

INTERVIEW OF ERIK OLIN WRIGHT BY ED LEWIS, NEW LEFT PROJECT
(WWW.NEWLEFTPROJECT.ORG)

MAY, 2010

1 Why do you think there is a need for visions of social arrangement very different from those that we have now? Why is there a specific need for 'real utopian' visions?

There are really two somewhat questions here: why do we need to look for fundamental alternatives to existing social institutions, and why should these alternatives be framed as “real utopian” visions.

First, the issue of the search for alternatives: We live in a world characterized by deeply troubling, if familiar, contrasts: poverty in the midst of plenty; enhanced opportunities for some people to live creative, flourishing lives alongside social exclusion and thwarted human potential; new technologies to cure disease, enhance health and prolong life along with untreated, devastating illness. There are, of course, many possible explanations for these facts. Some people believe that poverty in the midst of plenty constitutes simply a sad fact of life: “the poor will always be with us.” Defenders of capitalism argue that this is a temporary state of affairs which further economic development will eradicate: capitalism, if given enough time, especially if it is unfettered from the harmful effects of state regulations, will eradicate poverty. Many social conservatives insist that suffering and unfulfilling lives are simply the fault of the individuals whose lives go badly: contemporary capitalism generates an abundance of opportunities, but some people squander their lives because they are too lazy or irresponsible or impulsive to take advantage of them. If you accept any of these diagnoses, then there would not be much point in elaborating visions of social arrangements very different from those we have now. But if you believe, as I do, that there is very strong social scientific evidence that these morally salient forms of inequality and deprivation are mainly consequences of fundamental properties of the socioeconomic system, then it is imperative to understand alternatives to the existing world which would mitigate these harms.

But why should the search for alternatives be cast as envisioning “real utopias”? The idea of this apparent oxymoron is to combine a commitment to our deepest emancipatory values and aspirations with a serious attention to the problem of how institutions really work. The “real” in the couplet forces us to continually worry about the problem of unintended consequences and hazards of social engineering; the “utopia” keeps the moral purposes of social transformation and social justice at the forefront. In the absence of a theory of fundamental alternatives, struggles against the harms of existing institutions will generally be limited to those changes which are immediately accessible – reforms of institutions which might in fact be desirable in and of themselves, but which don’t necessarily constitute steps towards the longer term goal of human emancipation. A theory of fundamental alternatives enables us to ask two questions of any proposed transformation of existing institutions – first, does this improve the lives of people now, and second, does it move us in the right direction along a trajectory towards a more profoundly humane and just society.

2 You present the ideas and aims discussed in your book as socialist. However, your conception of socialism is novel, focusing on ‘social power’, rather than the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. Why do you think socialism needs to be re-conceived in this way? Is it really necessary to call the conception of emancipatory change that emerges ‘socialist’?

There is, of course, always a variety of words that can be used to identify any underlying concept. While I do think it is appropriate to deploy the word “socialism” for the theoretical and political purposes of my analysis, this isn’t “necessary” in the strong sense of being logically entailed by the arguments themselves. Indeed, some people have argued with me that the word “socialism” has become so contaminated by its association with heavy-handed state control – or even worse, in the United States ideological context, authoritarian statism – that I should abandon the word altogether. Words do have histories, and sometimes that history can destroy the usefulness of otherwise attractive terms.

In spite of this, I feel that the word socialist can be effectively retrieved for a progressive, democratic egalitarian political agenda. There are two issues in play here. First, while in the United States and perhaps some parts of Europe, the word “socialist” has lost traction in popular social movements, in much of the world it remains the broad umbrella term for anti-capitalism in the interests of ordinary people. I hope the audience for *Envisioning Real Utopias* is left intellectuals throughout the world, not just in the richest countries, and in this broader context socialism remains a positive symbolic anchor. Above all it signals not simply a complaint about specific features of existing institutions, but a criticism of capitalism as such. Second, the conceptualization of a “social” socialism is fully congruent with the *normative ideals* that have animated many socialists throughout the history of socialism. The real bottom line for most socialists is not really the abolition of private property in the means of production as such. That was always instrumental to deeper moral commitments. The real normative commitments were for a radically democratic and egalitarian social order. I could, therefore, call the political project underlying my project on real utopias, democratic egalitarianism (or perhaps, to give it more edge: radical democratic egalitarianism), and sometimes in fact I do use this expression as a way of identifying the normative foundations and conception of social justice. But because I argue throughout the book that realizing these values requires opposing and transforming capitalism, “socialism” remains the best term available for signaling this transformative agenda.

