

INTERVIEW

An interview with Erik Olin Wright: “When I Began My Work, My Fantasy Was That Marxism Would Once and for all Defeat Sociology...” (English Version)*



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—Your book “Envisioning Real Utopias” [Wright 2010] is coming out in May 2010, what about the second book, “American Society: How It Really Works” [Rogers, Wright 2010]? When can we expect it to be published?

—As for the first book, it is going to be published earlier than expected, probably in March, maybe April, but it will be earlier than May. So, early spring for “Envisioning Real Utopias”. The book “American Society” should be out in July 2010.

—In the interview you gave to Mark Kirby in 2001 you said that the aim of the “American Society” book is to make “a moral audit of American institutions” [Kirby 2001:6]. Now when you have finished this work do you think you achieved this goal? Why did you formulate the aim in this way? And how do you approach your book now?

—Of course, one always hopes to realize one’s goals. I do think the book is a kind of moral audit of American institutions. The “American Society” book is co-written with Joel Rogers who is a colleague in the Sociology department. Whether we succeeded in the sense of making a convincing moral evaluation of the current standing of American institutions, is of course for the reader to judge.

That book grew out of a course that the two of us have taught since the early 1990’s, called “Contemporary American Society”, and the book is called “American Society: How It Really Works”. The idea of the course was to look at American institutions in terms of central values

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which those institutions proclaim and then to evaluate institutions in terms of how well do they live up to their claims. American political institutions claim to be democratic, that's the simplest one. So the issue is, how democratic really is American democracy? And that means you have to clarify what we mean by democracy, as that word gets used in lots of ways. As everybody knows the old Stalinist constitution of 1936 looked very democratic on paper but of course the system wasn't. We have to define democracy as a value. What is the real point, what is the central underlying principle that people affirm when they say "I am in favor of democracy"?

Basically democracy is a value that says that people should govern themselves rather than be governed by an external power, whether that is elite or a king or whatever. Democracy is fundamentally a principle of self-governance "of the people, by the people, and for the people", to use the formulation by Abraham Lincoln. And then the questions are: do American institutions live up to that ideal? In what ways do they fail? And what would it take for them to live up to that ideal?

We base [Rogers, Wright 2010] book on four values which Americans affirm. These are all values which most Americans would say, "I believe in them". The four values are freedom, efficiency, fairness, and democracy. And then we examine the institutions of the economy, the society and the state to see if they do indeed realize these values.

—Speaking about these five values. As we went through the [Rogers, Wright 2010] book we had several questions, because initially efficiency and fairness are sort of contradictory to each other, as there are some tradeoffs arising from the desire to achieve both these goals. For example, in one of the chapters you wrote: "minimum wage [in the U.S.] is extremely low and provides almost no real protection for workers". So this statement is made in terms of fairness. Does it imply that you advocate an increase in minimum wages?

—Sure.

—Since it implies it, what can you oppose to economic arguments saying that increasing minimum wage negatively affects employment among less protected parts of the society and also generates poverty trap?

—I think both of those arguments are wrong. They are incorrect, because they have a false view about what it means to change a policy. Nobody on the left would say, "All we need to do is raise the minimum wage, and that is going to solve every problem". So I'm in favor of raising the minimum wage, increasing public employment, changing the way skills are formed by having better institutions of skill formation that are life-long, improving employment opportunities through community-based and cooperative systems of employment. I'm in favor of a lot of projects, a lot of programs. If you took simply one of them and say, what happens if you raise the minimum wage and you change nothing else, then of course there are going to be people who will be hurt by raising the minimum wage, but there's no a magic rule that says, "You can raise the minimum wage and do nothing else".

The egalitarian project requires multiple policies that complement each other and which reduce and in many cases completely eliminate the supposed tradeoffs. I don't think there is any tradeoff between raising the minimum wage, that is, preventing employers from paying people a wage that is insufficient to live at a decent level and also providing jobs for the disadvantaged. You can ban all such employment and nobody is going to be harmed by it. How do you do that? Well you ban that kind of employment and you create other employment. The other employment you create may have to be done by the state or by public subsidies of community initiatives. There is a variety of ways that employment can be raised other than simply allowing the market to generate jobs.

—Speaking about the modern American society, do you think the U.S. is moving towards a better society? Let's consider the recent health care debate. Taking into account the huge amount of the U.S. debt, do you

think this new health care system is reasonable at this moment in time? Would you advocate it in a better economic situation?

