An interview with Erik Olin Wright

Mark Kirby

Erik Olin Wright

"I am a classic baby-boomer: born in Berkeley in 1947 while my father was in medical school on the post-WWII G.I. Bill. I was raised in Lawrence, Kansas, where both of my parents were professors at the University of Kansas. I knew that I wanted to be a professor from about age 11. I am also a product of the 1960s, radicalized politically first by the civil rights movement and then by the the student anti-Vietnam war movement when I was an undergraduate.

"As an undergrad I was in an interdisciplinary social science major (economics, sociology, history and political science combined), and then studied history for two years at Oxford (which was a total blast). I finished my PhD in sociology at Berkeley in 1976 and have been here ever since.

"My intellectual mission as an academic is keeping the radical traditions of social theory and social science alive. My published work has revolved around revitalizing and reconstructing Marxist-inspired sociology, particularly as this theory is applied to the understanding of social class. The book which probably gives the best overall sense of my perspective on things is I*nterrogating inequality* (Verso, 1994). At UW I regularly teach one undergraduate class oriented for freshmen and sophomores, Sociology 125, "Contemporary American Society", and two classes which are open to upper division students and grad students, Sociology 621, "Class, State and Ideology," and Sociology 651, "Introduction to Economic Sociology."

"Aside from academics, I am a passionate cyclist, riding 12-15 miles most days and more on weekends. Anyone who wants to accompany me and learn about the best bike rides around Madison should let me know. I can also give you tips about winter riding in Madison (you should try studded snow tires made in Finland). I play the violin, mainly to fiddle at parties (anyone want to jam?) and attend many of the theater events in Madison. I have two daughters, both in college, and miss the commotion of kids around the house."

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Background

Kirby: You won awards for biology and Maths as a teenager and you grew up in a household where your parents taught psychology at University. What made you choose to go into sociology? Do you feel this was a choice?

Wright: You know, in the United States it is relatively easy for kids to change their minds about their academic interests after they arrive at University. Indeed, many people who get PhDs in sociology study other things as undergraduates and only really begin seriously work in sociology in the PhD program itself. So, it is not so unusual for a university student to start off in one field and end up in another.

In my particular case I didn't really make up my mind about sociology until I applied for PhD programs. I don't think I ever seriously considered math or biology, even though I did quite a bit of that in high school. When I was an undergraduate I knew I wanted to do some sort of social science, but I studied pretty broadly in political science, economics, anthropology, and sociology. When I graduated in 1968 I went to Oxford and did a second BA degree, this time in history, to round off my social science background.

When I applied for PhD programs in the fall of 1970, I decided on sociology because it seemed, of all the social sciences, to have the fuzziest boundaries and to be the most open to radical perspectives. I chose sociology because it is an easier home in which to do problem-centered work that crosses conventional disciplinary boundaries.

Kirby: In 1968 you made a film called "The chess game" (described in Wright 1997: 1-3). The film deals with the issue of structure and action by showing that if the pawns replace the aristocratic pieces they are still stuck with the chessboard and the rules of the game. You point out that the film was made at a time "before I would have identified my own intellectual work as Marxist" (Wright 1997: 2). What then would you say inspired the film consciously or unconsciously?

Wright: The key idea in this animated film was this: the pawns revolt against the "ruling class" pieces, sweep them from the board and then dance an American square dance on the board. In the end, however, they start a new chess game, but this time the pawns are on the back row moving like Kings and bishops and the like, while the old aristocratic pieces occupy the pawn row and move like pawns. The message of the film was that the pawns failed to make a revolution because they thought it was sufficient to depose the old elite. They neglected to remove the board itself. The chessboard, then, was a metaphor for underlying social structure that generates "the rules of the game". A revolution, to be sustainable, has to transform that.

Now, this idea is not a uniquely Marxist idea. In a sense it is the foundational idea of much structurally oriented sociology: people fill "locations" in social structures — sometimes called roles — which impose constraints and opportunities on what they can chose to do. This doesn't mean that human practices or activities are rigidly determined by roles. Intentions and choices still really matter. Agency matters. But such choice occurs in a setting of systematic (rather than haphazard) constraints.

The Marxist form of this general idea is to make a claim — a pretty bold one when you think about it — that the key to understanding this structural level of constraint is the nature of the economic structure in which people live, or even more precisely, the nature of the "mode of production". In my little film there was no production, no economy. The chessboard was a

completely open-ended metaphor for social structure. So it is in that sense that the film was not specifically based on a Marxist framework.

As for its inspiration, I think the film grew out of the concerns for radical, egalitarian social change that were part of the intellectual culture of the student movement, the American civil rights movement and Vietnam War era anti-war movement. I participated in various ways in these social movements of the 1960s and was very much caught up in the utopian aspirations of the times, but I also felt that the task of constructing emancipatory alternatives was more arduous than many people thought. It is not enough to attack the establishment and remove its players. Constructing an alternative is a task in its own right. And that is what the film tried to convey.

Kirby: In your writings you refer to the idea of a reference group — the group of people whose opinion really matters to you at a particular point in time. You refer to various groups who have fulfilled this role over time:

- San Francisco Kapitalstate collective
- *New Left Review* Editorial Board
- Analytical Marxism Group (No-Bullshit Marxism Group)

Can you say something about each of these and how your reference group has changed over the years?

Wright: I strongly believe that the development of ideas in general and academic work in particular is deeply affected by the social contexts in which they occur. While it is also true that ideas are worked out by individuals engaged in the hard work of writing and thinking, and much of this is a "solitary" activity, nevertheless, no idea is ever produced outside of a social context. Such contexts are complex. They include bureaucracies that administer grants, universities that organize careers, journals that review and publish or reject academic work. But the social context also involves, crucially, communities-of-dialogue, the "reference groups" that define a process of discussion, debate and learning with other people. The production of ideas is thus a social process, not just an individual act.

Some aspects of this multidimensional social context are more or less outside of one's control. There are "rules of the game" that one really is forced to play if one wants an academic career, and these unquestionably affect one's work. But there are aspects of the social context of intellectual production over which one can exert a significant amount of control. Like Ulysses and the Sirens, one can choose one's constraints, so to speak. And, among the things which one can deliberately choose, none is probably more important than the community-of-dialogue in which one is embedded. Most scholars, I believe, don't think much about this. They go to the best university they can — where "best" means something like "the highest standing in some status hierarchy of universities" — get the best job they can, and then do their work. I was pretty conscious from pretty early on in my career that where I studied and — even more significantly — the intellectual and professional circles in which I worked, would be consequential for what sorts of ideas I would be able to produce, what kinds of contributions I would be able to make, indeed in a broad sense, what kind of scholar I could become. I therefore made a point of trying, to the extent possible, to construct these communities of dialogue in a vigorous way in order to constrain the parameters of my intellectual work in ways consistent with my

values. I felt this was especially important given that I wanted to produce scholarly work that would be critical of established institutions of power and privilege.

Three of the most important reference groups of this sort that have marked my career are the San Francisco Kapitalstate collective during the first part of the 1970s, New Left Review Editorial Board (and I would add: readership) from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, and the Analytical Marxism Group (No-Bullshit Marxism Group) since the early 1980s. The first of these was formed by a group of Marxist-oriented graduate students during the heyday of the revival of Marxism. For me personally this circle was especially important in two ways. First, it exposed me to the broad spectrum of new Marxist work in Europe and North America. American academic life is often quite insular, partially because the US academic scene is so big in its own right, but also because of general American parochialism about the rest of the world. Kapitalistate deeply linked me with an international network of young Marxist-oriented scholars. Second, Kapitalistate was unconnected with any political party or party-tendency. This meant that I was able to forge my early understandings of Marxism and the project of its reconstruction in a context where there were no pressures towards conformity to any official position.

The second of these three reference groups was forged when I published my first essay on class theory in *New Left Review*, and it was greatly strengthened when I published my first book with Verso (then New Left Books), *Class, crisis and the state*. *New Left Review* was the English-language left publication with the broadest international audience interested in open-minded rigorous theoretical debate. I think for me, at that time, the most crucial thing about the *NLR* reference group was the feeling I had that I was being taken seriously. As a student there is always a premium on being clever. In a way it matters less that what one says is true than that it be "creative", original, quirky. Publishing in *New Left Review* in my late 20s and having my ideas discussed and debated by a mature left-wing audience helped me re-orient my own intellectual priorities towards a more relentless commitment to "getting it right" than had been the case when I was a student.

The third reference group developed when I attended what came to be called the Analytical Marxism group (or more self-mockingly: the NBSMG, "no-Bullshit Marxism Group"). This is a circle of ten or so scholars from several countries who have met once a year since 1979, originally in London and now in New York, to discuss work broadly relevant to radical egalitarian politics and social theory. Originally the group centred on the interrogation of core Marxist concepts and ideas, but gradually it has broadened to include a more eclectic agenda. Besides myself, the group now includes G.A. Cohen, Sam Bowles, Robert Brenner, Joshua Cohen, Philippe Van Parijs, Pranhab Bardhan, Hillel Steiner and Robert van der Veen. Earlier on Jon Elster and Adam Przeworski were also members. I will discuss the core ideas of Analytical Marxism later in this interview. Here the important thing to stress is the extraordinarily high demands this group places on issues of intellectual rigor and clarity. Sociology (not just Marxist inspired sociology) in general is characterized by loose argumentation: concepts are often vaguely defined, little effort is made to make every step in an argument transparent, assumptions are buried and reasoning is opaque. The Analytical Marxism reference group has done more than anything else to remind me of the importance of avoiding these methodological sins. When I write the shadows of the other people in the group lurk over my shoulder and scold me when I catch myself muddling through in some difficult part of an essay.

Kirby: There are only five books which appear in the bibliography of both your first (*Class, crisis and the state*) and last (*Class counts*) books. They are :

Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and monopoly capital*

Carchedi, G. (1977) *The economic identification of classes*

Giddens, A. (1973) *The class structure of the advanced societies*

O'Connor, J. (1973) *The fiscal crisis of the state*

Poulantzas, N. (1975) *Classes in contemporary society*

What does this tell us about you and your version of Marxism?

Wright: I am struck both by how few items are on this list of common books from 1978 and 1997, and what is not on the list — there is no Marx or classics of Marxism. Of course, part of what is in play here is the sharp difference between the substance of the earlier book — it was a book of theory dealing with a wide range of topics — and the latest book, which is mainly an empirical study of class structure and its ramifications. The thematic content of the last book only really overlaps with one chapter in the first one. But I also think that the list does reflect the fact that my version of Marxism does not pay much homage to classical works. I generally do not believe that the best way to develop arguments and push theory forward is to engage in fine-grained debates about the interpretation of texts, however brilliant they may be, particularly texts written a century or more ago. Thus, almost none of my writing centers on Marx's own writings. If the Marxist tradition is genuinely committed to a scientific understanding of the social conditions for radical, egalitarian social change, then it would indeed be extraordinary if the most useful things on most contemporary topics in the 21st century were written in the middle decades of the 19th century. Just as evolutionary biologists don't bother reading Darwin's work, except out of historical interest, eventually there will — hopefully — come a time when Marx's writings will mainly be of interest for the history of ideas, but not for the exposition of scientific arguments.