Perhaps it would be useful at this point to briefly pause from directly answering the questions and explain a little what I mean by “democratic egalitarianism” and how this is connected to the idea of socialism as social empowerment.

First, equality: Equality is a complicated problem, and there isn’t really a strong consensus among socialists as to precisely what this value means. A great deal of very productive and interesting philosophical debate has occurred over the past quarter century or so on this issue. Here is how I define the egalitarian ideal in the book: *In a socially just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives.* This conception is a variety of the “equality of opportunity” conceptions of equality. I prefer “equal access” to “equal opportunity” because the equal opportunity terminology is so strongly associated with what is sometimes called “starting gate” equality, whereas equal access emphasizes more the life-long problem of having access to the conditions to live a flourishing

life.

Second, democracy: The core value underlying democracy is that *people should, to the greatest extent possible, be able to control the conditions and decisions which affect their lives, both as separate persons and as members of broader communities*. We can call this the value of *self-determination*. When we apply the value of self-determination to the choices and actions of individuals that affect their lives as separate persons we usually call this “liberty” or “freedom”. When we apply the value of self-determination to those contexts in which our lives are bound together through interconnection and interdependency, we call this “Democracy”. Democracy and individual freedom are therefore rooted in the same value: people should be able to control the conditions and decisions which affect their lives to the greatest extent possible. (Apparent conflicts between democracy and liberty occur not because of an underlying conflict in fundamental values, but because of the inherently difficult practical problem of creating institutions to realize this value.) In a fully realized democracy all people have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in the exercise of political power over those collective decisions which affect their lives as members of a broader community.

This definition has two critical elements:

- The first is an *egalitarian principle* – all people have equal access to participate in the exercise of political power. A *shallow* democracy is one in which people have very unequal access to the means of effective participation; a *deep* democracy is one which approaches equal access.
- The second element concerns *scope of decisions* that is subsumed under the idea of democracy: a *narrow* democracy is one in which only a limited range of decisions are subjected to democratic decisionmaking; a *broad* democracy is one which democratic decisionmaking extends to all matters of collective interest. As I have specified it here, democracy should cover *all* decisions which affect the lives of people as members of a community. The word “community” here refers to all social contexts of social interaction and interdependence. A family is a community, a factory is a community, a city is a community, and so is a nation. Increasingly, I think, we should think of the world as a community. We can meaningfully talk about democratizing the family just as we can talk about democratizing a factory or the state. What democracy entails, then, is that all of the decisions which affect people’s lives as members of these different kinds of community should be under the collective control of the members of these communities.

The full realization of this principle would be, of course, an extremely complex matter, both because different people have such different stakes in the outcomes of any given decision within a community and because the interdependence of communities means that there are generally ramifications of the decisions made within one community on people in other communities. In practice, therefore, it is really not possible to fully realize the ideal of self-determination: people will always confront conditions not of their choosing and will be affected by decisions not of their making.

Nevertheless, we can still judge alternative institutional arrangements by how much they facilitate or impede the ideals of democracy as collective self-determination. Capitalism, in these terms, inherently obstructs fullest realization of democracy. By definition, “private” ownership of means of production means that significant domains of decisions that have broad collective

effects are simply removed from collective decision-making. While the boundaries between the aspects of property rights that are considered private and the aspects that are subjected to public control is periodically contested, in capitalist society the presumption is that decisions over property are private matters and only in special circumstances can public bodies legitimately encroach on them. The private decisions of owners of capitalist firms often have massive collective consequences both for the workers inside of the firm and for people not directly employed in the firm, and thus the exclusion of such decisions from public deliberation and control reduces democracy. A society in which there are meaningful forms of workers democratic control within firms and external democratic public control over firms is a more democratic society than one which lacks these institutional arrangements.