—The health care debate in the United States is another example like the minimum wage. Extending health care to every citizen in the U.S. need not increase the debt at all, unless you assume that you're not allowed to raise taxes.

At the same time, the United States has the highest levels of inequality of any capitalist country and the lowest rates of taxation. We have the lowest social aggregate rates of taxation of any developed country. The USA taxation is around 30% of GDP, in Sweden it's around 50% of GDP¹. Roughly speaking, there's about a 20% more tax rate that is tolerable and still be capitalist. Sweden is a well-functioning capitalist country. You may or may not like everything in Sweden, but nobody can claim that it isn't a feasible system. It works, right? So the U.S. could enormously increase taxation and pay for all this stuff.

What you cannot do is allow as much inequality, as much concentration of income at the top and solve these problems without debt. The fact that health care expansion will increase the debt is strictly a political question, not an economic question. It just has to do with the political power to block health increases and nothing else, that's the question. And that's because of the combination of ideology, the way the political system is organized, the fact that the public opinion does not get translated into policy. If you look at the distribution of public opinion on taxation, there is a majority of the population in favor of increasing taxes on the wealthy, but that does not get translated into democratic decisions because of the way the political system is organized.

—*And what do you think about trends in the US society in general?*

—Well, trends are a complicated matter, because one is tempted to project trends into the future and most predictions into the future are simple extrapolations of recent past. But we've just had a big break in trends because of the economic crisis. So I don't feel any confidence whatsoever about prediction.

In the recent past inequality has grown tremendously in the U.S., we've not been in a steady state; we've been having continual increase of inequality, poverty rates remained extremely high, the gap between rich and poor has grown tremendously.

One-quarter prisoners of the entire world are in the USA. We have the highest rate of imprisonment of any country, including authoritarian countries. There is a higher percentage of American citizens imprisoned in the United States than in Iran. We're the world leader on repression of our own citizens through imprisonment². And that's been increasing and therefore to say that we're moving towards a better society is pretty problematic.

Now, I do think that there are possibilities, i.e. health care. Debate may move things slightly towards a more equitable health care system³. But basically the political forces in the U.S. that are opposed to a more universal and egalitarian system are pretty powerful still. They have not been dislodged by the crisis. There

¹ 35,4% of GDP in Russia, for example. — *Hereinafter notes made by DK & GL.*

² The first book written by Erik Wright covered two issues: the internal operation of prisons in the U.S. and the political reality of prisons with respect to society at large. The book was contributed by prisoners, lawyers and former prison psychiatrist [Wright 1973]. All Wright's books are available on his personal web-site (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/selected-published-writings.htm>).

³ Health Reform was proved by the U.S Congress on March 21, 2010 with the 219-to-212 vote (Thirty-four Democrats joined Republicans in voting against the bill). Health Bill would allow 34 mln Americans to use health services by insurance companies. The U.S. Government is going to spend about \$940 bln on that in the next 10 years (read about debates on the reform here: <http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/5182/>).

is not a mass mobilization for equality and democracy in the USA. And therefore in terms of general expectations I am not very optimistic.

—*Let's talk about your current activity. You've finished two major projects this year. The books are the results. What are the other activities that you are currently involved in?*

—The big project, which I would call the umbrella under which I'm doing lots of particular things, is called the "*Real Utopias Project*". The book [Wright 2010] lays out foundations and general perspective of this project which has been going since the early 1990s. And there are several more specific projects that I'm pursuing under that umbrella.

This winter I will be doing a study of the social economy of a province in eastern Canada, Quebec⁴. I will be looking at a variety of institutions in the province of Quebec that support what could be called community or socially-based economic initiatives, economic activities that are not based in markets or in the state, but in community. I want to understand better what these kinds of initiatives are really like and how they work in Quebec.

I'm also involved in a project with some colleagues in Spain on Mondragon, the world's largest worker-owned industrial cooperative located in the Basque Country in Spain. It hasn't had a thorough study for 25 years or so. So we are doing a very detailed study of how Mondragon works and what the potentials are for worker-owned systems of production in a cooperativist model, where workers are both the sole owners of the firm and democratically govern the firm's policies. Mondragon is the best example: it's the most durable, largest scale worker cooperative, producing complex industrial products. Many people believe that cooperative firms are only possible on a small scale with simple products, while Mondragon produces complex products on an industrial scale⁵. That's also under the *Real Utopias* framework. Those are the two main things I'll be doing in the next year.