Kirby: In 1997 you produced *Class counts*. You have now produced a revised shortened student version. Would you like to say something about the thinking that led to this student book and how you decided what to leave out and why?

Wright: I felt that the original version of *Class counts* was unnecessarily intimidating, not just for undergraduate students but for most people interested in its themes. It was filled with complex tables and methodological appendices designed to deal with issues of concern to research sociologists, but not to most other people. So, I decided it would be a good idea to cut out all of the technically challenging bits, turn nearly all of the tables into simple graphs and drop most of the peripheral discussions. The student book contains all of the substantive ideas of the original book and all of the theoretical discussions virtually intact. Overall I actually think it is a better book — it is more accessible and the central themes don't get lost in the technical details of the original work.

Kirby: This year you have been a visiting fellow at All Souls Oxford. Why is that and what exactly have you been doing?

Wright: I am currently spending six months at All Souls college with no responsibilities, no administrative entanglements, no teaching (except the inevitable writing of comments on doctoral student dissertation chapters). It is a chance for me to sit for long stretches of time to read, and write — and answer questions in long interviews! While here I am working on five main projects which are in different stages of completion:

1. Mapping out the tasks for a book I am writing with Michael Burawoy called *Sociological Marxism*. Last year Burawoy and I wrote a long paper for the *Handbook on sociological theory* called "Sociological Marxism". It is an effort to map out a general framework for reconstructing Marxism on its sociological foundations. Next year we plan to expand this into a short book. This year I am organizing the gaps so we know what needs to be done.

2. *Deepening democracy* (volume IV in *Real Utopias*). This is the latest volume in my series of books called the Real Utopias Project. It deals with a series of empirical case studies of instances where new forms of what might be called "empowered participatory democracy" are being tried. I am waiting for one more case study chapter from a contributor to the volume and will then write the preface and revise the introduction to the book.

3. *Alternative foundations of class analysis*. This is a book which will assemble in one place a series of "foundational statements" about alternative ways of doing class analysis. There are six chapters:

Erik Wright	Marxist-inspired class analysis
Richard Breen	Weber-inspired class analysis
David Grusky	Durkheim-inspired class analysis
Loic Wacquant	Bourdieu-inspired class analysis
Aage Sorensen	Neoclassical economics inspired class analysis
Jan Pakulski	Anti-class analysis

Everyone is supposed to have their chapters to me by early March. I will then send people comments and write an introduction.

4. A moral audit of contemporary American institutions. This is really in the early stages. Basically I want to write a book on contemporary US society that grows out of the course I have been teaching. My idea is to organize it around a "moral audit of American institutions" on which I have been working for some time—a kind of ethical chart of the dominant and latent values relevant to different institutional settings.

5. "The American jobs machine". In December I published an empirical study in *The Boston Review* on the American job expansion of the 1990s. I have a pile of articles to read of other research on job changes and then a bit of additional analysis before writing a more academicky piece for a sociological journal.

So, that is what I am working on. It is keeping me busy.

Class Structure

Kirby: A continuing theme in all your books has been class. Why have you consistently stuck to the analysis of class?

Wright: There are two main groundings for my on-going commitment to a "problematic of class". First, and ultimately the most important, is a moral commitment to a radical egalitarian vision of the just and good society. Radical egalitarianism is a broad and multidimensional ideal. It includes egalitarian gender relations in which the gender division of labor is attenuated, where men and women share equally in the mundane tasks of child care and housework, where knowing a person's sex predicts nothing about their likely positions of responsibility, status or authority within the various spheres of social life. Radical egalitarianism means deep democracy, for it implies an egalitarian vision of the distribution of political power and thus requires the elaboration of institutional means for direct political participation rather than simply arms-length representative forms of democracy. And, radical egalitarianism means a commitment to the end of socially-structured forms of economic inequality, economic inequalities rooted in the social positions people occupy within the social division of labor. To give precision to this idea is complicated, but in broad strokes a radically egalitarian society means two things about economic inequality:

- there is a very deep form of "equality of opportunity for material well-being" in which a person's social location and natural talents have no effects on their access to the resources and processes for acquiring the material means of life;
- everyone, regardless of the choices they make, is assured a decent standard of living. Radical egalitarianism thus means a commitment to the ideal of a classless society and to the practical politics of reducing the classness of society.

Such radical egalitarian moral and political commitments would not, by themselves, be sufficient to ground a commitment to the "problematic of class". After all, there are many inequalities in society that constitute a moral affront to the ideals of radical egalitarianism: gender inequality, racial inequality, global inequalities between rich and poor zones of the world, and so on. The commitment to class analysis, therefore, is also grounded in a scientific belief: the belief that class inequality constitutes the most important socially structured axis of inequality that a radical egalitarian project confronts. This is a very tricky claim, as are all social scientific claims that something is the "most important" (or even, simply, more important than something else). "Most important" here does not mean "most important for every question one might ask". What it means is that class inequality and the institutions which reproduce that inequality are deeply implicated in all other forms of inequality and that, as a result, whatever else one must do as part of a radical egalitarian political project, one must understand how class works. This has been the central objective of my sociological work.

Kirby: In relation to your studies on class it might be argued that you have concentrated more on class structure or class locations than on class consciousness and class action? How do you defend this activity against the charge that it is merely creating boxes and putting real people into them?

Wright: It is true that my theoretical work and research has focused somewhat more on the problem of class structure and location than on class action and class consciousness. The main justification for this focus is the belief, when I began this line of work, that in order to properly understand class consciousness, class action and class formation (the formation of actors in class locations into collective agents) one needed to first have a clear understanding of the structural properties of class relations. The issue was never that I felt class structure was more

important than class action or that class location was more important than class consciousness, but I didn't see how one could sensibly study the problems of consciousness and action without first knowing what precisely one meant by "class", and that required a structural analysis. This task was especially urgent because of the massive changes in class structure that had occurred in the course of the 20th century which produced a class structure with a large category of people that, in everyday language were thought of as "middle class". I felt that before I could understand how these sorts of people figured in class conflicts I needed to give the concept of "middle class" a more rigorous meaning.

This kind of theoretical work is often accused of being a sterile academic exercise of pigeon holing people. Classification and taxonomy seems like a very scholastic activity of little relevance for real struggles and real lives. I don't think the choice is between "creating boxes and putting real people into them" or just "studying real people". The choice is between making the boxes explicit and systematic, clear and therefore criticisable, or keeping the boxes vague, implicit and slippery, and therefore impervious to criticism. If one wants to empirically study the class consciousness of real people, one needs to know how to identify people by their structural location within the class relations of capitalist society, and this means "assigning" them a class location. I do not see an alternative to getting these concepts straight.

Kirby: Do you think a preoccupation with class is a Marxist thing?

Wright: When I was a graduate student in sociology at the University of California, one of my professors, Arthur Stinchcombe, once quipped, "Sociology really only has one independent variable, class." He was, of course, making a deliberately exaggerated statement, but it did capture something important: the problem of deeply structured inequality is central to sociology in general, not just Marxism, and "class" is one of the ways of talking about this. So, to study class and treat it as a central issue in social research is not exclusively a "Marxist thing". That being said, the preoccupation with class is usually a pretty good indicator of scholarship that is rooted in the Marxist tradition. In other currents of social theory, notably the Weberian tradition, class is one of a menu of relations and processes around which social analysis is organized. In Marxism, in contrast, it is the pivotal relation. It is thus probably fair to say, in general, that being preoccupied with class tends to suggest a Marxist agenda.

Kirby: You argue in your article "Falling into Marxism; choosing to stay" that you have decided to stay a Marxist. Can you say something about this choice?

Wright: It is easy to understand how, as a radical intellectual in the 1960s I was attracted to Marxism: it was the only serious game in town. If one aspired to combine one's political commitments with an academic agenda, and was eager for deep and demanding intellectual debate, Marxism provided the most productive and interesting terrain.

It is more complex to explain why, in 2001, I personally continue to call myself a "Marxist social scientist." At one level the answer is still pretty simple: I believe that the Marxist theoretical tradition continues to offer indispensable theoretical tools for understanding the conditions for the advance of the radical egalitarian project. Marx is famous for saying in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach that philosophers have only tried to understand the world, but that the real point is to change it. It is equally true, however, that without effectively understanding the world we cannot know how to change it in the ways we desire. My continued commit-

ment to the Marxist tradition is the belief that at its core it provides us with many of the central theoretical tools we need for this purpose.

It is worth pointing out a couple of equivocations in that last sentence. First, I refer to "the Marxist tradition" rather than Marxism as such. I do this deliberately. "Marxism," like other "isms", suggests a doctrine, a closed system of thought rather than an open theoretical framework of scientific inquiry. It is for this reason, for example, that "Creationists" (religious opponents to the theory of biological evolution) refer to evolutionary theory as "Darwinism". They want to juxtapose Creationism and Darwinism as alternative doctrines, each grounded in different "articles of faith". It has been a significant liability of the Marxist tradition that it has been named after a particular historical person and generally referred to as an ism. This reinforces a tendency for the theoretical practice of Marxists often to look more like ideology (or even theology when Marxism becomes Marxology and Marxalatry) than social science. It is for this reason that I prefer the looser expression "the Marxist tradition" to "Marxism" as a way of designating the theoretical enterprise. I feel that the broad Marxist tradition of social thought remains a vital setting for advancing our understanding of the contradictions in existing societies and the possibilities for egalitarian social change, but I do not believe it provides us with a comprehensive doctrine that automatically gives us the right answers to every question.

The second equivocation is that I state that this tradition provides us with "us with many of the central theoretical tools we need", but not that the Marxist tradition alone provides us with every theoretical principle and concept needed for a radical egalitarian project. Above all, in these terms, I believe that Marxist class analysis provides absolutely central concepts for understanding the nature of capitalism as a social system and the problem of its transformation, but I also believe that this Marxist core needs to be supplemented with a wide range of theoretical ideas from other radical traditions, notably feminism, and even ideas from mainstream social science.

Now, I said that this was the "simple answer" to the question "why do I still identify as a Marxist social scientist?" I do not think that these purely theoretical commitments by themselves are sufficient to explain this kind of publicly articulated intellectual identity. After all, there are other ways I could identify my work: I could say that I am "using" ideas from the Marxist tradition, or that I am a critical social scientist drawing from a wide range of theoretical sources. To retain the public identification with the Marxist tradition, then, also has a symbolic component. It is a way of announcing explicitly that one is anti-capitalist, not merely pro-egalitarian. Particularly in an era in which anti-capitalist ideas are very much out of fashion even on the left, I feel that this commitment needs to be reaffirmed.

Kirby: In the same article you talk about your choice between Berkeley and Wisconsin. You characterise the difference as being between famous people writing books at Berkeley and people writing articles for radical journals at Wisconsin. Is that still true and do you still think you made the right choice?

