

DISSIDENT
men u
DISSIDENT[Login](#) [About Us](#)**DISSIDENT**[Magazine](#) [Online](#) [Blog](#) [Podcasts](#) [Events](#) [Donate](#) [Subscribe](#) [Store](#)

Real Men Find Real Utopias

Real Men Find Real Utopias

[Russell Jacoby](#) • [Winter 2011](#)

Envisioning Real Utopias

by Erik Olin Wright

Verso, 2010, 394 pp.

A BOOK on utopias by a Marxist sociologist seems promising, perhaps even courageous. In *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Erik Olin Wright seeks to counter widespread cynicism about radical social transformation. To do this he offers what he calls “real utopias,” which might appear a contradiction or oxymoron. For Wright, however, utopias are not fantasies, or not only fantasies. In the current period we need “hard-nosed proposals for pragmatically improving our lives” or utopian ideals grounded in reality. Wright not only provides examples of “real utopias,” but situates them within the broader framework of an “emancipatory social science,” a task that involves understanding how capitalism can be transformed.

Even more promising, Wright wants his book accessible to those “not steeped in academic debates.” Everything suggests Wright has the talent to pull it off. After all, he is no old-school Marxist crank or outsider. He is a chaired professor who has just been elected president of the American Sociological Association, the premier professional organization of the field. He often lectures at universities across the globe. He teaches in what many consider the finest sociology department in the country, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The Madison department is where C. Wright Mills received his doctorate, and it housed his mentor, Hans Gerth, an émigré scholar who was a student of another sociologist, Karl Mannheim, whose 1929 *Ideology and Utopia* remains a touchstone study. These men were steeped in history and sociological thought. Gerth translated Max Weber, and together with Mills put out a collection of Weber’s writings. Mills also published an anthology, *Images of Man*, that contained selections of social thinkers from Durkheim to

Michels and Veblen. At their best these sociologists addressed contemporary social issues with an enviable lucidity, theoretical savvy, and historical acumen.

With Wright that sociological tradition, alas, is dead. The book is startling and depressing evidence of what has happened to American academic Marxism, at least its sociological variant, over the last thirty years. It has become turgid, vapid, and self-referential. Wright lives in a bubble of like-minded sociologists and political theorists. On page 322, he thanks Marcia Kahn Wright, his wife, for suggesting to him “the term ‘interstitial’” as a way of expressing something about “strategic logic,” whatever that is. Apart from Mrs. Wright, Erik Wright’s favorite source is Erik Wright. He has read all of his works and finds them remarkable. He moves fluidly between Wright of 1985 and Wright of 2010, as if history has not changed. Actually, for Wright, history has not changed. The issues that rivet Wright unfold in an eternal graduate sociology seminar where the clock has stopped. In a memoir elsewhere, Wright comments that every September since kindergarten in 1952 he has been in school. It might be time for him to take a break.

Wright’s gargantuan theoretical edifice, with its multiple appendages, add-ons, and attachments steals all attention from “real utopias,” about which he shows little enthusiasm. He is more eager to pronounce on how to think about how to approach the preconditions that underlie the claims that support “real utopias” or on the numerous principles and subprinciples of social transformation they infer than to tell us anything about these practical ventures. “Real utopias” for Wright exist as a subset of the broader enterprise of developing an emancipatory social science. It is dirty and difficult work but some conceptually rugged professor has to do it. In fact a macho element wafts through his “Real Utopias Project,” which Wright has launched as an ongoing discussion and series of books. Real Men think about Real Utopias—or at least their punishing theoretical implications and lessons. The Real Utopian Project name came to him, he reports, while he walked his golden retriever in the early 1990s. So Wright does get out.