Of course, there may be good reasons for the exclusion of non-owners from such decisions, either on the grounds of economic efficiency or on the grounds that people have the right to dispose of “their” property as they see fit even if this has large consequences for others. Democracy, after all, is not the only value we have, and it could be the case that in some circumstances other values, such as efficiency, might be sufficiently important to justify a reduction in self-determination. These considerations, however, do not change the fact that capitalist property rights reduce democracy.

The advance of democracy, therefore, requires transcending capitalism. But how? And what does this really mean?

This is where my conception of socialism as social empowerment enters the analysis. “Social power” is power rooted in the capacity of people for voluntary association in pursuit of collective goals – what sociologists call “collective action”. Social power is contrasted two other more familiar forms of power – state power and economic power. You can think of these three forms of power as different ways of getting people to do things: bribing them, forcing them, or persuading them.

In the ordinary use of these terms, “democracy” is the label we use for the subordination of state power to social power: In a democratic state, considerable power is exercised by the state, but the purposes to which it is used are, supposedly, dictated by “the people”, which in practice means through the various ways in which people become organized associationally to influence the exercise of state power, especially through political parties, social movements, and labor unions. One of the pivotal mechanisms for this translation of social power into effective subordination of state power is elections. This is equivalent to saying state power is subordinated to social power. In an authoritarian state, on the other hand, social power is subordinated to state power. “Socialism”, then, is the word for the subordination of economic power to social power.

All economic systems involve all three forms of power. While we can construct three ideal type “pure” economic systems connected to the three forms of power – capitalism is based on the dominance of economic power, statism on the dominance of state power, and socialism on the dominance of social power – all actual economic systems are hybrids that combine in different configurations all three forms of power. The term “capitalism”, therefore, is a shorthand for “an economic system within which economic power is the dominant form of power and limits the scope and operation of state power and social power.” In this conceptual framework, transcending capitalism in the direction of socialism means increasing the weight of social power within the hybrid configuration along a variety of different “pathways of social empowerment”.

The institutional proposals for “real utopias” are all situated within these multiple pathways of social empowerment.

3 You discuss a range of different real utopian proposals for political and economic transformation. Can you describe what you see as the most important of these?

I hesitate to anoint any specific proposal as “most important” since the actual importance of a proposal depends on historical context, both in the sense of the political conditions which make different proposals more or less *achievable*, and in the sense of the existing institutional and social structural conditions which make given proposals more or less *viable*. So, instead of describing the proposals that I think are the most important, what I will do is briefly describe four or five proposals that I think reflect the diversity of institutional designs for moving along the pathways of social empowerment.

(1) *Participatory Budgets*. Participatory budgeting is a redesign of municipal government that was first instituted in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre and has since be instituted in one form or another in over 1000 cities worldwide. While the details vary enormously across cases, the basic idea is that ordinary citizens directly decide budgetary priorities for cities in various kinds of participatory assemblies. This constitutes a form of social empowerment because collective resources are allocated to different purposes by decisions made through voluntary association of people in civil society.

(2). *Wikipedia*. Wikipedia is a profoundly anti-capitalist way of producing and disseminating knowledge. It is based on the principle “to each according to need, from each according to ability.” No one gets paid for editing, no one gets charged for access. It is egalitarian and produced on the basis of horizontal reciprocities rather than hierarchical control. In the year 2000, before Wikipedia was launched, no one – including its founders -- would have thought what has come to be was possible.