—*Let's talk about economic sociology at whole and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, especially. The first sentence of the description of the PhD program in Economic Sociology at the UW Madison says, it "is one of the hot developing areas in sociology"⁶. The description was last updated ten years ago. So, is economic sociology still hot? How has its role changed over the past ten years?*

—Economic sociology is still a dynamic area of sociology. Economic sociology has always had an internal tension between I would call "business school sociology", i.e. economic sociology oriented toward management, and economic sociology oriented towards political economy and the critique of markets. Economic sociology has these two faces: a critical face that questions the way economists *fetishize* the market as a kind of Karl Polanyi critique of the market and also a pragmatic face in which sociologists help business and management operate in more sociological sensible manner.

⁴ Quebec was settled by the French in the XVIIth century, ceded to the British in the mid-XVIIIth, and became the original province in the Dominion of Canada in 1867. It is second in terms of population in Canada with 7.7 million people. More than 95% of Quebecers are able to speak French (<http://www.quebecregion.com/en>).

⁵ Mondragon Corp. was established in 1956. At the moment there are 256 companies and bodies, which comprise the corporation, and 92'000 employees. Net profit of the corporation in 2008 was €71 million. "As a business association, Mondragon's activity is structured into four areas – Finance, Industry, Distribution and Knowledge – which function separately within a group strategy, coordinated by the Corporate Centre" (<http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/language/en-US/ENG/Frequently-asked-questions/Corporation.aspx>).

⁶ <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/econsoc.htm>.

Ten years ago I was more positive about the field of economic sociology in the U.S. feeling that its critical side had become dominant. Now it seems to me that its business school side suddenly has a lot of influence, but it is hard to tell whether it is dominant or not. At Wisconsin we try to maintain a balance between those two.

—*Did the program change since the beginning?*

—The term “program” is used very-very loosely here. The advertisement may make it seem like it has more coherence and a more systematic character than it actually has.

Most “programs” within the Wisconsin Sociology Department are really a loose collection of faculty who work on various themes and students interested in those themes. The Wisconsin economic sociology program is like that: it doesn’t have a fixed curriculum with a fully organized agenda. As a program I would say it has not developed a whole lot over the years. The faculty doesn’t have a faculty leader who takes this program as such as a central academic goal and works on it. Rather there are several faculty members all of whom are connected to it but in a very loosely coordinated manner. There are many excellent students who do interesting work and they receive good support from faculty, but the program itself doesn’t really have a dynamic direction of development.

—*Returning to the program description, “the Wisconsin program does not define its intellectual agenda as fundamentally opposed to Economics, but rather as a conversation with it”. So if economic sociology is to build additional bridges between economics and sociology, who are we to meet on the economic side? Who are the economists that make their research sociology-oriented?*

—There are two very different problems in the dialogue between sociologists and economists.

One is a problem of method. There are many economists who believe that unless you can make a set of equations of a certain mathematical form to represent your theory you are not engaged in serious work. These are methodological imperialists among economists who insist that mathematical modeling is the only way to do social science. Those sociologists who do mathematical models therefore can be in a dialogue with those kinds of economists. Many mathematical modeling economists do not have any patience for sociologists who do not do that kind of theoretical work – who are more institutionalist, more ethnographic, more statistical but not in a sense of mathematical modeling in econometrics. So the problem of dialogue then is that sociologists are continually ignored. There is no possibility of real dialogue for methodological extremists in economics.

The other problem is more substantive. This concerns the issue of how wedded economists are to the rational actor economic model of human agency as being the sufficient model for how people act as the basis for economic theories of markets and institutions. On that score there has been a very big change in economics both because of the growth of behavioral economics and because theoretical develops such as the concern with information imperfections within mainstream economics. Those kinds of innovations from all sorts of people, like Joseph Stiglitz⁷, have really opened the door for dialogue with sociology. These are all issues about which sociologists really do have something to say and at least some economists now understand that an exclusive reliance on mathematical models based on pure rationality is inconsistent with these ideas. You can model the rational actor with perfect information who is maximizing utility very easily. The norm-constrained, morally-ambivalent, cognitively-inconsistent actor is much tougher to model because of all the obvious reasons. But those are the kinds of actors that sociologists often talk about. Consequently, there are openings in economics for those economists who have also broken with the simple rational actor model.