To elaborate an emancipatory social science means opening up theoretical nesting eggs lined up on a shelf that stretches into the horizon. Wright can barely open one set before another set pops up. That he did not label this book Volume One and promise Volumes Two through Ten shows restraint. An emancipatory social science has three components, he tell us: a systematic diagnosis of existing society, viable alternatives, and an understanding of social transformation. Underlying the first task—the diagnosis—is a theory of justice. Wright’s own theory is what he calls Radical Democratic Egalitarianism. This theory rests on two “claims,” one about social justice and one about political justice. Needless to say, these claims are complicated and difficult to spell out. Wright can only brush the surface, but the first claim “revolves around three ideas: human flourishing; necessary material and social means; broadly equal access.”

UNFORTUNATELY, THESE are not ideas; nor are they written in English. No matter. We are only on page thirteen and already we have utopias that depend on a social science that depends on a theory of justice that breaks down into two parts, social and political, the first of which subdivides in three ways. The second task of Wright's social science envisions alternatives, which can be evaluated by three different criteria: desirability, viability, and achievability. Some things can be desired, but not viable, and viable but not achievable. In case this is opaque, Wright thoughtfully diagrams it. Figure 2.1 gives us "Three Criteria for Evaluating Social Alternatives." Viability, for instance, breaks down into two parts, "Nonviable Alternatives" and "Viable Alternatives." We have yet to get to the third component of his social science, "Transformation," which relies on four theories, such as "A Theory of the underlying dynamic and trajectory of unintended social change." So far, Wright's book might be classified as an Undesirable Nonviable Alternative.

"What's So Bad about Capitalism?" is Wright's next chapter. Wright has to be given credit for parading his anticapitalist sensibilities, but his critique reads like a lecture at the hootenanny weekend of the Socialist Hiking Club, Berkeley Chapter. He distills the criticism of capitalism into eleven principles. Exploitation, profit, and alienation have disappeared from Wright's improved Marxism. Now we have "Capitalist class relations perpetuate eliminable forms of human suffering," "Capitalism is inefficient in certain crucial aspects," and "Capitalist commodification threatens important broadly held values." But why eleven propositions? Why not five—or fifty? Moreover, in their murkiness the propositions could just as well be reversed. "Capitalism is efficient in certain crucial aspects." "Capitalist commodification supports important broadly held values." What sinks Wright's little boat is exactly such vacuous and clumsy statements coupled, as they are, to a relentless faux precision of definitions, diagrams, and graphs.

HIS DISCUSSION of utopia must wait until he explains what socialism is all about, which he contrasts with capitalism and something he calls statism. Wright seeks to reinvent the Marxist wheel. A hundred, perhaps a thousand, Marxists have already written about the state, state capitalism, and its many variants. But a reader would never know it. Wright seems to have hatched these ideas himself.

In any event, Wright is most interested in how socialism leads to what he calls "social empowerment," of which there are three types. He writes that social empowerment can be "over the way state power affects economic activity" or "over the way economic power shapes economic activity" or "directly over economic activity." Is this clear, students? Any questions about the important difference between "affects" and "shapes" or on the technical use of "over"? No? Now the difficulty begins. "These three directions of social empowerment are connected to an array of linkages among the forms of power and the economy." How many? Wright finds at least seven, each of which he diagrams and discusses. These include such entities as "Social democratic statist economic regulation" and "Participatory socialism: statist socialism with empowered participation."

By page 150, Wright finally turns, almost, to “real utopias.” More theoretical brush clearing is required. He will look at real utopias with three criteria: desirability, viability, and social empowerment. A hundred and twenty pages earlier he had posited desirability, viability, and achievability as the foundation of an emancipatory social science. Now he has dropped the last term and added another. Who cares? Still he is not quite ready to plunge into his subject. First he must consider types of democracy that will allow an evaluation of real utopias under the rubric of social empowerment. He posits three types—direct, representative, and associational—each of which has two forms, “thin” and “deep.” He provides a table of “The Degree of Democraticness” to visualize the six possibilities. Associational Democracy exists as a Thin “Bureaucratic corporativism” and a Deep “Democratic associational corporativism.” He offers no examples of such entities—what is deep democratic associational corporativism?—but he does introduce an acronym, without which a sociologist dies a miserable death in the profession. EPG refers to “empowered participatory governance.” Now we are methodologically armed to address real utopias.