(3). *Solidarity funds*. In the province of Quebec unions have developed a specific kind of investment instrument referred to as “solidarity funds”. These funds are generated by contributions mainly from union members and are used for private equity investment in small and medium enterprises. The idea is to invest in firms which are relatively immobile geographically and rooted in the Quebec economy and which, in exchange for these long-term investments, agree to sign on to a charter of labor rights and principles of environmental sustainability. These firms remain capitalist insofar as they are profit-making firms in a capitalist market, but part of their capital comes from unions and a specific form of social power shapes the governance of the firms’ activities. They thus constitute a hybrid form combining capitalism and socialism.

(4) *Worker-owned enterprises: cooperatives*. From the early decades of the 19th century, worker-owned cooperatives have constituted a form of hybrid organization that combine capitalist and socialist elements. Prodhoun, in his famous conflict with Marx, argued that worker-owned cooperatives constituted both an alternative within capitalism and a strategy for challenging capitalism: because they would provide such a better way of life for workers, once they were well-established workers would leave capitalist employment for membership in productive cooperatives, eventually starving capitalism of labor power. Even if this scenario is not plausible, cooperatives are certainly one pathway of social empowerment, and we know under favorable

conditions, cooperatives can be both economically efficient and organizationally stable. Mondragón in Spain is the iconic example: 270 separate worker-owned firms constitute the federation called the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation (MCC) – basically a Meta-cooperative of cooperatives. The MCC provides a wide range of services for its constituent units, including forms of cross-subsidization, risk reduction, work sharing and other mechanisms which help mute some of the pressures from the ordinary functioning of capitalist markets.

(5). *Unconditional Basic Income*. The idea of an unconditional basic income (UBI) is quite simple: Every legal resident in a country receives a monthly living stipend sufficient to live above the “poverty line.” Let’s call this the “no frills culturally respectable standard of living.” The grant is *unconditional* on the performance of any labor or other form of contribution, and it is *universal* – everyone receives the grant, rich and poor alike. Grants go to individuals, not families. Parents are the custodians of underage children’s grants (which may be at a lower rate than the grants for adults).

Basic income is generally defended on grounds of social justice, either focusing on the ways in which it deals with poverty in particular or on the way it neutralizes certain unjust forms of inequality. In the present context, a universal basic income can also be viewed as a way of infusing funds into forms of economic enterprise within which social empowerment plays a substantial role. The term “social economy” covers many such enterprises. One of the main problems that collective actors face in the social economy is generating a decent standard of living for the providers of social economy services. This is, of course, a chronic problem in the performing arts, but it also affects efforts by communities to organize effective social economy services for various kinds of care-giving activities – child care, elder care, home health care, respite care. It would be much easier for communities to mobilize various sources of funding for these activities if the basic standard of living was already taken care of through a basic income.

The problem of providing an adequate standard of living to members is also a chronic problem for worker cooperatives, especially in the early stages in which a cooperative is being established and members are learning how to function, work out organizational details, and develop productive capacity. A basic income would make it much easier for a cooperative to survive this learning phase and reproduce itself as an on-going economic organization. Because a basic income makes cooperatives more viable, this would also help solve some of the credit market constraints faced by worker-owned firms. One of the reasons banks are hesitant to loan funds to worker cooperatives is skepticism that the first will survive and be able to pay back the loans. Since workers typically do not have significant collateral, risk-aversion by lenders means that worker-coops are typically undercapitalized, which in turn makes it less likely that they will succeed. A basic income changes this equation, since now banks know that the revenue stream generated by the coops’ market activities does not have to provide basic income for the worker-owners. This reduces the risk that the cooperative will fail and thus makes credit more easily available.

4 Some would feel that in an effort to promote utopian visions that are ‘real’, you undermine hopes for more radical possibilities. In particular, in politics you advocate the continuing existence of the state, which appears to involve intrinsically dominating relationships. In economics, by contrast, all of your proposals involve the

continuing existence of the market – an institution in which relationships are based on self-interest. Why do you advocate such apparently objectionable institutions?

