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[Read Russell Jacoby's review of Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias*](#)

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Response to Russell Jacoby

Russell Jacoby's [shocking review](#) of Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* cannot go unanswered. Amid all his gratuitous invective, the nature and significance of Wright's project gets lost.

The context of the project is important. These days, social scientists are concerned with what is, perhaps with what has been, but very rarely with what could be. We spend our time building elaborate explanatory models of how things work, albeit with limited success—as we know from the mess economists have made of the world. The limitations of social science have led some to abandon it altogether, while others have intensified their commitment to an ever-purer science, remote from the concrete world in which ordinary people live. Most social scientists continue to tread the blind alleys of positivism, and those who deviate from this path often turn to navel gazing or esoteric modeling.

Wright himself was a great believer in and brilliant executor of explanatory science. He began his career rethinking Marxist analysis of class in order to show how Marxism was superior to conventional sociological and economic models in explaining income distribution, class (un)consciousness, and political engagement.

He devoted decades to comparative survey research, mapping class structures around the world and studying their social correlates. More recently, however, he came to recognize that Marxism was nothing without its moral project, that is to say without its vision of a socialist future beyond capitalism. That is why he turned to an entirely new approach, centered on the notion of Real Utopias. In the book that was the purported subject of Jacoby's review, Wright examines the empirical world in order to understand how it can be transcended—transcended in ways that allow human beings to develop the material, political, and social conditions for their flourishing. This is a radical research program that also will be the theme of the 2012 American Sociological Association meetings—a major departure for sociology.

But Wright's project is not simply of interest to social scientists. It has real political implications for the post-communist era, in which the idea of an alternative to market capitalism has been obliterated from public memory. Whether it be the Grameen Bank's project of micro-finance in Bangladesh, shock therapy in Russia, structural adjustment in Africa, devastating economic expansion in China, the bailout in Ireland and Greece, or the stranglehold of finance and insurance in the United States, market capitalism is taken as natural and inevitable. As the market road becomes the only road, those left behind try to catch up, while those left outside scramble for access. However distasteful the Soviet order might have been, it did sustain a vision of an alternative that influenced a wide range of compromises with capitalism—from welfare state to civil rights—that are now dismissed as dangerous curbs on the market. Against that background, the question we face today is how to sustain a global imagination and commitment to alternative ways of organizing society.

It is in this context that Wright's bold initiative assumes significance. His idea is to hold aloft the possibility of alternatives that can sustain the critical imagination. To this end, his book examines various institutional experiments such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, socialized markets in Quebec, self-organized virtual communities like Wikipedia, and worker cooperatives in Mondragon. Each of these is embedded in society but poses a challenge to capitalism by elevating collective self-organization to a central principle as against the pursuit of private profit. These "real utopias" are real in the sense that they are actual existing institutions, and they are utopian in that they nourish the imagination of alternatives to the taken-for-granted capitalism that is destroying our planet. Of course these communities might not see themselves as alternatives to capitalism—they are, after all, embedded in capitalism. But Wright's sociological genius lies in his effort to elucidate how the principles upon which these real utopias are based do indeed challenge capitalism. His analytical apparatus is designed to show how alternatives can nestle in the interstices of capitalism, specifying the conditions of their reproduction as well as the internal contradictions that give them dynamics. Conceptual distinctions help us pose questions—for example, is a particular institutional arrangement viable, feasible, desirable?—that allow us to see potentialities that run against the grain.

In this endeavor Wright breaks with classical and Soviet Marxism by restoring the notion of the social to *socialism*. In so doing he returns to the original ideas of Marx and Engels. In their infrequent references to communism, Marx and Engels portrayed it as deeply social, the collective ownership of the productive forces enabling men and women to develop their needs and talents in *community with others*. But in the succeeding history of Marxism this social element got lost. Thus, classical Marxism did not dwell on the meaning of socialism, presuming that capitalism was driven by laws of development that would necessarily lead to its downfall. Blueprints were superfluous because the inevitable socialism would, when the time came, be made by all. There was no need to legislate its content ahead of time. From Marx and Engels to Kautsky and Luxemburg, socialism was an imaginary utopia rather than a real utopia.

While classical Marxism did not focus on the meaning of socialism, Soviet Marxism could not avoid the question. Lenin, Bukharin, and Trotsky had to work out socialism on earth, and in the most unpropitious circumstances. In the end the Bolsheviks hijacked Marxism and turned it into the ideology of a dictatorial regime. It was nonetheless a form of socialism—although Wright has always refused this identification, calling it instead statism—that by the end of the 1920s had turned into a combination of central planning and a violent collectivization of agriculture. Yet this same “state socialism” generated popular opposition with its own real utopias—strivings for a democratic socialism. These included the self-organized society of the Polish Solidarity movement, the factory council system of the Hungarian Revolution, the economic cooperatives of reform-era Hungary, and the collective mobilization of civil society in perestroika Soviet Union. One might even argue that under state *socialism*, market society was itself a real utopia insofar as it expanded autonomy and decentralization and could counteract class inequalities stemming from central appropriation and redistribution.