In the next two chapters Wright takes up four examples of “real Utopias,” the budget process of Porto Alegre, a city in southern Brazil; the “social economy” of Quebec; Wikipedia; and Mondragon, the Basque cooperative corporation. The sheer randomness is stunning. Why these four? How does Wikipedia fit with the other three? Wright offers neither rhyme nor reason. Moreover, he spurns on-the-ground investigation. He cites official sources and does not appear to have made an effort to find out what these enterprises mean for their Brazilian, Basque, or Canadian participants. His main source for the Quebec Federation of Labour’s Solidarity Fund is its annual report.

Wright no sooner introduces his examples than he drops them in order to snag larger prey, sociological critters. His discussion of the decentralized budget decision-making in Porto Alegre runs five pages. He follows this with many more pages to set out the lessons he and a colleague have drawn. We have done this, he explains, “on the basis of our research on Porto Alegre . . . as well as our understanding of broader issues in the theory of democracy.” Their broad understanding has enabled them to identify seven elements of democratic enterprises. “The first six concern aspects of the internal design of EPG institutions.” Some of these might be obvious to any lay person. Who couldn’t come up with “Devolution and decentralization?” But even an informed citizen, unless trained in the broader issues of democratic theory, would probably have missed the fifth element, “Recombinant decentralization.” The seventh element “concerns an important aspect of the sociopolitical environment of such institutions which contributes to their robustness and stability.” Any questions?

WRIGHT’S DISCUSSION of Mondragon, which now owns the largest Spanish grocery chain (Eroski), takes up six pages and gives basic information, available from any source, on how it functions, but it is swamped by the succeeding twenty pages on

the schemes of two leftist American economists on how to introduce socialism. Without missing a beat Wright sashays from a real cooperative in Spain to a Rube Goldberg plan of “coupon-based” market socialism as contrived by John Roemer and of “Parecon” (or “participatory economics”) as detailed by Michael Albert. In Wright’s PowerPoint sociology, Parecon might just as well be a billion-dollar Spanish corporation as a province in Canada.

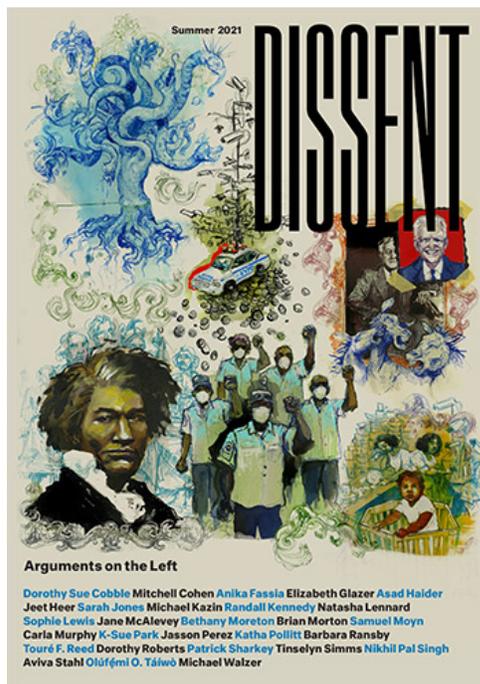
For Wright, Wikipedia exemplifies “the anti-capitalist potential of information technology.” It consists of unpaid and egalitarian participation with democratic governance. For all its success, he asks, what is the impact of Wikipedia? Is it a step on the path to utopia or empowerment? Wright raises some questions before moving on to child care in Quebec (of which he diagrams four types) and the Quebec Federation of Labour’s Solidarity Fund.