I have three responses to this objection. First, if it were the case that a plausible argument could be made that the kinds of real utopian proposals I advance actually impeded the realization of a more radically democratic and egalitarian society, then this would be an important objection. But there really is no credible argument as far as I know that proposals I discuss -- basic income, participatory budgets, worker cooperatives, solidarity funds, etc. -- make more radical transformations less likely. So, even if one acknowledges that the state and markets are intrinsically objectionable, I don't see how the probability of their eventual elimination is reduced by the kinds of proposals I advance. Second, under any foreseeable historical conditions the complete dissolution of state power and the complete disappearance of markets are utopian fantasies, not viable destinations. We can aspire to deepening democracy and extending its scope and thus subordinating more fully the state to social power, but this is not the same as the disappearance of the state. And we can struggle for egalitarian conditions of social justice in which the inegalitarian effects of markets are largely neutralized. But this is not the same as creating a comprehensively planned economy with no role for markets. Finally, I am not so sure that the state and the market are intrinsically objectionable; what are objectionable are their effects on power and inequality. The objections would largely disappear if state power is effectively subordinated to social power, and if the space for market relations is delimited by genuinely democratic processes and the inequality effects markets neutralized.

5 You describe three different approaches to social transformation - ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic. What are these different approaches? And do you think that the different strategies that characterise today's leftist and radical movements all fall into one of these categories?

The central idea of *ruptural* transformation is that through direct confrontation and political struggles it is possible to create a radical disjuncture in institutional structures in which existing institutions are destroyed and new ones built in a fairly rapid way. Smash first, build second. A revolutionary scenario for the transition to socialism is the iconic version of this: a revolution constitutes a decisive, encompassing victory of popular forces for social empowerment resulting in the rapid transformation of the structures of the state and the foundations of economic structures. In contrast, both interstitial strategies and symbiotic strategies see transformation as a process of *metamorphosis*, as a gradual process without large scale, temporally-condensed radical breaks. *Interstitial* transformations involve building new institutions in the niches, spaces, and cracks of the existing society. They embody the vision of the Wobblies: build the new society in the womb of the old. Worker cooperatives, alternative trade systems, social housing, wikipedia, are examples. *Symbiotic* transformation involve entering the dominant institutions of power and collaborating with elites to solve practical problems, but doing so in ways which expand the scope of social empowerment. These are what used to be called "nonreformist reforms": reforms which both make the system function more effectively and expand the limits of popular power. If you want some slogans for these three strategic logics with respect to the state, ruptural logics say "smash the capitalist state", interstitial strategies say "ignore the capitalist state", and symbiotic strategies say "use the capitalist state."

These ideal-type strategic logics are loosely associated with different long-standing

ideological traditions on the left: ruptural strategies with revolutionary communism, interstitial strategies with anarchism, and symbiotic strategies with social democracy. In practice, left social movements combine elements from each of these in different times and places. While it may be that ruptural strategies no longer have much plausibility, at least in developed capitalist countries, aspects of ruptural strategies – confrontation, disruptions, disjunctures in particular institutional settings – could still play an important role in some situations. Often symbiotic strategies are needed to open up spaces for more effective interstitial strategies. The potential effects mentioned earlier of basic income – a state policy – on expanding the possibility of a vigorous social economy and worker cooperatives would be an instance. More generally, then, just as the institutional design of a social socialism is pluralistic in the sense of involving heterogeneous configurations of social empowerment, so too are the strategies of social empowerment.

6 Where does the strategy of reformism, in which leftist parties seek power through winning elections and then enact progressive reforms, fall in the picture you describe?

Electoral strategies are one aspect of symbiotic transformations: using the state to transform the state and economy. Symbiotic strategies are more than simply electoral politics – they also involve, for example, creating things like works councils within capitalist enterprises to solve problems of cooperation within production. Participatory budgeting is also a form of symbiotic transformation: solving practical problems of urban governance in a way that enhances social power. But electoral politics remain an important component of many such initiatives. The mistake is to imagine that a thorough transformation of capitalist societies would ever be possible simply through this specific strategic route.