Wright’s Marxism builds on the Western Marxism that asks why socialism failed—why no revolution in the West, and why no success in the East? He rejects the “laws of history,” the scientific laws of historical materialism that were supposed to guarantee the rise of an unspecified socialism. Wright instead takes up the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi—ideas merely hinted at in their works—about a socialism based not on the economy nor on the state but on the collective self-organization of society. This is a socialism *without* guarantees, the embryos of which can be found within the interstices of capitalism—embryos that are not planned but emerge spontaneously in response to the challenges posed by capitalist markets. In studying real utopias we become microbe hunters in search of new institutional species, or archeologists excavating the terrain of market capitalism for social organization with emancipatory potential. Indeed Wright’s research program privileges ethnographic practice—a practice that necessarily includes collaboration with the practitioners of the experiments he uncovers. What is at stake here, then, is not just a theoretical vision, but a methodological one, too.

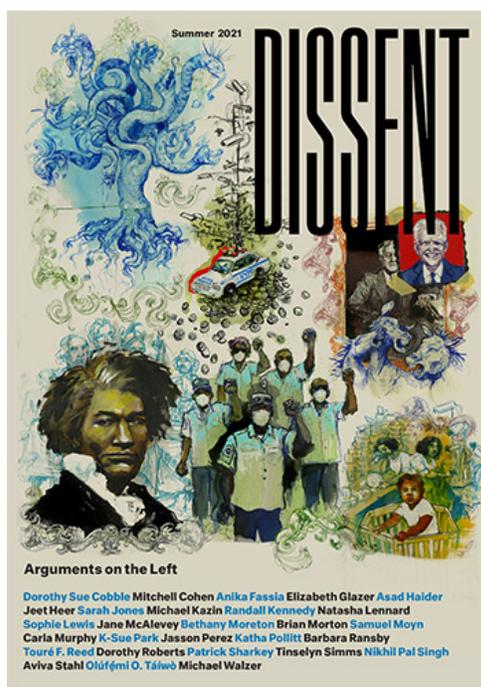
Erik Olin Wright may not be Russell Jacoby's favorite person—and indeed this is not the first time he has let fly at Wright—but that is no reason to put such enmity at the center of his review. As a historian, Jacoby has made his own important contributions to the study of utopias. Sadly in his review he chose to ridicule Wright rather than to engage constructively with one of the most important projects of twenty-first century social science. Jacoby loves to be a bad boy, but here he is just an anti-intellectual.

-Michael Burawoy
University of California, Berkeley

Reply to Michael Burawoy

Thanks for the abbreviated history of Marxism, the dissident council tradition, and the search for non-market alternatives in a post-communist era. I am happy to learn that this is the “context” for the “project” of Erik Wright. I am happy, too, that you rally to your confrere whom you have called a genius and who succeeds you as the elected president of the American Sociological Association. But there is a problem. You hardly say a word about the book itself. Everything is about the “project” and “context.” This might be called bait-and-switch: let's not talk about the book that I reviewed, but the estimable project of which it is a part. I like the project too. So? The project does not redeem the book, which remains what I said it was: sociological gibberish.

-Russell Jacoby

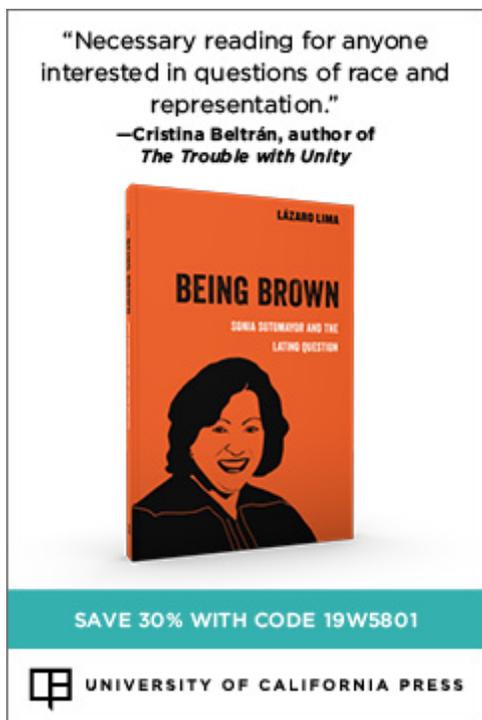
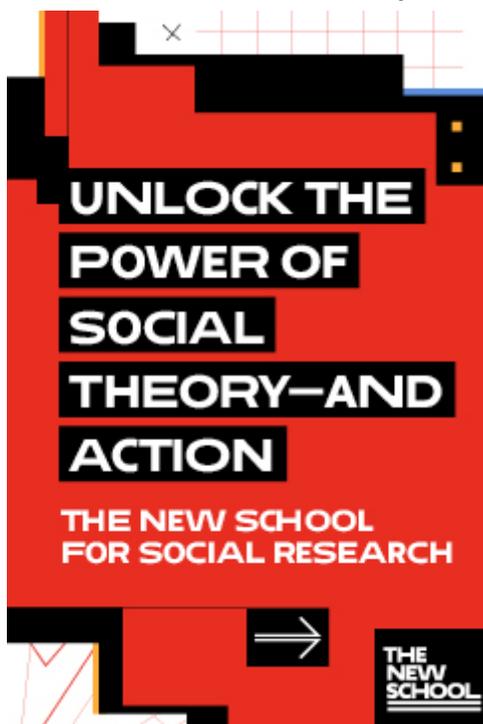


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