

**ERIK OLIN WRIGHT:
Envisioning Real Utopias**

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Many intellectuals and activists in the West linked the collapse of the state socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe with the hope, not only of a »peace dividend,« but also of a more open debate on better and more appealing alternatives to their capitalist societies. The outcome was quite the opposite: discussion of structural reforms and systemic transformation was even rarer than before and, despite a few isolated attempts to strike new paths, left-wing politics and debate have stagnated and the prospects for new ideas about the future did not appear particularly favorable.

Recently, however, that seems to have changed. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright, president elect of the American Sociological Association and one of the few university teachers in the USA who is well-versed in left-wing and Marxist thought, has produced a tour de force. He started the »Real Utopias Project« in 1992 with the intention of focusing »on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of different arenas of social institutions rather than on either general, abstract formulations of grand design, or on small immediately attainable reforms of existing practices« (p. 10). Since then, a number of publications have appeared and this, the most recent volume represents the project's culmination. It is remarkable by virtue of its genesis alone: over four years Wright held more than 50 lectures and discussions in 18 countries on particular aspects of the book. As a result, the quality is particularly high, representing the summation of the experiences, findings, and evaluations of this comprehensive, intensive, and multifaceted discourse which the author terms »emancipatory social science.«

The very title of the book indicates that Wright's aim is to surmount currently dominant habits of thought: utopias and reality may be opposites, but it is precisely his aim to take seriously the tension between dreams and practice and to turn it to account: »utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change« (p. 6).

The book is divided into three sections. First, the essential diagnoses and critiques of capitalism as an economic system are expounded, summarized, and concisely presented in terms of eleven key criticisms. In part two, possible alternatives are taken up: the traditional Marxist approach (for example, its fixation on the state) is assessed as inadequate and replaced with an approach based on the increasing social empowerment of civil society, both in the state and in the economy. Following that, a wide spectrum of concrete concepts and examples of alternative institutions are described, which include real alternative

models, such as citizens' budgeting, Wikipedia, the Mondragon cooperative, and unconditional basic income – these are »real utopias.« In Section 3, the topic of transformation – in other words, the problems of implementation – is discussed. The conclusion consists of seven key insights which are the summation of the various aspects and arguments that have been considered.

The author's basic line of thought comprises three main questions and their discussion, together with the outlines of solutions: (i) are social emancipation, the further development of democracy, and empowerment desirable and worth pursuing; (ii) are the ideas and activities that can be derived from them viable, in principle, as solutions to society's problems and crises; and (iii), above all, how is this to be achieved? Wright devotes several chapters to this strategic questioning and tries to develop a theory of emancipatory social/societal transformation.

To this end he elucidates his take on societal change and explains the related problems and contradictions of change in our capitalist societies with a view to discussing the dynamics and patterns of development of »unintended social change.« At this stage in the argument he adduces, among other things, gender relations and how they have changed over the past few decades. Accordingly, at issue is a complex and multifarious process in which very different relations, on the individual, organizational, and societal levels, combined with or counteracted one another, and individual calculations and modes of behavior and political and economic activities eventually resulted in trends which in large part were not even intended by most actors: »However, because of the nature of the opportunities they faced, the resources they controlled, the beliefs they held, and the choices they ultimately made, they did things which cumulatively contributed to the transformation of gender relations« (p. 299). On this basis, Wright proceeds to outline a theory of systemic transformations which, in his opinion, has so far been lacking.

The author's argument culminates in three chapters on conscious collective strategies and various kinds of strategies of systemic transformation. This also rounds off his brilliant systematization of previous approaches in terms of this thematic complex: the three transformation strategies which are both fundamentally conceivable and to be found in the real world are assigned a number of key features (actors, objectives, and priorities), thereby providing an impressive overview of the potential field of action. The three transformation strategies are as follows: ruptural transformations, interstitial transformations (transformations which bypass the state), and symbiotic transformations (transformations in close cooperation with the state). Simplifying considerably, these variants can be related to socialism, anarchism, and social democracy; at least, they exhibit many of their aspects and forms. Wright describes the basic features of all three variants of metamorphosis and discusses their respective preconditions, characteristics, and advantages/disadvantages, including their unintended effects. While these are obvious, for example, in the case of violent ruptures (»smash first,

build second«), the disadvantages of the two other varieties of transformation are that, with their reform-orientation and limited solutions to problems, they (also) stabilize and reinforce the capitalist system. In discussing these different perspectives on and assessments of the various related effects and experiences the author adopts a markedly neutral and extremely subtle stance. Of crucial importance for the probability of success and appropriateness of each variant is whether it maintains or changes people's material circumstances, which raises the question of whether specific measures might lead to disruption – in other words, would only make things worse. The deeper and the longer such disruption is deemed likely to be, the less probable it is that it will be endorsed. The fact that Wright »plays out« all these considerations consistently and with cool logic, making them easier to understand and envisage by means of diagrams and curve models, is very useful. Based on the performance of such countless calculations it is scarcely possible to rapidly arrive at simple positions and evaluations. There can be no question of a universally valid strategy or a panacea; instead, the three transformation strategies are frequently implemented alongside one another in different »doses« or in succession.

In his conclusion, Wright speaks from the standpoint of his »emancipatory social science«: »The best we can do is to treat the struggle to move forward on the pathways of social empowerment as an experimental process in which we continually test and retest the limits of possibility and try, as best we can, to create new institutions which will expand those limits themselves. In doing so, we not only envision real utopias, but contribute to making utopias real.« It is worth mentioning here that the next conference of the highly respected American Sociological Association, in 2012, will have the theme »Real Utopias.«

The book is very readable and logically structured, and the train of argument is well thought out and easy to follow, at times even dazzling. What Wright provides is not so much new results from social scientific research as an extremely sophisticated and concise synopsis of left-wing emancipatory thought and research. A technical knowledge of sociology is not necessary. However, dogmatists of whatever kind will be unsettled by this book and their one-dimensional attitudes undermined. It is strongly recommended to anyone willing to reflect deeply, even radically and without ideological blinkers on fundamental improvements, especially with regard to Western societies, and to commit themselves to this quest. In the face of climate change and the exigencies of sustainability policy, social upheaval and economic crises this kind of strategic effort is an urgent necessity. Wright's book on »real utopias« could serve as an important guide in this endeavor and may even become a standard work.

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