the notion of describing the current world as a conflict between masters and slaves. This kind of writing compels our attention through the stark and polarized contrasts it draws between opposite sides in conflict and struggle: thesis, antithesis, and every synthesis the thesis for the next antithesis. The

result is that difference becomes hostility, and every engagement with others has only two possible outcomes: winning or losing, elation or disappointment. And disappointment breeds cynicism, and cynicism breeds inaction.

However, I think another guru of those times can help us out here: Paulo Freire. His was a theory that was transitional in many ways between dialectics and dialogics, the epistemological basis of dialogue. With dialogics, there is difference and there is often conflict, but the parties in this difference and conflict are not dialectical opposites. Indeed, each is a part of the other, similar in many (and likely most) respects but also helping to constitute the other's difference through engagement. The other's difference is thus us, not merely them. Categories blend into each other, but without losing sight of the reality of difference. And through our engagement with similarly different and differently similar others, creative change happens—not some predictable synthesis born from a dialectical logic of conflict.

For Freire, this meant, among other things, overcoming the opposition between talk and action, theory and practice, while continuing to recognize their difference. As he wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: *the word*. . . . There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. An unauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality, results when dichotomy is imposed upon its constitutive elements.⁵⁵

Central to Freire's conception of dialogue, then, is its transformative potential, but in a way that engages others, rich and poor, empowered and disempowered, rather than dissolving into a struggle for dominion. As Freire put it, dialogue 'is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another'.⁵⁶

Yet this creativity cannot flourish without the most transformative part of dialogue, what Freire called *conscientiza* *o*, the heart of his approach to education. Instead of seeing students as banks in which to deposit the teacher's knowledge, Freire argued that education should be about posing problems and engaging students in creative, critical intervention in the world. As Freire described, in education that encourages *conscientiza* *o*:

people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.⁵⁷

This recognition allowed Freire to avoid the opposition of talk and action. In his words:

I wish to emphasize that there is no dichotomy between dialogue and revolutionary action. There is not one stage for dialogue and another for revolution. On the contrary, dialogue is the essence of revolutionary action.

On the contrary, dialogue is the essence of revolutionary action. Precisely. In other

words, dialogue does not mean being patient and meek. Rather, it suggests the following advice: speak up now, and yell if necessary. Be critical. Refuse to be quiet. It's amazing how difficult people will find it to ignore you. Besides, it makes meetings and conferences a lot more interesting. But take seriously what others say too, if you want them to take seriously what you say. That won't always work, so you may have to yell a bit louder next time. And don't forget to mention it when you agree with others. It's a lot more engaging when you do. Also, try to make it so others don't have to yell to attract your serious attention. But don't be too mad if they do yell sometimes, because sometimes you too may be lost in your own constructions, unalert to the conditions of others and the possible transformations they offer.

Dialogue may not bring us instantly to isodemocracy, or even quickly there, given its paradox of being both the parent and child of isodemocracy. That is indeed true. But it is no less revolutionary because of that. The time that dialogue takes is not to be lamented, because it allows us to avoid the determinism of the monologic idea. This is the core of dialogic revolution: we can change our minds. And we can contribute to changing our minds and the minds of others through sponsoring diction to the greatest extent possible. The more we do so, the more the paradox resolves itself, merging parent and child in the endless creation and creativity of dialogue.

Where it will take us, we do not know. And that's the best part. The revolution will not be televised, the revolution will not be televised.⁵⁸ So do not look for the revolution in the program schedule for your TV. Because, if it really is the revolution, it cannot be predicted.