Wright: The details of the intellectual contrast between Wisconsin and Berkeley have changed since the 1980s — Wisconsin has become a more freewheeling place where book writing is appreciated, and Berkeley has a higher dose of profession-oriented sociologists who write in the major journals. There is still a difference in the center of gravity of the two departments, but they are not at polar extremes by any means. As for my personal choices in my career about where to work, it is always difficult to make a sober assessment of the "road not taken" (to quote from Robert Frost). I feel I have thrived in Wisconsin, that I have been given the space

to develop my own style of work and intellectual priorities and to work with students on the Left without interference, and I certainly have been given considerable institutional resources to pursue my specific agenda. So I have no regrets at all.

Kirby: Michael Burawoy argues in his article "Marxism without macro-foundations" that you assume there is a link between class position and class actors and to try to make this link you redefine the notion of class location. Do you accept this or is it an implicit criticism?

Wright: I have never really understood this criticism. If one believes the social relations are "real" — that they are not simply constructs in the heads of academics — then it seems to me that one should believe that people occupy locations-within-relations. This is true for any sort of social relations. A "location" is just a way of specifying the kind of relation one is talking about and how a person is situated within that relation. If class relations have consequences for class action, then I don't see how this could be so without at least some aspects of those consequences being generated by the locations-within-relations occupied by people. This is all that the claim that we need to specify people's class locations amounts to.

Now, part of the effort of my work has been to give more precision to this idea in a world where there is a lot more complexity than is captured by the simple idea of capitalist class relations as a perfectly polarized relation between Capital and Labour. This has meant that I have had to "redefine" class location in order to capture this complexity. I consider managers, for example, to be a special kind of class location, which I call a "contradictory location within class relations", a location that in some sense occupies both the capitalist and working class location (or, more precisely: a location within a complex set of relations in which with respect to some dimensions of these relations occupies the capitalist location and with respect to others, the working class location). My claim is that adding this complexity — redefining their location in this way — will facilitate our understanding of their class consciousness and their role in class conflict.

Kirby: How do sexism and racism fit into the framework of class analysis? This has been allegedly the weak point in Marxist social analysis?

Wright: There was a time when people thought that Marxism should try to be a Theory of Everything. The goal was to have a distinctively Marxist theory of gender oppression, of racial oppression, of national oppression, and so on. This theoretical ambition was part of the larger theoretical project of Marxism to constitute a General Theory of History, or what was called historical materialism.

The central device by which this explanatory ambition was played out was through a complex set of functional explanations in which the forms of race and gender oppression (and many other things) were explained by the ways in which they contributed to the reproduction of class relations (or some almost equivalent formulation like: the ways they contributed to capital accumulation or to the interests of the bourgeoisie). Why does racial oppression exist? The answer was (with various twists and elaborations) that racial oppression takes the form that it does because this form contributes to the reproduction of capitalism, for example by dividing the working class and by allowing for forms of super-exploitation of black workers. Why does gender oppression exist? Because the oppression of women helps domesticate the working class and increases the rate of exploitation through the provision of unpaid labor services

in the home. These are all functionalist explanations: gender or race or other oppressions are explained by the functions they fulfil for capitalism.

These kinds of functionalist explanations have been sharply criticized, both by critics of Marxism and by Marxists themselves. The issue is not that these explanations are never relevant. There are certainly mainly cases where indeed it is the case that, for example, racial antagonism has been used by ruling classes to divide the working class and weaken challenges to their class power. The issue is that such explanations provide a shaky foundation for a general theory of non-class relations since they fail to recognize the various ways in which these relations have autonomous mechanisms of their own reproduction and transformation.

The fundamental task for a sophisticated Marxist class analysis of race and gender is to figure out how to combine an account of the functional pressures generated by the class structure and its transformations, with an account of the autonomous mechanisms that underpin racial and gender inequality and oppression. Marxism is most powerful and most coherent as a form of class analysis, as a theory of the contradictory reproduction of capitalism rooted in the analysis of class. The contradictory reproduction of capitalism poses all sorts of problems and requires many different sorts of institutional solutions, some of which work well, some of which work badly. In this context, racial and gender divisions are available to be used for capitalist purposes, but how effective this is will be a contingent matter. Most crucially, the reproduction of racism and sexism is grounded in mechanisms other than simply their possible functions for capitalism. A Marxist class analysis of race and gender explores the interactions of these distinctive mechanisms with the dynamics of class relations.

How then, in terms of Marxist class analysis, would I incorporate a concern with race and gender? I would make the following basic points:

1. It is crucial to recognize from the start that racial and gender relations/oppression have very different dynamics rooted in very different kinds of causal mechanisms and therefore have very different relationships to class. It is essential to theorize the nature of these mechanisms in order to understand the articulation between race and class and between gender and class (and, of course: between race and gender). Sometimes radical theorists string together a list of oppressions — race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity — as if these were all of a piece. Each of these, however, is rooted in different kinds of causal processes, and grasping their specificity is a necessary step in understanding their interactions.

2. Racial oppression is much more deeply and intimately linked to class than is gender. Certainly in the American historical experience, the earliest forms of racial domination were directly generated by the distinctive class oppression to which Africans-descendants were subjected: slavery. Subsequent transformations of forms of racial domination in America closely track transformations of the way race was linked to the class structure: the segregationist era in the US South, for example, corresponded to the period of racialized sharecropping in Southern agriculture; the destruction of sharecropping greatly facilitated the destruction of segregation. While forms and variations of gender inequality are also affected by changes in class relations, the effects are much more indirect and mediated. This, I think, is because gender relations and gender inequality is rooted in issues of family structure, biological reproduction and sexuality, all of which are grounded in mechanisms quite distinct from the relations of production.

3. In terms of an empirical agenda for the study of the articulation of race/class and gender/class, I think there are four principal kinds of articulation that would need to be examined:

a. The ways in which the mechanisms of racial division and of gender division contribute to sorting persons into class locations. The social processes by which individuals end up in locations are a central issue in class analysis. Race and gender play a significant role in this.

b. The ways in which transformations of class relations either directly or indirectly impact on forms of racial and gender oppression. This does not imply (to repeat the main points above), that the transformation of racial division or, especially, gender division can be viewed simply as a functional response to changes in class relations. Nevertheless, changes in class structures create systematic pressures on the reproduction of other kinds of social relations and the task of class analysis is to understand how these pressures contribute to the transformation of those relations.

c. The ways in which gender and racial oppression impact on the process of class formation (i.e. the formation of collective actors within class struggles).

d. The ways in which gender and race, jointly with class, interact to shape individual subjectivities and practices. Here the issue not the effects of class on race or gender, but the joint effects of gender, race and class (and, of course, many other relevant factors) on various individual and social processes. In its simplest forms such analyses can the form of "additive models" in which each of these causal processes is treated as generating separable effects which, cumulatively affect the outcome in question. Much more interesting — and more relevant for class analysis — is the idea of deeply interactive, non-linear models, explanations in which, for example, the effects of class on voting vary by gender.

Kirby: In *Class counts* you offer the following distinction between exploitation and oppression:

> **The crucial difference between exploitation and non-exploitative oppression is that in an exploitative relation, the exploiter needs the exploited since the exploiter depends upon the effort of the exploited. (Wright 1997:11)**

This distinction is a structural one and you use it to explain the different outcomes of the Native Americans who were oppressed and therefore not exploited and suffered genocide and the black workers in South Africa who because they were wanted for exploitation (i.e.) labour could not all be killed. I have always found this convincing as a reason why class presents a stronger basis for action than some forms of oppression. However does this example work for gender relations and the non-exploitative oppression of women, since surely the choice of killing all women is not open to capitalists?

Wright: I think the contrast between exploitation and oppression is relevant for gender analysis, but not in the simple way suggested by the question. There are several distinct points to make here:

- Women live in households, and their class location comes in part from their location within families, not simply their own direct relationship to the means of production. The class interests of women — and of men with respect to women — is thus mediated by the gender structure of families. This makes the problem of gender relations and gender-based exploitation quite different from simple class exploitation and economic oppression.
- Women who are marginalized from households (single women) and who are not exploited, but marginalized from the system of production and thus economically oppressed (welfare mothers) are expendable from the point of view of capitalism in the same way that Native Americans were expendable in the 19th century. In this case, however, it is their location within the economic relations of exploitation and oppression that are decisive, not their location within gender.
- There is entirely different form of exploitation and oppression, however, which is relevant to gender analysis: sexual exploitation and sexual oppression. A sexual exploiter is someone who benefits from the sexual effort of another in ways that harms the sexual welfare of the exploited. A sexual exploiter needs the sexually exploited in the same way that an economic exploiter needs the exploited. A sexual oppressor, on the other hand, benefits from excluding the sexually oppressed from access to their own sexuality, but does not appropriate the sexual labour of the oppressed. This could, perhaps, describe the relationship between homophobic heterosexual men and homosexuals: they wish to deprive the homosexual of access to their specific form of sexuality, but not appropriate sexual effort from them. This kind of sexual oppression is important to understand in the analysis of gender relations, but it is not the central form of sexual domination that occurs between men and women. Sexual exploitation is more characteristic.

Analytical Marxism

Kirby: You often cite John Roemer as a major influence in turning you towards rejection of the labour theory of value and towards analytical Marxism.

What exactly do you agree with him about and what major differences, if any, are there between you?

Wright: I wouldn't characterize my relationship to the work of John Roemer in precisely this way. My "turn" towards analytical Marxism was driven by my appreciation for the kind of rigorous, careful thinking about Marxist problems that characterized the work of a circle of people: G.A. Cohen was probably the most important, followed by Adam Przeworski and John Roemer. I believe that my work was already characterized by these general features prior to my discovery of "Analytical Marxism" as a specific theoretical current. In any case, the issue was less their specific arguments about any individual topic, such as the merits of the labor theory of value, but rather than general strategy for making arguments.

I became an active participant in this intellectual circle in 1981. Among the topics that we engaged in those early years was the problem of properly understanding the concept of "exploitation" and its relationship to the labor theory of value. Roemer, of course, was one of the

lead contributors to that discussion, but other people also had much to say about this. Out of these discussions all of the people in the Analytical Marxism group became convinced that the technical apparatus of the labor theory of value was unsatisfactory — it simply could not do the theoretical work it was intended to do. But we also came to realize that for the elaboration of a coherent concept of exploitation and its linkage to class analysis, the labor theory of value was also not necessary.

If I had to sum up the central differences between my work and approach and that of Roemer and certain other members of the Analytical Marxism group I would emphasize four things:

1. ***Marxism*** Since the early 1980s Roemer's own work has moved steadily away from a concern with Marxist themes and ideas. He remains, I believe, committed, to a broadly egalitarian set of political values and he continues to see some kind of socialism a central part of an egalitarian project. But he no longer sees the Marxist tradition as such as offering a fruitful place to pursue this agenda. In this respect, we differ strongly: I see the Marxist tradition, especially Marxist class analysis and its strong links to an egalitarian normative critique of capitalism, as a crucial body of ideas highly relevant for contemporary analysis.