⁷ Joseph Stiglitz is a University Professor at the Columbia University, a Nobel laureate in Economics in 2001.

When I say that economic sociology program at the UWisconsin is in dialogue with economists it's because people in economic sociology program on the sociology side all recognize that there is value in these rational actor models and in mathematical modeling. None of us is opposed to mathematical modeling or opposed to rational utility maximizing actor models. We just argue that neither of those is sufficient in order to understand how economies really work, and how struggle, change and obstacles to change actually work in real institutions.

—*Could you name a salient book or an article, written by economic sociologists over last five or ten years, which impressed you?*

—I am not a good person to ask for bibliographic references off the top of my head because I am very bad at keeping the running inventory of the best things I have read (*laughing*). I like works done by people like Charles Sabel, Jonathan Zeitlin, Joel Rogers and Wolfgang Streeck⁸. And I felt that I learned something important from these four authors.

—*In your autobiography you wrote that in the 1970s “Marxism really was the only game in town” [Wright 2005: 341]. Is it still the case, for you at least? How popular is Marxism now among sociologists in the USA?*

—There're relatively few sociologists who will declare that they are Marxists. That's different from the question is Marxism as a body of ideas popular or not.

Marxism as a body of ideas has been pretty much integrated into American sociology, so that Marxist ideas of various sorts are discussed all the time and in different areas. This is not so much in the sense of doctrines that people adhere to, but rather as one of the sources of ideas that need to be used to study particular problems.

American sociology has what might be called “a menu approach to ideas”. When you go to a restaurant, you have a menu, and you've got the fish course, and the vegetables, and the desserts and the appetizers and the soups. And in the menu of sociology there is the Durkheim page, there is the Weber page and there is the Marx page, and then there is Bourdieu page in the more recent additions. And on each of these pages there's a bunch of ideas: on the Marx page the big ideas that jump out are class, capitalism, exploitation, history. On the Durkheim page – norms, values, organic and mechanical solidarity. On the Weber page – rationalization, bureaucracy, authority, charisma. These different pages of the menu of sociology each come from different traditions.

American sociology as a discipline is in a sense committed to being eclectic. This is a kind of contradiction of terms – to be committed to being pluralistic, as opposed to committed to developing some big paradigm. It is like being committed to being uncommitted. I recently wrote a paper titled “*From Grand Paradigm Battles to Pragmatist Realism: Towards an Integrated Class Analysis*” [Wright 2009], and I think that's a way of thinking about the role of Marxism within sociology.

When I began my work I saw Marxism as doing battle with sociology, it was Marxism vs. sociology, a grand clash of these two ways of doing social science, in which my fantasy was that Marxism would once and for all defeat sociology and everybody would join the Marxist perspective.

⁸ Charles Sabel is a Professor of Law and Social Science at the Columbia Law School. His recent books are: [Dorf, Sabel 2006; Sabel 2006; Fung, O'Rourke, Sabel 2001]. Jonathan Zeitlin is a Professor of Public Affairs, Sociology, Political Science, and History at the University Wisconsin-Madison. His recent books are: [Sabel, Zeitlin 2010; Tolliday, Zeitlin 2010; Jones, Zeitlin 2009]. Joel Rogers is a Professor of Law, Political Science, and Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His recent books are: [Rogers, Wright 2010; Freeman, Rogers 2006]. Wolfgang Streeck is a Professor of Sociology, Faculty of Economics and Social Science at the University of Köln. His recent books are: [Streeck 2009; Crouch, Streeck 2006; Grote et. others 2006].

The new model is not Marxism vs. sociology, but Marxism in sociology, in which Marxism constitutes one of the most powerful and coherent bodies of ideas to engage a range of really important problems, but it is not a comprehensive paradigm of everything, it's not a grand theory of all things social. It is a theoretical attempt to give precision to a set of mechanisms that play a fundamental role for certain kinds of problems.

The way in which I describe myself as a Marxist sociologist is because the problems I work on are problems for which I think the best concepts and arguments and accounts of mechanisms available come from the Marxism tradition. I'm a Marxist sociologist because of the success of Marxism in providing us theoretical and empirical tools for studying certain kinds of things. If I was interested in certain other problems, I would probably not draw from the Marxist world because I would think that Marxism wouldn't be the best way of doing it.