Notes

1. Marcuse (1972, p. 7).
2. Marcuse (1964, p. 9).
3. Marcuse (1964, p. 3).
4. Marcuse (1972, p. 131).
5. Marcuse (1964, p. 7); emphasis in the original.
6. This definition of good talk I draw from my discussion of 'response ability' in Bell (2000).
7. On the need for patience in the working out of democracy as she is currently constituted, see for example the World Bank's 1999 *World Development Report* (1999, p. 157).
8. UNDP (1999, p. 3). The *Human Development Report 2000* (UNDP 2000), the most current source at the time of this writing, does not give a more recent tabulation.
9. Korten (1995, p. 39).
10. UNDP (2000, p. 82).
11. UNDP (1999, p. 3).
12. World Bank (2000a, p. 7).
13. World Bank (2000a, p. 2).
14. World Bank (2000b, Table 1a).
15. Cited in Bell (1998a).
16. See for example Sen (1992, 1999).
17. I derived these figures from UNDP (1999, pp. 134–137).
18. My calculations again, derived from UNDP (1999, pp. 134–137).
19. Cited in Bell (1998a, p. 25).
20. In fact, those in wealthy countries increasingly suffer from their own food problems: being overfed. Obesity in the USA, for example, skyrocketed among adults in the 1990s from 12% of the population in 1991 to 17.9% in 1998, according to the Centers for Disease Control. The fastest rise was among those aged 18–29 (Mokdad *et al.*, 1999).
21. UNDP (2000, p. 4) and World Bank (2000b, p. 2).
22. World Bank (2000a, p. 12).

23. Cited in Bell (1998a, p. 26).
24. UNDP (2000, Table 4). Based on data for various years in the 1990s.
25. UNDP (2000, p. 4).
26. World Bank (2000a, p. 17).
27. World Bank (2000a, p. 9).
28. UNDP (2000, Table 1).
29. World Bank (2000a, p. 10).
30. UNDP (2000, Table 1).
31. UNDP (2000, Table 9).
32. UNDP (2000, Table 4).
33. In an international journal, it is perhaps worth pointing out explicitly the pun here: in English the word 'dear' can mean both 'cherished' and, particularly in the Commonwealth countries, 'expensive'. The Spanish word 'cara' carries the same double meaning.
34. For a comprehensive review and vigorous critique of gender inequality around the world, see Vianello and Caramazza (1998).
35. World Bank (2000a, p. 10).
36. UNDP (2000, Table 30).
37. Vianello and Caramazza (1998, p. 8).
38. UNDP (2000, p. 4).
39. UNDP (2000, p. 3).
40. Cited in Bell (1998a, p. 26).
41. In the USA, 12% of the US population is African American, but 49.4% of the US prison population is African American. Blacks are incarcerated at six times the rate of whites. Much of this incarceration is for non-violent drug offenses. While blacks constitute 15% of drug users, 36% of those arrested for drug use are black and 49% of those convicted for drug use are black. Fifty-six percent of those currently imprisoned for drug use are black. See Human Rights Watch (2000).
42. See for example the writings of Cornelia Flora and Jan Flora.
43. See for example Carney (1998).
44. See Sen (1992, 1999) for an introduction to his approach.
45. UNDP (2000, Table 25).
46. A quick sampling of the dictionaries around my house all define socialism in Marxist–Leninist terms, and give essentially the same definition for communism and socialism. For example, the 1994 edition of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, a standard American source, defines socialism as 'any of various social systems based on shared or government ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods'. The same source gives several closely related meanings for communism, particularly definition 2: 'I: social organization in which goods are held in common 2: a theory of social organization advocating common ownership of the means of production and a distribution of products of industry based on need 3: a political doctrine based on revolutionary Marxist socialism that was the official ideology of the USSR and some other countries.' See the 1955 edition of *The Oxford Universal Dictionary* and the 1958 edition of the *Thorndyke-Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary* for similar definitions.
47. The irony is that it was the idealism of the socialisms we got that led to their exaggerated emphasis on materialism.
48. For a more detailed argument about the spurious distinction between Soviet-style and capitalist economies on the basis of whether or not they were 'planned', see Bell and Lowe (2000).
49. Jagers and Gurr (1996). Cited in World Bank (1997, p. 112).
50. There is a vast but little-read literature on the sociology of dialogue. Much of that work finds its theoretical sustenance in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, who has only recently begun to be understood as a social theorist. For a review of Bakhtin's potential in the social and human sciences, see Bell and Gardiner (1998). Sociologists have also neglected the work of Martin Buber, seeing him as a theologian and philosopher, despite the fact that he served as the first chair of the Department of Sociology at Hebrew University and edited the book series *Die Gesellschaft* for many years. For an introduction to Buber as a social theorist of dialogue, see Buber (1992) and the introduction by S. N. Eisenstadt, in the University of Chicago Press's 'The Heritage of Sociology' series, as well as Buber (1958). For a conceptualization of a post-masculinist society as necessarily predicated on dialogue, see