2. ***The continued relevance of exploitation*** Along with no longer identifying his work with the Marxist tradition, Roemer has also dropped his earlier concern with the problem of "exploitation". He now feels that this concept is misleading. In his view, the only thing normatively objectionable about exploitation — about the appropriation by one category of agents of the labor effort or surplus of another — is the objectionable distribution of the means of production (or "initial endowments of assets") that makes this appropriation possible. He remains a strong resource-egalitarian, insisting that the means of production and other assets should be equally distributed to all, but he rejects the relevance of exploitation as such as a distinct normatively salient consequence of the radically unequal distribution of those means of production.

In contrast, I continue to see "exploitation" as a central, analytically powerful concept, both normatively and sociologically. Normatively, it matters not simply that some people have more assets than others, but that they use those assets to take advantage of vulnerability of others. Exploitation is the way we talk about this specific way of using one's resources. Sociologically, exploitation describes a particularly explosive form of interdependency between people, an interdependency in which one group (exploiters) simultaneously depend upon another (the exploited) for their own material well-being and impose harms on the wellbeing of the group on whom they depend. This defines a distinctive kind of social relation which is not captured just by talking about unequal endowments of assets.

3. ***Methodological individualism*** Roemer, as well as a number of other people in the Analytical Marxism circle, defends methodological individualism as the correct principle for building explanations in social science. As I argue systematically in the chapter on methodological individualism in *Interrogating inequality*, while I agree that micro-foundations are important for any social explanation, I reject the project of micro-reductionism — the reduction of all social explanations simply to causal statements at the level of individuals and their interactions — that methodological individualists advocate.

4. What counts as "theory"? I suppose one final difference between Roemer and myself centers on the nature of the theory-building project. Roemer, in the good tradition of neoclassical economists, believes that for something to count as a convincing social scientific explanation it must be backed by a deductive, formal, mathematical model. While this does not inherently mean that all theory must buy into the assumptions of rational choice, micro-models, still, since these tend to be the most tractable mathematically, a commitment to this kind of rigorous deductive model building tends to underwrite substantive theory grounded in such rational actor premises.

I take a much more eclectic stance towards the methodology and theory construction. While I appreciate the elegance and analytical power of formal models, I do not think that social scientific theory and knowledge should be restricted to this kind of theoretical activity. I think it is fine to engage in a variety of theoretical and empirical strategies, to combine careful formal model building with more casual theoretical arguments, to pursue qualitative-interpretive empirical methods as well as quantitative-statistical ones.

All scientific knowledge is provisional, partial, and subject to revision — social scientific knowledge is even more so than many other branches of science. There is never an absolute guarantee that one gets it right, and it is an illusion that the certainty of mathematics translates into a certainty of social science knowledge when such models are used. The one big advantage of mathematical models is that they force you to make all your assumptions explicit, and they make it easy for someone else to see where you get it wrong — either because you start with unsatisfactory assumptions or because you make an error in the deduction. This ease of rendering one's argument easily criticized — which is a considerable virtue — is bought at a high price: restricting one's questions to problems that are tractable with these methods, and even for those problems, relying on extreme simplifications that often obscure as much as they clarify.

None of this implies a rejection of formal mathematical models of the sorts Roemer adopts, but merely a call for a more open-ended and eclectic menu of methodological possibilities and strategies of theoretical elaboration.

Kirby: You argue that you became a sociologist rather than an economist because sociology valued its marginal traditions (including presumably Marxism) in contrast to economics which was dominated by neoclassical thinking and included those who saw Marx as a third rate post-Ricardian.

Analytical Marxism in part derives from the nostrums of neoclassical economics. Has this made it harder to remain a Marxist?

Wright: I think it would have been harder to remain committed to the Marxist tradition if my disciplinary home was economics rather than sociology, but this would have more to do with the nature of the discipline and its history than with the intellectual content of economics as such. Analytical Marxism adopts strategies of analysis and intellectual orientations that share much with a variety of disciplinary traditions, especially the concern with fine-grained conceptual distinctions and clarity of analytical philosophy and the explicit model building of neoclassical economics and game theory. But this does not imply that it accepts any substantive arguments of neoclassical economics simply because economists use some of the same methods. The continued interest in questions of class, power, domination and exploitation, for

example, are not standard themes within neoclassical economics but are central to Analytical Marxism.

Kirby: John Roemer argues that among the foundations of Analytical Marxism are the "state of the art methods of analytical philosophy and 'positivist' social science" (Roemer, 1986, 1-2). In your own books you seem more inclined to follow the methodological views of Roy Bhaskar and his notion of "transcendental realism". What are the implications of this difference?

Do you agree that in some sense analytical Marxism is a form of positivism?

Wright: The term "positivism" means so many things. As a term of abuse by anti-positivists it often means rigid mechanistic thinking, for example, or radical forms of empiricism that reject all concepts that are not directly observable. When Roemer endorses "positivism" it is against postmodernist, conventionalist, relativist, anti-objectivists, anti-empiricists (where "empiricism" is just a claim about the importance of observation in the development of science). This meaning of positivism is not antithetical to transcendental realism. The parts of Bhashkar's work which I understand (which is not, by any means, all of it — some of the more recent work I find almost impenetrable) seem entirely consistent with the methodological posture of Analytical Marxism: careful theoretical specification of mechanisms that are thought to generate the empirical observations of research; seeing the world as an open-system; understanding the strong creative, interventionist role of the scientist in constructing the settings of observation, and thus the need for a theory of those settings. This all seems very sensible to me.

Kirby: G.A Cohen's book on Marx's theory of historical materialism has often been cited as a key text of contemporary Marxist social science. However one controversial point is its use of functional explanations. Jon Elster argued that his notion of the "development thesis" which states that over time there is a clear underlying tendency for the productive forces to develop (therefore giving some dynamism to the system) was in fact a process without a subject and as such an objective teleology. Does this suggest that this takes his explanation close to Althusser's idea of history as a process without a subject? If so, what do you think about this?

Wright: There are two quite distinct issues in your question: first, the status of functional explanations and whether or not these entail an "objective teleology"; and second, the problem of the "development thesis" and whether this is a "process without a subject". I will deal with functional explanations in the answer to the next question below. Here let me comment on Cohen's analysis of the development thesis — the proposition that there is a systematic tendency for the forces of production to develop in history. Why does Cohen believe there is such a tendency? Basically it derives from a specific set of claims about the nature of the human condition and human capacities:

- ***The human condition*** Humans live in a world of scarcity in the sense that it takes toilsome effort, often considerable effort, for them to produce their means of existence, and further that they engage in this production under conditions that contain real risks (of famine, danger, etc.). Our needs are met through labor, and at least some of this labor is experienced by people as toil.

- ***Human capacities*** We are intelligent and rational. Intelligence means we come up with novel solutions to the problems of producing our subsistence out of nature, and rational, in this context, means that we do not easily give up advances in our capacity to transform nature to meet our needs.

His argument, then, is that with these assumptions about the human condition and human capacities, the forces of production will tend to develop over time; innovations will occur that increase productivity, however erratically; knowledge of how to transform nature will improve; and once knowledge has moved ahead it will not, except under very special circumstances, regress. Indeed, it is at its core the advance of knowledge that is the pivotal anchor to the whole development process, for it is the advance of knowledge that imparts to the change in the forces of production and developmental trajectory.

Is this a process without a subject? Hardly — all of these elements center around the human subject, the individual human actor facing a set of problems imposed by the natural environment with particular human capacities for coping with those problems. It is conscious human agency that drives the development of the forces of production.

Kirby: Are functional explanations acceptable in Marxist social science and if so in what circumstances?

Wright: Cohen argues for two different clusters of functional explanations in his reconstruction of Marx's theory of history. First, and most problematically I think, there is a claim that the forces of production functionally explain the relations of production (i.e. the relations of production are the way they are *because they are the relations best suited* for the further development of the forces of production, given the existing level of the forces of production), and secondly, that the "superstructure" is functionally explained by the economic base (i.e. various aspects of the state and ideology take the form that they do *because these forms are the best suited to reproducing* the economic base). The italicised phrases embody functional explanations, explanations in which some property is explained by its beneficial effects on something else.

This kind of explanation is typically how, in biology, one explains physical attributes of living organisms: Why do birds have hollow bones in their wing? Because hollow bones have the effect of enabling the bird to fly. The beneficial effect of hollow bones on flight explains the existence of hollow bones. The mechanism by which this comes to pass, of course, is natural selection.

Are such explanations legitimate in social science? In terms of abstract methodological principles, I do not think that functional explanations are inherently impermissible in the analysis of social phenomena. If one observes a stable social system it is entirely plausible that certain institutional arrangements take the form they do because these contribute significantly to the reproduction of the system as a whole. This, however, does not imply that a functional explanation is ever the whole story. There is always the need of specifying the mechanisms by which functional relations come about and are maintained (sometimes referred to as "feedback mechanisms"), and — of course — in any given instance a functional explanation may be simply incorrect.

What about the specific problem of functional explanations in Marxism? I have written extensively on this subject (see the first part of my book with Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober,

Reconstructing Marxism). I would say five general things with respect to functional explanations in Marxism:

- Functional explanations involved in the analysis of "superstructures" are generally more persuasive than the functional explanations involved in the articulation of forces and relations of production. Recall that the functional explanation of relations of production by forces of production posits that the relations take the form that they do because these are optimal for the development of the forces of production. This implies that relations of production could not stably occur and endure which had the effect of permanently blocking the development of the forces of production. I do not think the arguments in favour of such a claim are persuasive. The functional argument for states and ideology, on the other hand is more persuasive: states and ideologies that were far from optimal for the reproduction of class relations would be likely to change because of that suboptimality — the actors would experience the lack of functional relation as disruptive, as crisis inducing, and institutions are likely to be changed as a result (or, alternatively, class relations are likely to change).
- Second, functional explanations of superstructures are less plausible when they posit strong optimality of the effects of a given institutional arrangement for reproducing the economic base then when they simply posit functional compatibility. It is one thing to say that the state contributes to the reproduction of class relations and another to say that it does so in an optimal manner.
- All functional explanations need to be combined in some way with agency-explanations and structural-constraint explanations. That is, in trying to explain why states in capitalist society take the form they do — which is the task of a functional explanation — part of the explanation will always involve struggles under constraints. This is an essential part of the elaboration of the feedback mechanisms that make functional explanations work.
- It is very important to be clear about the level of abstraction at which one is describing the explanatory problem. Functional explanations in sociology generally are more persuasive when the *explananda* are relatively abstract: the most general structural properties of the capitalist state may be able to be functionally explained by the requirements of reproducing capitalism whereas fine-grained, concrete details of capitalist state policies may not be. But even at the more abstract level, functional explanations need not posit optimality and should be combined with agency explanations.
- Finally, as a general strategy of explanation I think Marxism should emphasize what might be termed theories of contradictory functionality (or, perhaps more aptly, contradictory reproduction) of class relations rather than straightforward functional explanations. This implies understanding the conditions for the reproduction of capitalist class relations and capital accumulation and examining the extent to which institutions contribute to that reproduction, but also focusing on the contradictory tendencies, on the ways institutional solutions to functional problems are self-limiting and perhaps even self-defeating.

Kirby In your article "What is Analytical Marxism?" you refer to the group of individuals who meet every September and adhere to the ideas of Analytical Marxism as the "No-Bullshit Marxism Group" What exactly is the bullshit you feel the need to escape from and how does this group ensure they avoid it?