—Returning to your metaphor, Marxism for you is the main course. When you're saying, this is the only game in town, what do you mean by that?

—Marxism may not be the only game in town any more, but it is still the best game if you're interested in the critique of domination, and exploitation and oppression, if the reason why you wanted to study society is because of the moral intolerability of poverty in the midst of plenty. I consider it a moral outrage that the United States, the richest country in the world, has 20% of its children living in poverty. To me that is morally intolerable. Poverty in the midst of plenty is intolerable. Poverty in the midst of a world of low productivity and destitution isn't, it's just sad. But poverty in the U.S. is intolerable.

And my feeling is, if you really want to study poverty in the midst of plenty, unnecessary social suffering, the harms that our society imposes on people, Marxism provides the best theoretical and empirical and methodological tools for doing so.

When I said it's the only game in town, what I meant when I was young was that this is where all the action was. Marxism was where the heavy hitters were playing. That's not so true now; there is a broader terrain of critical thinking and morally driven critical sociology that draws from feminism as well as Marxism, from ecological critical theories and other intellectual currents. The intellectual menu for critical sociology is not as exclusively Marxist as it once was. But still it's the case I think that for those sociologists who are challenging the systems of power and inequality, Marxism is an indispensable source of ideas.

—If we compare your students today and 20 years ago, are there left view advocates among them, how many? Has this number increased or decreased over this period?

—Let's talk about my PhD students. I'm in close connection with PhD students in the department and less so with undergraduates. If anything the left is stronger now than 20 years ago, it's more or less the same as it was 30 years ago. In the last couple of years we have had a very strong group of left-oriented critical graduate students.

I teach a core graduate course called "*Class, State and Ideology*", which is about the Marxist tradition of social theory. In this 2009/2010 year's class there are about 25 graduate students, and half of them are from the first year cohort in the sociology department, which means that almost half of the incoming students, not quite, 40% of the students in the Sociology Department in their first year are taking my course on Marxist sociology. That shows a pretty high frequency of students interested in this kind of stuff. They would not mostly say they were Marxists, but they do see themselves as left critical.

The label "Marxist" has a purely historical meaning. What does it mean to say "I'm a Marxist"? Well, in certain historical times for a person to say "I'm a Marxist" meant "I'm affiliated with the Communist movement." In other times and places it doesn't mean that. To say "I'm a Marxist" now does not mean

that “I’m a Communist”. Marxism and communism are two separate, although historically connected, bodies of ideas; communist parties have a particular strategic vision, not simply a theoretical critique of the existing world.

I gave a lecture in Poland in 1986 “*Marxist Class Analysis and the Problem of the Middle Class*”, and when I was done a Polish sociologist stood up and said that he found my arguments extremely interesting, but said he didn’t see that had anything to do with Marxism. So even though I talked about exploitation and capitalism and domination, what I had to say wasn’t Marxist because it wasn’t Polish communist. What counts as Marxist changes historically by context.

For young scholars today there is no context for Marxism. There is no political movement that defines their anti-capitalism as Marxist. Most young scholars, who are attracted to the ideas of Marxism, just see Marxism as a really interesting body of ideas rather than as an identity.

—*In the same year you also visited Soviet Union. You gave a talk in the Institute of Sociology in Moscow. What was your impression of this trip? Did your opinion about Soviet system change after it? How did you understand the Soviet state before the trip and after it?*

—The trip didn’t really change my views. I was always very critical of the Soviet Union and was never close to communist parties. I always considered the Soviet Union to be an example of something other than socialism.

In my own theoretical work on the topic I distinguish between *socialism* and *statism* as forms of economic organization. I work with a model with three economic structures: capitalist, socialist and statist. I wrote a piece called “*Taking the Social in “Socialism” Seriously*”⁹, arguing that statist economies were not socialist; in fact, they were quite anti-socialist in the sense that they did not take the problem of the social seriously; they weren’t interested in empowering people to control the economy and the state. They saw the economy as an object of state control, not the state as an object of social control. In any case I was very critical of the authoritarian and bureaucratic structure of those societies both in terms of their economic structure and in terms of their political structure. That was more or less confirmed by my experiences at the Academy.