7 What are the key problems involved in the strategies you describe? Which problems are of greatest significance for the contemporary left?

I would identify three key, interconnected problems faced by the left in grappling with the strategic problems of transformation: 1. The problem of time horizons; 2. The problem of fractured solidarities; 3. The problem of forming any kind of plausible strategy for radical transformation of a hegemonic system.

Time Horizons. The term “time horizon” refers to the length of time into the future that we can coherently organize our activities. There are three critical time horizons that bear on the problem of strategy: (1) the time horizons under which most people are prepared to engage in a political project; (2) the time horizons of our scientific knowledge about the conditions that are likely to exist in the future; (3) the time horizon of the trajectory of radical transformations leading to a transcendence of capitalism. The key disjuncture is between (1) and (3): the time horizon for radical transformation stretches far into the distant future, almost certainly well beyond the lifetimes of people today, whereas the time horizons for political action of most people is very short, a few years or perhaps in some cases a few decades. There was a time when classical Marxism functioned in a way that brought these time horizons more into alignment through a particular form of the second time horizon: Marxism proposed a theory of the trajectory of capitalist development in which capitalist crises were predicted to intensify over time and

capitalism was predicted to become more vulnerable to transformation over time. This prediction about the destiny of capitalism, then, helped lengthen the time horizons of many activists – the length of time they were willing to look into the future for results – and sympathetic followers. That particular theory of the future no longer seems plausible to most people (even given the experience of recent intense economic crisis). So, for the moment we really do not have a good theory of the trajectory of conditions we are likely to face in the future, and this makes it very hard to have a coherent strategy that occupies the same time frame as the transformations we want to accomplish. The implication is that whatever else we want to accomplish, our strategies need to be oriented to accomplishing things in the relative short term.

Fractured solidarities. This is a hugely complex problem. It involves both the issue of the developments in the class structure over the past half century or so, but also the transformation of other bases of solidarity. Solidarity is a critical dimension of any project of radical transformation. At one level this is a subjective phenomenon – with what categories of people do I feel I share basic identities and interests and for whom I am prepared to make sacrifices. (Note: I think that the concept of solidarity implies a willingness to make personal sacrifices for others, not merely to feel a shared identity. This is the dimension of solidarity that matters most for collective action.) But solidarity is also closely connected to objective properties of social structure: how opportunities and real conditions of life are differentiated across a population. One of the central problems any left strategy faces is the problem of increasing complexity in the underlying conditions that shape potential solidarities. Strategy can have some impact on this. Some strategies tend to mute divisions – either by strengthening more universalistic identities or by proposing changes which in fact bring benefits to larger circles of people – others tend to intensify them. But it is also often the case that the problem of solidarities imposes severe trade-offs on the choice of strategy.

Hegemonic capitalism. We live in a world in which capitalism is hegemonic. Capitalism is not just powerful or durable. It is *hegemonic* in the specific sense that it continues to organize the daily lives and interests of most people so that their lives go better when capitalism does well than when capitalism does badly. This is true even in – or perhaps, especially in – a situation of economic crisis such as the one in which we find ourselves today: the lives of people who are currently unemployed will go better when capitalism begins to grow again. This is a reality with which all strategies on the left have to contend. It is one of the reasons why the advances of the left have mainly come through symbiotic strategies – sometimes combined with aspects of ruptural confrontations and interstitial institution building – since symbiotic strategies involve solving practical problems within the existing economic system while at the same time advancing the conditions for increased social power.

8 Is it possible to describe the outlines of a promising strategy for transformation?

I wish that I could outline in some decisive way “a promising strategy for transformation.” In a way no strategy seems really promising – at least if we mean by this that given what we know now, strategy X has a high probability of producing radical transformation. What *Envisioning Real Utopias* tried to accomplish is sharpen the theoretical tools we have available for thinking about these issues. But it does contain any distilled strategic advice.