The label "no-Bullshit Marxism Group" is, of course, a bit of self-mockery, but it does tap into a serious issue. (G.A. Cohen, in fact, has written an interesting and thoughtful essay on the topic of "what is academic bullshit?") Full-blown "bullshit" Marxism suffers from three sins:

- First, *obfuscation* — arguments and analyses that are obscure, confusing and vague. The bullshit artist is adept at making arguments sound profound by the deployment of fancy language and arcane jargon. Of course, serious academic works often needs to use technical terms, and to an outsider these can seem to be esoteric jargon. The issue, then, is not simply the use of jargon, but its use in ways that are resistant to clarification and definition.
- Second, *intellectual dishonesty* — the deliberate refusal to engage in careful debate, to clarify one's arguments in a way open to challenge, to admit where there are gaps in one's knowledge and understanding. This is probably the most damning criterion for bullshit Marxism and brings with it a moral condemnation of bad faith. It implies that an intellectual is defending positions about which he or she has some doubts but is not sharing those doubts with others. Of course, when Marxists (or anyone else) make arguments as if they had absolute certainty about the correctness of their views and refuse to acknowledge that there could be reasonable grounds for disagreement, this could simply reflect a sincere, but dogmatic, mind set in which a person is convinced of such absolute certainty. But when such absolutism comes from a sophisticated intellectual one suspects that it involves intellectual dishonesty as well — a suppression of doubts and a false representation of one's beliefs about a problem.
- Third, *Marxology* — the view that a correct "reading" of Marx is equivalent to a correct understanding of the world, with the result that quoting chapter and verse from the work of Marx (and sometimes other classical Marxists, especially Lenin) is seen as providing arguments in a substantive debate. This was particularly a problem when Marxism functioned more as an official ideology of states and parties than when it functioned as a theoretical paradigm within academic work, but since academics were often also deeply committed to that ideology, academic Marxists have sometimes adopted this kind of ideological style of argumentation.

There is, of course, a risk of arrogance in levelling the accusation of "bullshit" at any specific target, particularly when the second element above is emphasized. It is pretty harsh to accuse one's opponents of intellectual dishonesty. The important thing to remember here is that the concept does not refer to any specific substantive argument, to the content of theoretical positions, but rather to the style of argument.

As to how one avoids this kind of "bullshit", it is not actually all that hard. I think more than anything else it means always sharing your own doubts and reservations, making it as clear as possible what you don't understand as well as what you do, and laying out arguments in a clear, systematic manner so that critics will know exactly where they disagree.

Kirby: One key aspect of Analytical Marxism is its rejection of the labor theory of value. This rejection can be traced back to the neo-Ricardians and the Sraffians. What effect do you think the Sraffian episode had on Marxism? How important was it to you and when did you first come across this debate?

Wright: First, I would not quite say that "one key aspect of Analytical Marxism is its rejection of the labor theory of value." It is true that Analytical Marxists reject the LTV as a satisfactory theory of value, but this is simply because the arguments in favor of the LTV are unsatisfactory. It is not because any principle in Analytical Marxism stipulates that the LTV is incorrect, and indeed Analytical Marxism would be entirely open to theoretical arguments which rehabilitated the LTV if they were coherent and analytically powerful. So, let me repeat: Analytical Marxism is not a doctrine that rejects any specific classical Marxist thesis or concept; it is a stance towards concept formation, theory construction and empirical research which variously supports and challenges specific claims in the Marxist tradition.

Concerning the specific issue of neo-Ricardians and Sraffa, I don't know enough about the specific history of the Sraffian episode and its impact on Marxist political economy to say anything specifically about its importance. In my personal case, reading Ian Steedman's book *Marx after Sraffa* was important insofar as it made me aware of a series of technical arguments against the LTV which, I felt, could not be dismissed. This lead me initially to try to show how the LTV could remain useful even if one dropped its role as an explanatory theory of the value of commodities, but later I felt that this was unnecessary and so I have bracketed the LTV altogether.

Kirby: UK Marxist and educational theorist, Glenn Rikowski, argues that his criterion for living his life is to ask himself how he can do the maximum damage to the rule of capital? How exactly do you think you can do the maximum damage to capital and do you feel this is an acceptable moral basis for a life based on Marxism?

Wright: I think that the idea that doing maximum damage to capital is the proper way to live a life "based on Marxism" depends upon the extent that one continues to believe the central thesis of strong versions of classical historical Marxism, namely the thesis that socialism (and eventually communism) is the immanent future of capitalism, contained within capitalism and generated by the contradictions of capitalism. This is an important point, so let me explain it more systematically.

Classical historical materialism is a theory of the tendencies of the long-term trajectory of what might be termed epochal historical change. At its core is a claim that capitalism, like all previous modes of production, in the long run follows a determinate trajectory of development. The critical feature of this long-term trajectory is that capitalism progressively destroys the conditions for its own sustainability (its own reproducibility) while simultaneously creating both the agents (the working class) for creating an alternative form of society and the material conditions for the success of attempt at this creation. These are inherent tendencies, built into the "laws of motion" of capitalism, not contingent properties of specific historical circumstances. Capitalist contradictions will eventually destroy capitalism; it creates the working class that will be its "gravedigger"; and the working class will become the new dominant class capable of constructing a socialist alternative. If one believes all of this — if history follows a determinate trajectory, and if, in the long run, capitalism itself is an unsustainable mode of production and will therefore be replaced by a higher or superior mode of production —

then hastening the demise of capitalism can only be a good thing. Doing damage to capital is equivalent to hastening socialism and human emancipation.

Things get much more complicated if one lacks confidence in this optimistic vision of the future demise of capitalism and the immanent presence of an egalitarian, socialist, democratic alternative. Once one comes to believe that the conditions for a radical democratic and egalitarian alternative to capitalism are not directly produced by the internal contradictions of capitalism but must be the result of collective actions, and especially once one believes that there are many possible futures to capitalism, then it is no longer sufficient to be militantly anticapitalist — thinking only about doing maximum damage to capital — if one wants to enhance the possibilities of such an emancipatory future. Attacks on capital designed to inflict maximum damage could, conceivably, make capitalism function much more poorly, resulting in higher unemployment, greater poverty, etc. It could even make capitalism more vulnerable politically. But does this necessarily enhance the prospects for socialism?

I think it is much more important to think positively and creatively about constructing elements of alternatives to capitalist rationality and capitalist inequality inside of capitalism than simply about undermining capitalism. Or, perhaps more precisely: the way to be effectively anticapitalist is to challenge capitalism in ways that build the alternative rather than simply undermine capitalism. What is needed is what used to be called "non-reformist reforms", social changes that are feasible in the world as it is (thus they are reforms), but which prefigure in important ways more emancipatory possibilities. Examples would include such things as universal basic income, empowered forms of participatory democracy in local governance, enhanced role of democratically controlled agents in the control of capital investments ("pension fund socialism"), and so on. Doing damage is not enough and will hardly build the kind of social movement needed to really challenge capitalism with a viable, sustainable alternative.

Kirby: Alan Carling offers as a key basis of rational-choice Marxism the following: "societies are composed of human individuals who being endowed with resources of various kinds, attempt to choose rationally between various courses of action." (Carling, *New Left Review* 160: 25) What would you say is Marxist about this claim?

This is nothing specifically "Marxist" about this statement. What makes rational-choice Marxism Marxist is three things:

- The problems it studies. Rational-choice Marxism applies these tools to the study of exploitation (Roemer), class structure and class formation (Wright), the transition costs of socialist transformation (Przeworski), the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Brenner), the nature of the power relations embodied in the employment contract in capitalism (Bowles and Gintis), and many other problems. These are Marxist problems rooted in an agenda normatively linked to egalitarian, democratic values.
- The views about the nature of the social relations that govern the relationship of individuals to the "resources of various kinds" with which they are "endowed". The quote from Carling contains the standard claim that people have different resources they bring to bear in the choices they make. Every neoclassical economist recognizes this. What makes the treatment of this standard element Marxist is first, the salience attributed to one specific kind of resource — capital resources — and second, the implications for the broader structure of society of the specific form of property rights which link individuals to these resources. "Endowment" is

an under-specified formulation. What matters is the nature of the rights and powers which govern the relationship of people to these "endowed" resources, and the ramifications for social relations that get constructed on the basis of these rights and powers.

- The nature of the social relations that determine the "various courses of action" among which individuals make choices. Finally, what makes rational-choice Marxism Marxist is the view of the socially structured "feasible set" of choices faced by individuals with different "endowments". This feasible set is given by distinctively capitalist rules of the game, not atomized individuals floating in a world of simple voluntaristic agreements. This means that the optimal choices of some actors involve inherent conflicts of interests with the choices of other actors, conflicts which generate deep antagonisms in the choice-making process.

To sum up: stated in its most formal and contentless manner, there is nothing distinctively Marxist in "rational choice" any more than there is anything distinctively Marxist in multiregression statistical equations, or in psychological theories of cognitive dissonance and belief formation. But all of these can become Marxist when content is added in one way or another.

Kirby: Is Analytical Marxism different to rational-choice Marxism? If so,how?

Wright: I think rational choice theory is one of the ways of elaborating certain important micro-foundations within Marxist theory, but that the use of such models is not at all equivalent to the much broader framework of Analytical Marxism. One might say that Analytical Marxism gives permission to explore the possibilities and limits of rational choice theory as a way of developing good micro-foundations for problems of class analysis, but it does not stipulate that rational choice is the only way to do this or even the best way to do this.

Let me explain a little more about how rational choice theory can contribute to Marxism. Actually, I would prefer a different designation here: instead of rational choice theory, rational choice models of micro-foundations. Why do I shift the terminology here from "theory" to "model"? The use of the term "theory" may suggest to some people the claim that rationality and intentional choice could be sufficient bases for explaining all social action, and by extension, all social outcomes. This strikes me as a preposterous idea and one that few people — even those who work within the rational choice tradition — really subscribe to. Individuals are often irrational, and they often act without making conscious choices. Furthermore, social outcomes are the result of the social structural contexts within which individuals make their choices (rational or not) as well as the choices individuals make. It is better, therefore, to see rational choice as a way of building certain kinds of explanatory models of the micro-level of social interaction which may, or may not, provide deep insights into many of the problems Marxists care about.

Rational choice models are models of human action and interaction in which the actors are assumed to consciously make choices in which they systematically take into account the alternative pay-offs (the "costs and benefits") of different choices, and make their choices on this basis. In the more complex formulations, actors are seen as acting in a world of inter-acting choice-makers all making the same sorts of calculations. Such more complex models of strategic interaction (where the expected choices of others are taken into account) is called "game theory." Nothing in these models depends upon concepts of class relations, modes of production, or any of the other ingredients of Marxism. There is therefore nothing specifically Marxist in these models. This does not imply, however, that rational choice models are inappropriate

for Marxist questions. As long as one believes that in some circumstances human agents make choices consciously and that they at least sometimes attempt to evaluate rationally the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action, the rational choice models are potentially useful. (Indeed, even if one did not believe these things, rational choice models could still be useful insofar as they would help to give greater precision to the nature of irrationalities and non-conscious behavior).