I was also struck by the character of public discussions in the academy at that time, which was early *perestroika*, before things really opened up – how unserious intellectual discussions were. People were not interested in ideas. When I would have technical discussions with people around a survey we were developing, that was fine, they were prepared to have a serious discussion about technical issues; but as soon as I would discuss real ideas, they just weren’t interested in talking about it.

Michael Burawoy wrote a little piece about our trip called “*Bringing Marxism back to Moscow*”. In the piece he wrote about a talk I gave about why Marxism was useful for understanding various kinds of problems and how I constructed Marxism in a particular way. He described how nobody at the talk wanted to discuss anything whatsoever. At that lecture there was no discussion, no questions at all¹⁰.

⁹ Paper presented at the annual meetings of the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE) in July 2004. (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Socialism.pdf>).

¹⁰ “I recall the consternation and tension that greeted myself and Erik Wright – two Western Marxists – in 1986, when we came to the Institute of Sociology in Moscow to collaborate on a comparative survey of social structures in the US and USSR. [...] From the beginning, Vilen Ivanov, head of the Institute at the time, was skeptical about the possibilities of collaboration. He was right. It was hampered by all sorts of restrictions, from the formulation and content of questions to conceptualization, and the ownership of the data. The attempted execution of the project revealed far more about the divergence of the two societies than could the results of any survey. I remember so well all the fascinating translation problems, not least that of social structure itself, which meant something very different in the lexicon of the Western Marxist than it did in the language of official Soviet

—*Being a senior student at Harvard you had the “Chess Game” movie shot¹¹. Somehow it reminds of the 1917 Revolution in Russia, when the poor break the system but don’t change the rules. Do you understand the Russian Revolution in the same way or do you believe the Bolsheviks actually wanted to change the rules of the game?*

—When you use the word “wanted to”, you’re asking what the motives of the people were. The motives were mixed, the Revolution involved hundreds of thousands people, tens of thousands of activists, hundreds of leaders, and the motives were incredibly mixed: many people had very lofty morally driven emancipatory ideals; I don’t think that was all phony. They had pragmatic considerations and they had fears. Some were driven by lusts for power, others were driven by hatred of the old regime. There was a general model of social change operating at the time which people really believed in, which was that the most difficult problem was destroying the old regime, not building a new one. So there was an illusion that the main task was one of destruction. That was the big problem.

Once you destroy the old regime, the image was that you liberated forces for creative construction of a new possibility. That was the metaphor that the Marxist tradition had cultivated: unfettering new possibilities by destroying the constraints.

I think Lenin had genuine illusions about that. Partially, this illusion depended upon a historical diagnosis that revolutions would occur in the West as well. So there was a belief that a revolution in Russia would spark a world-wide revolution. The West was in this horrible WWI and if Russia had a revolution and pulled out of the war the expectations was the kinds of insurrections that one did see in the West – which were very short lived – would have been explosive and you would have had a European-wide revolution.

Well, maybe if that had happened, who knows what the possibilities would have been. There were these brief moments of possibility but, basically, the flaw from a strategic point of view was the idea that the main task was to destroy the old structures of power, and that the task of constructing new social order based on new principles of power would be relatively easy compared to the task of demolishing the old regime, and could be done on a kind of *ad hoc* experimental manner.

The slogan “All power to the Soviets” was a very democratic slogan, because the soviets were workers councils of ordinary people engaged in solving problems. If “All power to the Soviets” had really been instituted, it would have meant “All power to the people experiments”, to the pragmatic people’s experiments from below. Of course, that just wasn’t possible, that’s a fantasy in the conditions of the Russian Civil war and the Revolution. Given the nature of opposition, the difficulty of changing habits and creating a new equilibrium of institutional forces, it’s a fantasy that you can create a democratic experimentalist system of popular power in a kind of casual spontaneous way. It’s the same illusion that anarchists have, I think, about social change. This is not a very accurate historical claim, but when one might want to say that Lenin had a kind of anarchist view of the creative possibilities of the explosive moment, and then his pragmatic view was the Party should control everything from the top down because that’s the way of preventing everything from falling apart.

So what happens is this, you gain power through violence and through centralized authority. You inevitably are going face disagreements and opposition, and how do you deal with that? You can deal with

Marxism. For Wright, class was a critical concept that could be turned against the social structure of the Soviet Union, where, he argued, “organizational exploitation” prevailed, as much as against the social structure of the United States, where he talked of “labor exploitation.” This new-fangled scientific Western Marxism was the enemy of Soviet Marxism, as we learned when a public discussion of his ideas at the Institute was suddenly and arbitrarily cut off in midstream” [Burawoy 2009: 198-199].