- Collins (1990) and the work of the editor of this journal, especially Vianello and Caramazza (1998).
51. I describe this elsewhere as 'response ability' (Bell, 2000). But given how conceptually overloaded this piece already is, I will spare the reader that terminology here.
 52. I thank my colleague Silvia Aleman for suggesting this apt summary of my argument.
 53. The explicit recognition of this unavoidable paradox is one of the principal points of difference between my position and that of Habermas and discursive democracy scholars like Dryzek. The words 'class', 'economics', and 'inequality' do not even appear in the index to Dryzek (1990), although it is nonetheless an excellent work. For more on my points of difference with these bodies of work, see Bell (1998b).
 54. Marcuse (1969, p. 6).
 55. Freire (1999 [1970], p. 68).
 56. Freire (1999 [1970], p. 70).
 57. Freire (1999 [1970], p. 64).
 58. I quote here the immortal words of the 1960s American folk-rock musician, Gil Scott Heron.

References

- Bell, M. M. (1998a) *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, Newbury Park, CA, Pine Forge Press (Sage).
- Bell, M. M. (1998b) 'Culture as dialog', in Bell, M. M. and Gardiner, M. (eds), *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, London, Sage, pp. 49–62.
- Bell, M. M. (2000) 'An unfinalizable aliveness: sustainability as response ability', Paper given at the Xth World Congress of Rural Sociology, Rio de Janeiro.
- Bell, M. M. and Gardiner, M. (eds) (1998) *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, London, Sage.
- Bell, M. M. and Lowe, P. (2000) 'Regulated freedoms: the market and the state, agriculture and the environment', *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 16, pp. 285–294.
- Buber, M. (1958) *I and Thou*, 2nd edn, New York, Scribner.
- Buber, M. (1992) *On Intersubjectivity and Cultural Creativity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Carney, D. (ed.) (1998) *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: What Contributions Can We Make?*, London, Department for International Development.
- Collins, Patricia Hill (1990) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Boston, Unwin Hyman.
- Drysek, J. (1999) *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy, and Political Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Freire, P. (1999 [1970]) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, Continuum.
- Human Rights Watch (2000) *Human Rights Watch World Report 2000*, <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k/>.
- Jagers, K. and Gurr, T. R. (1996) 'Polity III: regime type and political authority, 1800–1994', Ann Arbor, MI, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.
- Korten, D. C. (1995) *When Corporations Rule the World*, West Hartford, CT and San Francisco, CA, Kumarian Press and Bernt-Koehler Publishers.
- Marcuse, H. (1964) *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1969) *An Essay on Liberation*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1972) *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press.
- Mokdad, H., Serdula, M. K., Dietz, W. H., Bowman, B. A., Marks, J. S. and Koplan, J. P. (1999) 'The spread of the obesity epidemic in the United States, 1991–1998', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 282, No. 16.
- Sen, A. (1992) *Inequality Reexamined*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*, New York, Knopf.
- United Nations Development Programme (1999) *Human Development Report 1999*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- United Nations Development Programme (2000) *Human Development Report 2000*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Vianello, M. and Caramazza, E. (1998) *Women and Metamorphosis of Politics: The Ovular Utopia as Anti-Principe*. Author's translation of *Donne E Metamorfosi Della Politica*, Rome, Editori Riuniti.

World Bank (1997) *World Development Report 1997: The State in a Changing World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

World Bank (1999) *World Development Report 1999*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

World Bank (2000a) *A Better World For All: Progress Towards the International Development Goals*, Washington, DC, World Bank Group.

World Bank (2000b) *Worldview*, Washington, DC, World Bank Group.