It would be surprising for anyone to be an Analytical Marxist and reject out of hand rational choice models, since these models have in fact proved to be powerful and useful. As I note below (pp. 25-6), Marx certainly used many rational choice explanations in his own work. But this does not mean that Analytical Marxism implies that all explanations can be subsumed under rational choice or even that rational choice provides the principle micro-explanations for all problems.

Kirby: Roemer has been said by some to have presented Marxism in a form acceptable to neoclassical economics. The force of this criticism is that the rational-choice approach has often been associated with those of the political right, such as James Buchanan. To what extent do you believe this criticism has some degree of force and how would you argue against it?

The first sentence of this question has the suggestion that Roemer adopted this form in order to render Marxism "acceptable to neoclassical economists". This seems to me to be incorrect. Roemer is a highly sophisticated mathematician. He believes that rendering arguments in formal mathematical terms gives them precision, and he believes that understood broadly rational actor assumptions are useful for illuminating many problems. Those are reasons for adopting these strategies of "presentation."

More generally, the fact that right wing economists use rational choice is a tribute to its analytical power in helping sort out the complex strategic interactions of actors making choices, just as multivariate regressions for the analysis of complex quantitative datasets are used by both left wing and right wing data analysts because of its ability to sort out the relative effects of specific variables in multi-causal contexts. It would be very silly indeed for Marxists to refuse to use these kinds of powerful tools simply because they are used by reactionary academics.

The counter argument, of course, is that these methods — both game theory and quantitative statistical analysis — are inherently "bourgeois", that using them inherently imparts a bourgeois content to the resulting analysis. The analytical tools contaminate the substantive results. I consider this an interesting hypothesis in the sociology of knowledge. The simple correlation between the content of particular theories and the methods used is, however, insufficient to establish the truth of this hypothesis. What would have to be shown is that simply by using game theory, the critical, emancipatory content of the analysis is subverted. Unfortunately for a person advocating that view, this would render Marx's own theory of the falling tendency of the rate of profit a contaminated theory, for his argument (below, pp. 25-6) is precisely an analysis of a prisoners dilemma within capitalist competition.

Kirby: Roemer's theory of social relations of exploitation relies on the argument that capitalism exists as an option before it is an actuality. This implies that all forms of potential society have to be there at the beginning of human society in the form of potential choices. The problem is that this avoids the need to explain where these

'choices' come from, how they are created, and there is therefore no real sense of agency. How would you respond to this criticism given the centrality of Roemers theory to your own work?

Wright: This is a misunderstanding of the use of counterfactual models in Roemer's specific style of theoretical argument. Roemer is not studying the historical origins of anything, nor even the historical conditions under which real human beings can make choices over forms of production. He is engaged in a purely logical thought experiment designed to reveal various properties of the categories involved. This is an exercise in clarifying the nature of categories, not an exercise in explaining institutional arrangements.

Kirby: Amartya Sen makes the point that the purely economic man seen in neo-classical economics and also in rational choice theory can be described as a "social moron" or a "rational fool". In your own work you argue that we cannot rely solely on rational choice models. However since an important element of Analytical Marxism does derive from these ideas, might it be possible to criticise by asking if it is rational to try to describe human behaviour on rational grounds.

Wright: I think I have already mostly dealt with this issue. It would be incredibly stupid for any social theorist to say that all human behaviour can be reduced to rational choice under constraint. There are some social theorists who come close to this, but mostly they do so in order to push an argument to its limits rather than because they really believe it. But it would be equally stupid for people to say nothing about human behaviour and social relations involves human beings making rational choices under constraints. Once you acknowledge that, then it becomes a open, rather than closed question, how much can be explained using very thin models embodying rational action as the core. And it also becomes an open question how rich and powerful a set of explanations of specific phenomena can be generated by adding interesting modifications to rational choice models — for example, introducing imperfect information; introducing power relations and sanctions; introducing metagames; and so on.

I believe that human interaction is incredibly complex. That it involves a variety of distinct "modes of action": rational action, creative action (*à la* Dewey), habitual action, affective action, and perhaps others. These all come into play in social settings and it is important not to deprive ourselves of the theoretical tools for understanding any of these dimensions of social action. It just turns out that at this stage in the development of social science the tools of game theory built around rational actor models are especially developed so they get a lot of use. The criticism, however, should not be directed at those models, but at the problems in developing comparable rigorous and systematic models of other dimensions of human action.

Kirby: Is not analytical Marxism more involved in "theoretical practice" than even the Althusserians were?

Wright: I don't really know what this question means. All scholarly work is involved in "theoretical practice" in one way or another. You can do it explicitly or implicitly. You can worry a lot about clarity or just muddle along with poorly defined and vague concepts. But using poorly defined, implicit and vague concepts is not less an activity of "theoretical practice" than is the elaboration of clear, accessible and precise concepts.

Kirby: You reject the labor theory of value along with other Analytical Marxists. However that leaves us with nothing to judge the value of things other than price, and therefore no basis for a critique of the market. Is this not a weak basis for Marxism?

Wright: There are masses of criticisms of the market in general, and capitalist markets in particular, that do not depend upon the labor theory of value:

- Capitalist markets generate socially destructive inequalities.
- Capitalist markets generate exploitation (this does not depend upon the labor theory of value).
- Capitalist markets lead to concentrations of power which undermine democracy.
- Capitalist markets produce ecological devastation by biasing production towards under pricing negative environmental externalities.
- Capitalist markets generate a culture of consumerism.
- Capitalist markets threaten communities and the values of community (solidarities, altruism)

None of these points depend upon the specific thesis that in a competitive equilibrium the rates of exchange of commodities will be determined by the relative amounts of abstract labor which they contain.

Kirby: In a recent interview with a Greek sociologist you argued that Marx's theory of the tendency for the rate of profit to fall could be seen as a standard game theory model of the Prisoner's Dilemma. Can you explain what this is and why you feel this approach was involved in Marxism from the very beginning

Wright: One of Marx's most celebrated theoretical arguments — the theory of the falling tendency of the rate of profit — is based on a standard game theory model of the prisoner's dilemma: each individual capitalist, in order to maximize profits in the face of competition makes technical innovations in the forces of production which increase the organic composition of capital (roughly capital intensity). This is rational for each individual capitalist: they are just maximizing their individual profits. But the aggregate effect of this is to undermine the conditions for the on-going production of profits. If capitalists could co-operate and quell competition and prevent the rising organic composition of capital, this tendency could be halted, but the laws of motion of capitalism — i.e. the drive for accumulation under conditions of capitalist competition — make this impossible.

That is a standard prisoner's dilemma: in a prisoner's dilemma each actor has to choose to co-operate with others or compete with them (defect from co-operation). In this specific case, co-operation with other capitalists means "refraining from making innovations which raise the organic composition of capital". Now, the best possible situation for each individual capitalist is for all other capitalists to refrain from such innovations, but for oneself to make such innovations. This generates super profits. The worst situation is for everyone else to make such innovations but to refrain oneself from doing so. The preference ordering of this innovation game from best to worst for each individual capitalist is therefore: best alternative = everyone else refrains from innovation, but I innovate; second best = everyone refrains; third best = everyone innovates; worst alternative = I refrain, everyone else innovates. That is precisely the prisoner's dilemma.

A similar point can be made about theories of class formation and class struggle. As Jon Elster argues very effectively in his book *Making sense of Marx*, Marx's theory of the transformation of the working class from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself can be viewed as a process by which an individual prisoner's dilemmas in the process of collective action is transformed into an assurance game. As long as workers are atomized and competing with each other on the labor market, they are incapable of forming stable collective organs for class struggle. Capitalism brings workers into close interaction in large factories and forges deep inter dependencies within production. This has the effect of changing the nature of their preference ordering from the selfish-competitive preferences of the market to the co-operation favoring preferences of the work place, and eventually this underwrites the emergence of an assurance game in class formation. This transformation makes organization possible and gives an especially potent role for leadership (and "cadre") since the key problem to be solved is now information and coordination (the central issue in an assurance game) rather than motivation.

The basic point here, then, is this: rational choice models and game theory are perfectly usable within Marxist analysis and have, at least implicitly, been present from the beginning of the Marxist tradition. It is another question whether or not the more formal, mathematically elaborated form of these models is helpful in pushing Marxist theories forward, in solving problems internal to Marxism, in revealing gaps in the theory, in proposing new ways of reconstructing the theory. Here, I think, the evidence is pretty strong that some of the significant advances in the Marxist tradition in recent years have been aided by the use of these tools. I would point people to the various important work of John Roemer on exploitation, Adam Przeworski's work on the class basis of social democracy, Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis's work on contested exchange, and my work on class compromise.

Sociology and society

Kirby: What do you make of the Clintons?

Wright: I don't think I have anything particularly profound to say about Clinton. He represents a political current very much like that of New Labour: beholden to the most powerful, globalized sections of capital; emphasizing efficiency and economic growth as the central objectives of government to the extent that the pursuit of any other value is conditional upon its strong compatibility with these goals; using a pseudo-egalitarian rhetoric of equal opportunity and meritocracy while pursuing a set of practical policies that reinforce inequality and respect privilege. This is not to say that there are no political forces in the United States that are worse that Clinton and Company: the US has a fundamentalist Christian right wing that is unbelievably backward-looking with respect to a wide range of civil rights and civil liberties issues, from gay rights to affirmative action to public education.

Kirby: What impact do you think the election of George W. Bush and the perceived lack of legitimacy of his election will have on America and the world?

Wright: I do not think that the lack of legitimacy in the election will, in the end, matter very much for anything. People have short memories, and, after all, just a hair less than 50% of the population voted for Bush anyway. It isn't like there was wild enthusiasm for Gore even

by the people who voted for him. My guess is that Bush will basically pursue a mushy middle-right set of policies, holding back on the really vicious anti-civil liberties and anti-civil rights agenda of the U.S. Christian right. The biggest worry within the U.S. centers on the Supreme Court, which can matter quite a lot. Bush potentially could stack the Court with ultra right wing judges who could control the Court for decades to come. That is a deep worry given the way the US system works. In terms of the world at large, Bush may actually be less militaristic than Gore would have been. It is a terrible indictment of American democracy that someone with so little competence and such primitive ideas could be president, but my guess is that this will not make a dramatic difference (aside from the Supreme Court possibility).

Kirby: What do you make of the idea, associated with Clinton and Blair, but academically expressed by Tony Giddens, of the "Third Way"?

Wright: The Third Way is a combination of some relevant, if highly underdeveloped, ideas for new directions for an egalitarian project with a tremendous amount of bullshit (in the sense of obfuscation, empty rhetoric and intellectual dishonesty). Perhaps the most relevant for progressives is the argument that centralized command-and-control forms of government intervention and regulation need to be replaced by more flexible, decentralized forms. The problem is that this is combined with a view that the best way of accomplishing decentralization and flexibility is greater reliance on the market and private initiative. In many ways, then, the Third Way is not all that different from conventional, conservative pro-market anti-statism.