¹¹ “The Chess Game” by Erik Wright Shot on 16mm in 1967 at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEPRP75UpY>).

that in a democratic and an open and deliberative manner, but only if everybody is prepared to play by those rules. When so many people are prepared to play by other rules, namely rules of violence and force as a way of getting their way, then every opposition seems like a potential threat. There's so little trust that people are actually going to play by democratic rules that it becomes very hard to avoid the temptation of repressing opposition, repressing deviation, labeling differences deviation rather than just as creative disagreement. The authoritarian outcome of the Russian Revolution was probably inevitable given the historical circumstances of its creation and the dilemmas it faced in its reproduction. But the result was that out of a Revolution, which had a very wide range of models including emancipatory democratic models, out of that historical moment came a system which was a system of domination and not a system of emancipation.

—Now we would like to ask you about your annual meetings with scholars, who holding the same views. Does the September or No-Bullshit Marxism Group (NBSMG) exist today? Could you please explain the initial idea behind these meetings? When did you last take part in that meeting and what topics were discussed?

—The last meeting was in September 2009. It represents the 30th Anniversary of the first meeting, started in 1979. These meetings initially began at the initiative of Gerald Cohen¹² to discuss some of the themes of his book, *"Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense"* [Cohen 1978]. There was no intention at the start to create an annual event.

A first meeting was held in London with some 30 people and was so interesting that some of the participants decided to hold another meeting the following year. That meeting was much smaller and even more productive, so a third meeting was scheduled for 1981. That was the first meeting I was invited to as a result of a review I had published in *New Left Review* on the Cohen book [Levine, Wright 1980]. By then the group had consolidated to a ten or so people, and has met more or less every year since then, with a few people leaving and a few new members joining. Jerry Cohen died in August 2009, which is a tremendous loss, but for the moment the group intends to continue.

For the first decade of the group we discussed almost exclusively hard core Marxist themes. The idea was to interrogate all of the core Marxist concepts and see how they could be made coherent and robust. A lot of attention was given to exploitation and class and the theory of history. Gradually since then the themes have broadened to a wide range of philosophical, economic and sociological problems linked mainly to egalitarianism, democracy and social justice.

Here are some of the things we discussed at the September 2009 meeting. One long three hour discussion revolved around the ways in which new information technologies it promote peer-to-peer collaborative network organization that contradicts private property rights, copyright, patents and exclusive hierarchical control over information. The question was, does the modern production of information contradict capitalism or not? And in what ways it might be subversive of capitalism? That is not exactly a standard Marxist question, but clearly has an affinity to Marxist concerns.

We had also a discussion about the role of moral norms in markets and whether or not market liberalism in a classical sense depended upon non-liberal institutions to provide its moral foundations. The title of the paper was *"Is Liberalism Parasitic on Tradition?"* Liberalism requires traditions in order for its function.

¹² Gerald "Jerry" Cohen was the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at the University of Oxford. "He was best known as a leading contributor to the analytical Marxism movement of the 1980s. But when he finally acknowledged that the Marxist project was beyond rescue, he spent the rest of his career defending the egalitarian morality that he always thought was the heart of Marx's criticisms of the unjust, arbitrary and irrational capitalist system" (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6790514.ece>).

—*And the last very personal question. Being a 23-year-old graduating student at Oxford you formulated the principle “to contribute to Marxism rather than simply using Marxism” [Wright 2005: 327]. What do you consider to be your main contribution to it at this moment?*

—I would hope that my main contribution is towards the development what I now call “emancipatory social science” of which the Marxists tradition provides one of the essential elements. But it is a broader project.

The first chapter of my book [Wright 2010] attempts to define what I mean by emancipatory social science. So, my hope is that my work has contributed to creating legitimate role for emancipatory social science within the academy, and provided foundations for emancipatory social science that makes it actually both more emancipatory and more social sciencey. *The Real Utopias* project is the main way in which I advance that agenda now. Earlier I mostly worked on class analysis [Wright 1978; Wright 1979; Wright 1985; Wright 1990; Wright 1997] but now on the institutional problem of envisioning the real utopias.

Interview made by Dmitry Krylov and Georgy Loginov

Madison, December 07, 2009

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