With his examples out of the way Wright returns to more pressing issues, to a theory of transformation, which takes up the remainder of the book. “A fully developed theory of social transformation” consists of four components. The first is a theory of social reproduction. This assumes two forms (active and passive) that rest on three “claims” and operate in “four clusters of mechanism” (coercion, institutional rules, ideology, and material interests) that “interact in a variety of ways” that produce two especially important “configurations”: despotism and hegemony. Follow? Professor Wright will explain before turning to the four “limits and contradictions” of social reproduction such as “strategic intentionality and its ramifications” and “contingency and unpredictability.” Get that before we turn to the second component of social transformation? Actually, Wright is just warming up for his ensuing discussions of “interstitial” and “symbiotic” transformation, which are numbingly baroque and that he clarifies with diagrams that might as well be satires. He gives us a graph of “Interstitial Transformations Paving the Way to Rupture” with one axis: “Historical Time.” Wright doesn’t plot history, but Time itself.

WHAT IS one to make of this morass? Wright seems to know nothing about the history of utopian thought, communities, or cooperatives. He refers to exactly one book in the utopian tradition, Martin Buber’s 1949 *Paths in Utopia*. Buber’s book closed with a discussion of the kibbutz, a subject that would seem to call out to Wright. After all, the kibbutz is a “real utopia” with a socialist ethos and decades of practice. Are there lessons to be found here? Daniel Gavron’s suggestive book *The Kibbutz*, subtitled “Awakening from Utopia,” sought to appraise its past and future. Wright says nothing about the kibbutz or the literature on it. Nor does he say much about the “real utopias” in Brazil, Canada, and Spain. He says little about anything. The empirical information he provides is perfunctory at best. His command of Marxism seems limited. His historical reach extends to his own earlier works. His vast theoretical apparatus is jimmy-rigged and empty. The graphs are inane, the writing atrocious. To call this book dull as dish water maligns dish water.

Wright is a man of the Left and undoubtedly supports with his heart, mind, and resources good causes. Yet only sociologists force-fed as graduate students will not choke on this book. That many of them have come to adore this stuff is only striking proof of the discipline's collapse. In a blurb, Michael Burawoy, a previous president of the American Sociological Association and a prominent leftist sociologist, calls the book "encyclopedic" in its breadth and "daunting" in its ambition. He states, "Only a thinker of Wright's genius could sustain such a badly needed political imagination without losing analytical clarity and precision." With the correction that Wright is no genius and that the book is suffocatingly narrow in scope, impossibly cramped in imagination, and irreparably muddy in execution, the blurb is accurate. C.Wright Mills, who despised sociological jargon, has been succeeded by Erik Olin Wright, once given the C.Wright Mills Distinguished Professor Award at Wisconsin, who cranks out sociological cant. With Wright as elected president of the sociological profession, the conservative nightmare of radicals taking over the university has in part come to pass. But if this book exemplifies academic Marxism, conservatives can rest easy. We should all fear, however, what it suggests about the contemporary university and its scholarship.

Russell Jacoby's new book, *Bloodlust: The Roots of Violence from Cain and Abel to the Present* (The Free Press), will be published in the spring. He teaches history at UCLA.



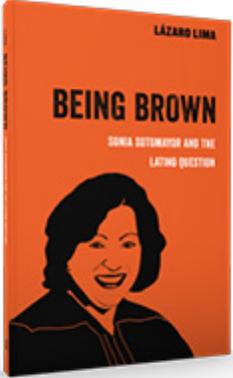
Subscribe



Sign up for the *Dissent* newsletter:



“Necessary reading for anyone interested in questions of race and representation.”
—Cristina Beltrán, author of *The Trouble with Unity*



SAVE 30% WITH CODE 19W5801

 UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

[About](#)
[Contact](#)
[Advertise](#)

[Donate](#)
[Subscribe](#)

[Facebook](#)
[Twitter](#)
[Newsletter](#)

This website and its content © Dissent Magazine 2021. All rights reserved.