Still, there is a "kernel" of progressive thought here. What is lacking is a call for deepening democracy rather than extending the market. Flexible decentralization need not imply public-private "partnerships" or other euphemisms for increased marketization. Flexible decentralization can mean empowered participation and democratic renewal. This would indeed be a kind of "third way" between traditional social democratic emphasis on centralized statist regulation of capitalism and anti-statist free market positions. What is needed is an increase, not decrease, in social regulation of the market, but a form of regulation that is executed through empowered forms of popular democratic participation. There are a variety of interesting proposals along these lines: Joshua Cohen's and Joel Rogers' discussion of "associative democracy" in their book *Associations and democracy* (Verso, 1994), and recent work I have done with Archon Fung of "empowered participatory governance" in the June 2001 issue of the journal *Politics and Society*.

Many people on the left see the emergence and consolidation of the New Democrats in the US (and their Third Way New Labour cousins in Britain) as a reflection of the failure of the left to imaginatively and creatively propose a feasible reform agenda that has any real plausibility or appeal to a large enough political constituency. Undoubtedly new ideas and dynamic new proposals would be a good thing for the left, but I don't think this is the pivot of the decline of a social democratic current in the United States and elsewhere. I would place more emphasis on the changing character of the class structure and the peculiar polarized form of economic growth in recent years: There has been, as many people have noted, an extraordinary increase in inequality over the past 25 years, which has generated a much more polarized employment structure and income distribution. The important thing about this polarization, however, is that it is not really a polarization simply between the super rich, the top five percent, and everyone else. Rather, the patterns of economic growth and increasing inequality in the United States have led to significant improvements in income of perhaps the top 30% or so of the labor force. What is more, when we say that the top 30% have gained, this actually means that a

significantly greater proportion of the labor force will experience some real gains over their work lives (since people move into that top 30% from middle layers). This is a very large, rich segment of the population to anchor an anti-statist, anti-welfare regime dressed up as a Third Way. It is not the case that the current expansion has benefited only the super rich, the top few percent of the population. The significant improvement in economic standards, in the US at least, penetrates much more significantly. And these are the people who vote, who contribute, and who define the agenda. The new forms of center right politics that have taken hold in the US and Britain have a real socio-economic base in the population, as well as — of course — very strong support from corporate capital.

Kirby: James O'Connor has now moved into very much an emphasis on environmentalism. Do you think it is possible to fuse Marxism and environmentalism?

Wright: It is certainly possible to fuse a critique of capitalism with environmentalism, and the Marxist tradition provides critical tools for grounding the critique of capitalism: the analysis of market irrationalities, of capitalist power, of the incessant impulse for accumulation and growth and so on. But a serious anti-capitalist environmentalism also needs to shed certain traditionally important ideas from Marxism. Marx, for example, saw the capitalist development of the forces of production as an overwhelmingly good thing and envisioned a time when it would generate the technical conditions for "super abundance", a virtual end to scarcity. One of the conditions for communism, in fact, was a material world in which there was so much surplus that issues of distribution would lose much of their bite. In his more teleological moments, Marx saw the creation of such conditions as the "historical task" of capitalism.

Given what we now know about the carrying capacity of the earth and the ecological consequences of industrialization and population growth, I do not think any serious, radical environmentalist, believes in this technological vision of a post-scarcity world. Anticapitalist environmentalism, therefore, would have to drop this element from classical historical materialism. This, however, poses new problems for a distinctively Marxist form of anticapitalist environmentalism, since it would mean that Marxists would have to think through the implications for socialism and communism of a world in which scarcity would be a continuing, and perhaps even deepening, problem. I don't think this is an insurmountable problem, but it does pose significant new theoretical and political challenges.

Kirby: What do you think of the ideas of Michael Apple and Henry Giroux?

Wright: I am not familiar enough with these writers to make any serious comment here.

Kirby: In the book you are writing on "alternative foundations of class analysis", you include a chapter on Bourdieu-inspired class analysis. What do you think of the sociological and political ideas of Pierre Bourdieu?

Wright: I am not much of an expert on Bourdieu and have not, in fact read his most recent political writings (which, by second hand, seem quite interesting). My main gripe with Bourdieu is that his concepts are incredibly slippery and his basic ideas on class and class analysis very hard to pin down. For example, he introduces a very flexible, multidimensional concept of "capital", which includes social capital, symbolic capital and cultural capital as well as human capital and ordinary financial capital. But he never provides a really clear definition of "capital"

nor does he give a systematic defence of why all of these are in fact varieties of this common property, "capital". He seems to argue that since a person who posses a high level of one of these is in a position to "convert" one form of capital into other forms, that this renders them various forms of the capital. But I really do not understand the reasoning. The lack of clarity means that it is often very difficult to know whether or not one really disagrees with him or precisely where one disagrees.

This being said, much of his empirical work is extremely interesting. My guess is that his concepts are not really meant to constitute a tight, analytically integrated theoretical structure, but more a loose menu of concepts that point to particular directions of research. Perhaps it doesn't really matter if cultural "capital" is really "capital", as opposed to, for example, cultural "competence". What matters is that the concept directs attention at the ways in which acquiring cultural competencies affects the capacity of people to negotiate social relations in particular ways.

Wright: What do you think of the work of Craig Calhoun and the critical theory tradition in the USA?

Wright: I don't really know Calhoun's work closely enough to make a serious comment on his work in particular, but I have some general things to say about "critical theory". In general I find work that identifies itself as "critical theory" suffers from a looseness of argument, ambiguously defined concepts and, in the empirical work, a lack of clear specification of causal mechanisms. The work also tends to focus too exclusively on the problem of culture, at the expense of political-economic structures and, especially, class relations. Perhaps because of this preoccupation with culture, critical theory in the United States often tends to be hermeneutic — interpreting the world — rather than scientific — explaining phenomena. I do not object in principle to this kind of theoretical practice. Interpretative sociology can generate important insights. What I object to is the methodological stance of many critical theorists who argue against the aspirations of scientific explanation of social phenomena. This is especially a problem in the more "postmodern" varieties of critical theory which come close to arguing for the impossibility of social science altogether.

My view of these big methodological issues is that social analysis in general, and progressive social analysis in particular, is in desperate need of real insights and that we should approach the problem of producing insights in a methodologically eclectic and open manner. There is a role for hardnosed, number crunching, positivist visions of hypothesis testing; there is a role for more flexible strategies of a "realist" science that sees empirical research as a vehicle for theory reconstruction more than simple testing of hypotheses; and there is a role for hermeneutic, interpretive social inquiry. I see no need to imagine that only one of these will generate knowledge that is relevant and powerful for the tasks of understanding the world and changing it.

The Real Utopias project

Kirby: Reading the prefaces to your books *Interrogating inequality* and *Reconstructing Marxism* it is clear that you take a great care over the titles and you yourself

acknowledge that the term "Real Utopias" seems like a contradiction. What does it mean to you and what alternatives were considered?

Wright: The first working title for the real utopias project was "Society by design". I had taught a seminar by that title in which we explored a range of proposals for radical alternatives to existing institutions — market socialism, workers co-ops, communes, centrally planned socialism, etc. In the end I didn't like the title because it suggested a kind of elitist social engineering rather than a vision of radical alternatives which might potentially be embodied in social movements and political projects from below. I eventually settled on the expression "real utopias" because I liked the paradoxical evocation of the two words taken together.

Perhaps the best way to explain my thinking here is to quote from the general description of the Real Utopias Project that appeared in the preface to the first book:

> **"Real utopia" seems like a contradiction in terms. Utopias are fantasies, morally inspired designs for social life unconstrained by realistic considerations of human psychology and social feasibility. Realists eschew such fantasies. What is needed are hardnosed proposals for pragmatically improving our institutions. Instead of indulging in utopian dreams we must accommodate to practical realities.**

The Real Utopias Project embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is founded on the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. Self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful forces in history, and while it may be polyannish to say "where there is a will there is a way", it is certainly true that without "will" many "ways" become impossible. Nurturing clear-sighted understandings of what it would take to create social institutions free of oppression is part of creating a political will for radical social changes to reduce oppression. A vital belief in a utopian ideal may be necessary to motivate people to leave on the journey from the status quo in the first place, even though the likely actual destination may fall short of the utopian ideal. Yet, vague utopian fantasies may lead us astray, encouraging us to embark on trips that have no real destinations at all, or worse still, which lead us toward some unforeseen abyss. Along with "where there is a will there is a way", the human struggle for emancipation confronts "the road to hell is paved with good intentions". What we need, then, are "real utopias": 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 muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change. These are the goals of the Real Utopias Project.

I am very pleased with what has come out of this project so far. People who are interested in finding out more about it can find information on my website: ***http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/RealUtopias.htm.***

Kirby: The whole focus of the Real Utopias Project seems to be on institutions rather than on movements. How would this link in to say the work of Henry Giroux and Paula Allman who emphasise the importance of movements in effecting radical change?

Wright: I am not familiar with either of these writers work, so I cannot comment on their specific arguments. I, of course, agree that a radical egalitarian, democratic project of social change is unthinkable without a coherent collective agent of change, or what we typically call "movements". The advance and deepening of democracy does not happen simply as the

unintended by-product of disorganized "vectors of forces"; it must be pursued as a conscious project, and this means movements are essential.

Kirby: Might one criticism of the project be to say the project remains utopian because the focus is on what needs changing but without any real analysis of the subject which is going to effect that change?

Wright: I do not think that this is a valid criticism of the Real Utopias Project. Of course it is important that we have analyses of the historical agents capable of promoting radical egalitarian projects, but it doesn't follow that it is a waste of time to think carefully about the nature of alternatives apart from the question of who are the agents of change. Any project of radical egalitarian change ultimately involves at least four tasks:

- a clear critique of existing institutions in terms of egalitarian-democratic values
- proposals of alternative institutional designs that would, in principle, advance these values
- an analysis of the achievability of alternatives, i.e. of the strategic process by which collective agents could actually advance these institutional alternatives.
- an analysis of what can be termed the workability of alternative institutions: i.e. arguments for why particular institutional alternatives, if achieved, are workable and sustainable

Now, classical Marxism had a powerful theory of the first of these tasks, and an attractive, if ultimately unsatisfactory, theory of the third. Marx made only occasional gestures towards the second, and said virtually nothing about the fourth. He basically believed that since capitalism was doomed — this was an important part of his critique of capitalism as a self-limiting and self-destructive social order — and since capitalism also produced a collective agent with both the capacity to challenge capitalism and institute an alternative, it was unnecessary to provide systematic analyses of the alternatives. The working class would invent the required institutions, and through an unspecified process of creative trial and error would insure the workability of those institutions over time.

I believe we can no longer bracket the problem of proposing normatively attractive alternatives and exploring their institutional workability. I also believe that the investigation of these issues should not be narrowly constrained by attention to achievability through collective agents. There are three reasons why I feel the kind of discussion of the real utopias project are valuable even if we have no analysis of agents of change.