Still, here are my ideas on the matter. I think *system-wide* ruptural strategies have no possibilities of success for the foreseeable future, and no strategies that we can adopt today have a plausible chance of making ruptural strategies more effective in the future. This is not the same as saying that I know for sure that in the future system-wide ruptural strategies might not become plausible. But at the beginning of the 21st century they seem off the historical agenda. As indicated earlier this does not imply that some elements from the ruptural menu aren't potentially useful, but a revolutionary rupture with capitalism to create a democratic egalitarian socialism isn't plausible.

This means that strategies need to mainly revolve around combinations of symbiotic and interstitial transformations. In these terms I think the a promising (“a” rather than “the most”) way to think about this is to see symbiotic transformations as specifically directed towards opening up more space for expanded interstitial transformations. For example, solidarity funds are a way of reducing the geographical mobility of capital by increasing the social control over the allocation of investment funds directly to small and medium enterprises. State policy can facilitate the expansion of solidarity funds in all sorts of ways. This is symbiotic insofar as it helps revitalize local conditions of capital accumulation, but also interstitial, insofar as it allows civil society organizations to increase their role in the regulation of local and regional economies. More generally, a wide range of public policies can be imagined which would strengthen what is broadly called the social economy or solidarity economy and create greater space for bottom-up initiatives of expanded social power.

There are, of course, well-founded objections on the left to state policies that strengthen the social economy and other non-statist forms of economic activity. Many initiatives in this direction go under the rubrics of decentralization, privatization, participation. The World Bank has been a big advocate of participatory budgeting and a supporter of all sorts of “social entrepreneurship”. The Left is thus rightfully suspicious of many of these kinds of proposals. Instead of being a pathway of interstitial social empowerment, in practice practice they can easily become covers for an increasing role of markets and competition. Nevertheless, I think organizing strategies in ways that reinforce the democratic empowerment mechanisms of such interstitial transformation is one of the ways that the Left can connect with social movements, provide positive social changes within the time horizons of real world actors, contribute to widening solidarities, and – perhaps – counteract capitalist hegemony through the building of alternatives.

9 What effects do you hope the book will have, and on whom?

This book was produced through a long process of intensive dialogue, not simply internal reflection at my desk. In 2004 I had an initial version of the central argument finished in a paper called “Taking the ‘Social’ in Socialism Seriously,” and I began presenting that paper at various academic meetings and invited lectures. By 2006 I had a draft of much of the book. I posted this draft on my website and invited people to comment on it. I also decided to accept every invitation to speak on the themes of the book. So, for the next three and a half years, I traveled around the world giving lectures, seminars, workshops, and in a few places more extended lecture series on the book. Mostly these events were in academic settings, but there were occasions when I gave talks to social movement activists, trade unions, and other kinds of popular audiences. During these trips I took detailed notes on the discussions, and in a few cases

recorded the discussions and prepared transcripts. (These can be found on my website at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU-discussions-2007.htm>). After each trip I would revise the manuscript and post the new version. By the time I was done I had given over 50 talks in 18 countries other than the United States: Norway, Japan, Britain, China, South Africa, Turkey, Italy, Spain, Bosnia, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Sweden, Canada, Ireland, Mexico, Argentina, Chile. The final manuscript was deeply shaped by this extended process of dialogue. Intellectual production is always a combination of a social process of inter-subjective communication and internal reflection, but in this specific case the global dialogue was especially important.

I recount this history as part of my answer to this last question because it reflects how I think of the book and my hopes for its role in the world. I see the book as a stage in an on-going conversation: it was produced and refined through conversations and now my hope is that it will contribute to future conversations. My hope is not that everyone who reads it will agree with its arguments, but that it will generate productive discussions. While it is written for a relatively educated public, I have tried to write it clearly enough that it will be accessible to non-academics, especially activists. It will have succeeded in its goals if it expands the vocabulary for thinking about alternatives to existing structures of power and privilege, and helps clarify to people the ways in which they can contribute to the realization of those alternatives.