First, a focus on agents of change almost necessarily pushes us towards a very short time horizon of analysis. We simply do not have a good enough theory of what sorts of agents of change are going to be at center stage a hundred years from now to analyse the possible plausibly projects such agents are likely to pursue. Marx thought he had a long term theory of agents of change in capitalism. This was the core of his account of the trajectory of deepening class polarization and proletarianization of capitalist class relations, culminating in a relatively homogeneous mass working class capable of challenging a capitalism enfeebled by its own self-destructive contradictions. That theory — if it were true — would indeed enable us to talk about agents of change in the future. But I don't think that theory is satisfactory. So, my first point is that unless we wish to restrict our analysis to alternatives that are poseable in the here-

and-now with historical agents already on the scene, it is necessary to sometimes bracket the problem of agency.

Second, the development of clear, coherent and compelling analyses of institutional alternatives can play a role in creating agents for change. Agents for change are not simply given by social structure and class structure. This is one of the central conclusions of the theoretical and empirical research of the past quarter-century: the effective agents for change emerge out of struggles over the formation of collective agents, and one important element in such struggles is the vision of alternatives. If, therefore, one believes that the possibilities for the formation of progressive coalitions and collective mobilization depends, in part, on the credibility of attractive models of alternatives to capitalism, then elaborating such models is an important task.

Finally, the careful examination of the institutional conditions for realizing various kinds of emancipatory values is difficult work. It is easy to make vague gestures about alternative visions, to invoke simply the ideals of equality, democracy, the realization of human potentials and the other good things the left has always stood for. It is difficult, really difficult, to give these ideas clear, compelling institutional bite. To impose on that task the additional requirement that the analysis must also be relevant to our existing understandings of agents of change would short-circuit the discussion.

Now, none of this means that the problem of agency should be ignored in the analysis of "real utopian" institutional designs. Indeed, in every one of the specific proposals explored in the project, this is one of the themes that is addressed in one way or another, either by the proponents of the institutional design itself or by the commentators. At a minimum it is important to show that the institutional design corresponds to a set of values and interests that significant numbers of people are likely to hold. But the discussions also involve analyses of the possibility of intermediary forms of the institutional design which could be plausible reform steps attractive to existing collective agents.

Kirby: In 1987 you published a paper entitled "Why something like socialism is needed in the transition to something like communism", making it clear you rejected the capitalist road to socialism or communism as advocated by Robert van der Veen and Philippe van Parijs. However in the article "Sociological Marxism" which you co-wrote with Michael Burawoy in 2000 you advocate as a key proposal the idea of a basic income guarantee set at 125% of the poverty line. Two key proponents of this idea are Robert van der Veen and Philippe van Parijs. In the article you write that although the idea of a basic income guarantee does not do away with capitalist exploitation, it is feasible institutional design. The question arises of whether you still object to the capitalist road to communism. Is something like socialism still required in the transition to something like communism?

Wright: I suppose that I am no longer as certain as I was in the 1980s that universal basic income is incompatible with capitalism. In the earlier article I argued that the rate of taxation needed to sustain a high basic income and the level of empowerment of workers generated by the partial decommodification of labor that accompanies basic income (since now workers are no longer separated from their means of subsistence) were inconsistent with private ownership of capital. Capital would simply leave places where a high basic income was established.

This may still be right. A high basic income may be incompatible with capitalism. But it may not be. This all depends upon the extent to which there are powerful locational advantages for

capital accumulation to continue in places with a basic income — advantages due to infrastructure, to human capital, to political stability, to social networks, and so on. The fact is that in some countries something quite close to a basic income is already in place.

So, the answer to the question is that I don't know whether a high basic income is possible under capitalism. There was a time in the first half of the 19th century when most people believed that a universal franchise was incompatible with capitalism. Even Marx initially felt that it would be a threat to capitalist institutions. But capitalism adapted and in the end was stabilized by democratic institutions. Basic income might well turn out to be a stabilizing reform as well.

Kirby: In "Sociological Marxism" you reject the Frankfurt School and Western Marxism approach by arguing that anti-capitalism is not a sufficient basis on which to construct a socialist alternative. However although not sufficient, is it not necessary and does institutional feasible design constitute anti-capitalism?

Wright: To say that anti-capitalism is not enough is to argue that socialism cannot be conceptualised simply as a negation of capitalism. Of course one can still be anticapitalist in the sense of condemning the values which capitalism promotes, pointing out the harms to human well being systematically produced by capitalism, showing how capitalism undermines human flourishing in many ways, and so on. But this is not enough to put an alternative to capitalism on the agenda, and that requires the elaboration of feasible institutional alternatives to capitalist principles.

Kirby: One theme that has grown in recent times is the re-emergence of moralistic bases of socialism that seem to derive from Durkheim. Examples of this would include Blairism and the Third Way in the UK and communitarianism in the USA. This language of morality seem to be present in some of your recent work. For instance in "Sociological Marxism" you make the point that while a universal basic income guarantee would not end capitalist exploitation, it might be less morally objectionable. Secondly, you are at present compiling a moral audit of America. Is morality becoming more important in your thinking and if so how do you avoid the authoritarianism of Blairism and communitarianism?

Wright: There are a variety of grounds on which one could argue for a radical egalitarian democratic alternative to capitalism. One could say that capitalism is inefficient and wasteful, and a more egalitarian and democratic organization of society would simply work better on technical grounds. Or, following one strand of classical Marxism, one could simply argue that capitalism is doomed to self-destruction, that it cannot survive, and that as a practical matter the only class capable of producing an alternative is the working class which will create an alternative suitable to its interests. Or one could make the claim that a radical egalitarian democratic alternative to capitalism will advance certain values that are blocked in capitalism.

Since I do not believe in the second of these grounds for anti-capitalism, and since I think the first of these is, at best a fairly weak basis for arguing for an alternative, I do not see the alternative to raising a normative critique of capitalism and arguing for why alternatives will do better. A normative critique invariably brings issues of morality and moral judgment into the analysis of society, its institutions, its directions for change.

Need this be authoritarian? I suppose that there is always a danger that making moral judgements may bring with it moral imposition by "experts". My hope is that the emphasis I place on democratic dialogue and the deliberative production of consensus minimizes those risks. In any case, I do not see how the issue of the moral critique of capitalism and the moral defence of alternatives can be avoided.

In the specific instance of communitarianism I think the sense of authoritarianism comes not from its emphasis on the importance of moral considerations in the evaluation of institutions, but in the specific stance it takes on questions of what might be termed "personal morality." Communitarians often place great stress on the importance of "duty" and "responsibility" for individuals rather than simply their "rights." When they argue for the need to strengthen community it is in order to enhance the moral responsibility of individuals. This certainly has an authoritarian air to it. But this comes not from the articulation of moral judgements but from the specific content of the judgements they make.

I also feel that community is a crucial value, indeed one of the central values of the socialist tradition. The idea of solidarity, for example, basically embodies the value of community. And I am prepared to condemn capitalism for eroding community, for intensifying competition and atomised individualism in ways that block the development of solidaristic reciprocities. This is part of my "moral audit" of American institutions. But this does not mean that I support moralistic calls for individuals to feel a sense of duty and to act responsibility. Rather it means that I seek ways of creating conditions where solidarities will flourish.

Kirby: Jurgen Habermas has been criticized for moving to a position close to Talcott Parsons in terms of talking about the ideal speech situation and moral consensus. What do you think of the work of Jurgen Habermas and in what sense is the morality aspect of the Real Utopias Project open to the same sort of criticisms?

Wright: I think the idea of a ideal speech situation is a powerful one. It provides a thought experiment for the conditions under which a certain kind of consensus would be possible. However, this has little to do with Parsons' notion of value consensus. Parsons believed that value consensus was generated by institutions of socialization when those institutions were functionally integrated to the rest of society. Consensus formation in Parsons is much more a question of homogenisation of the inputs into the formation of subjectivity rather than a characterization of the process by which people forge consensus. For Habermas, in contrast, the "ideal speech situation" defines an idealized context within which people are capable of engaging in the creative process of producing commonality of beliefs. This is, fundamentally, a production model of beliefs, not a socialization or inculcation model, and in that way it is very distant from Parsons.

More profoundly, perhaps, the concept of the ideal speech situation is a way of doing an end run around the problem of moral experts pronouncing what should be the content of an authentic consensus of values and beliefs. The claim is that the only way really to discover the truth about any belief is for the discussion of beliefs to take place in a setting of free and open dialogue, without power and manipulation interfering in the process. This is the standard way that most people think about the social conditions for arriving at scientific truths; the best chance for the "truth winning out" is where there is an arena of scientific discussion where power, status and manipulation play no role, where the best argument wins. This is no guarantee of truth — mistakes happen for all sorts of reasons — but it offers the best social context for truth to emerge.

Kirby: In your essay on the transformation of the American class structure between 1960 and 1990 you compare the theories of proletarianisation and post-Fordism and broadly come out in favour of the post-Fordist position. In the "American jobs machine", howeve, you notice a greater polarization in job creation in recent years. Would you therefore still broadly support a post-Fordist view on the job market and economic structure?

Wright: It is true that in my recent work on the US employment expansion in the 1990s I observe a pattern of growing job polarization, and particularly of racialized polarization. Nevertheless, I also note that this polarization is weighted towards the expansion of fairly good, high paying jobs rather than lousy jobs. 50% of the job expansion in the 1990s occurred in the top three deciles of the employment structure. This does not correspond to the conventional image of pervasive degradation and deskilling of labor. What we have them is a combination of the post-Fordist image of rapidly expanding high end jobs along with a somewhat smaller expansion of poorly paid service employment at the very bottom of the employment structure.

Kirby: When we were discussing reference groups early on in our conversation you argued that "one can choose one's constraints". Does this not undermine the notion of structure?

Wright: I suppose the proper way to have made my earlier point would be to say that, "within broad constraints one can chose narrower constraints." I believe choices are real: we are not robots following scripts, and sometimes our choices matter quite a lot. One of the ways choices matter is in shaping some aspects of the constraints one faces for future choices. Knowing this — since humans are pretty smart — we can make choices in the present with the intention of affecting future choices, and thus we in a sense "choose our constraints." But even these choices — constraint-making choices — occur within a social context that defines obstacles and possibilities for action. "People make history but not just as they choose". "Making history" means creating constraints which operate in the future, not just the present; not just as they choose means that even this takes place under constraints. This doesn't undermine the notion of structure at all. It explains how structure works in a world of conscious agents.

Kirby: In your early work you made the distinction between structural capacities and organisational capacities. However you now seem to emphasise institutions and morals. Are structures and organisation still important or do you feel these are now less important than morality and institutions?

Wright: I don't really see any tension between my earlier work and my present work on this score. Indeed, one of my most recent papers was entirely about the problem of organizational capacities and its impact on class conflict (my essay "Working-class power, capitalist-class interests and class compromise," *American Journal of Sociology*, 104:4, January 2000, 57-102). The problem of structural and organizational capacities is pivotal for explaining the conditions of struggle and the empirical possibilities of particular kinds of social change. The normatively-driven analysis of institutions in the Real Utopias project helps to clarify the desirability and coherence of certain kinds of possible social changes. These are distinct kinds of analyses which complement rather than contradict each other.