

Analytic Marxism and Real Utopias

An interview with Erik Olin Wright

Nicolas DUVOUX

Erik Olin Wright is a prominent American sociologist and the last president of the American Sociological Association. In this interview, E. O. Wright explains the nature of “analytic Marxism”, which renewed the study of Marxism in the late 1970s and 1980s, and comes back on a more recent project called “ Envisioning Real Utopias”, which focuses on institutions that prefigure radical emancipatory alternatives to existing social structures.

Analytic Marxism

Books and Ideas: Your work is usually labeled as being prominent within the field of “analytic Marxism”. In what sense is “analytic Marxism” different from European Marxism? What do you keep from Marx and how do you apply its lessons to current work in social sciences?

Erik Olin Wright: Let me begin with a brief prefatory comment on the word “Marxism”. I think that it is in some ways unfortunate that an intellectual tradition is named after a person, for this seems to accord some special authoritative status to the texts written by this person and suggests that the ideas grounded in these texts constitute a doctrine. The only people who call evolutionary biology “Darwinism” are creationists who deny the scientific status of evolutionary theory. Few evolutionary biologists study carefully the texts of Darwin as a source of insight, and they never would cite a passage as proof of the scientific soundness of an argument. Calling the tradition of social scientific theory and research begun by Marx “Marxism” encourages Marxology – the study of Marx’s texts and their “correct” interpretation – or, even worse, Marxolatry – the reverence towards Marx’s texts, citing them much as one would a sacred text in religious debates.

Of course, it is completely understandable why these ideas did get subsumed under the rubric “Marxism”, for they have functioned as the animating core of political ideologies and not just as a framework for social scientific analysis. As revolutionary ideology Marxism becomes a doctrine whose purpose is as much to motivate people to action as it is to critically investigate the world. While understandable, this double function of Marxism – as an animating ideology and as a scientific framework – is fraught with internal tensions because of the contradictory cognitive demands of these functions. For these reasons I generally prefer to speak of the Marxist Tradition rather than Marxism as the location of my theoretical and empirical research program.

“Analytical Marxism” is a particular approach to reconstructing the central elements of the Marxist tradition that emerged in the late 1970s and had its most vibrant period of theoretical

development in the 1980s. It grew out of a belief that Marxism continued to constitute a productive intellectual tradition within which to ask questions and formulate answers, but that this tradition was frequently burdened with a range of methodological and metatheoretical commitments that seriously undermined its explanatory potential. The motivation for trying to rid Marxism of this burden was the conviction that the core ideas of Marxism, embodied in concepts like class, exploitation, the theory of history, capitalism, socialism, and so on, remained essential for any emancipatory political project. The central elements on this approach are a commitment to conventional scientific norms, an emphasis on the importance of systematic clarification of concepts, a concern with very fine-grained specification of the steps in theoretical arguments, and a concern with linking micro-analysis of individuals and their motivations to macro problems.

In terms of my own research, I have mainly played out this orientation in two contexts: the study of class and the vexing problem of alternatives to capitalism. Let me say a little about the first of these here; I will have much to say about alternatives to capitalism when we discuss real utopias. The central problem I addressed in my work on class was this: Marxist analyses of class structures in capitalism had a coherent abstract concept of the polarized class relation between capitalists and workers within the capitalist mode of production. For some purposes this is fine, but for many empirical questions of importance, this simple, two-class model of capitalism seemed woefully inadequate. In particular, the kinds of economic positions vaguely called “middle class” in popular discourse did not seem to have a coherent place within the Marxist analytical scheme. Of course, the very term “middle” in middle class is suspect within a Marxian theoretical framework, since it suggests class structures are ladders with rungs arrayed from lower class to upper class with middle in between. What could “middle” possibly mean within the strongly relational understanding of class within Marxism? On the one hand this seemed like a terminological problem – what is the proper way of labeling positions like professors, managers, engineers, computer programmers, doctors, nurses, etc. But more significantly the issue was how to locate these kinds of jobs or positions within the class relations of capitalism. Simply calling them “middle” just wouldn’t do.

My strategy for grappling with this problem was both empirical and theoretical. I felt the most productive way to approach the theoretical issues was to do so while engaging in systematic, comparative empirical research on class structure, class biography and class consciousness in advanced capitalist societies. The empirical work would continually provoke problems for whatever theoretical solutions I proposed; the theoretical solutions would continually raise new questions to examine in the empirical work.

With this as the context, I work intensively on these issues in class analysis from the mid-1970s until the early 1990s. The empirical basis of the research was a set of large, national questionnaire surveys on class and its consequences, eventually conducted in over a dozen countries. The central theoretical idea, which I developed in a variety of different ways during this period, was to see the commonly called “middle class” as occupying what I termed “contradictory locations within class relations.” Basically, in one way or another, I characterized such positions as being simultaneously in more than one class. Instead of seeing every position in the class structure occupied by a person as in one and only one location within class relations, some positions in a sense straddled class relations, in some respects having the relational characteristics of capitalists and in other respects of workers. I then extended this idea of relational complexity of class locations to include the ways people were connected to class relations through their families and social networks (which I referred to as mediated locations within class relations) and through the dynamics of careers (which I referred to as temporal

class locations)¹.

Books and Ideas: Could you describe in a few words how you see the state of class relations in the US?

Erik Olin Wright: There has been a great deal of discussion in the United States about the vast increase in inequality of both income and wealth in recent years. This increase in inequality is captured in the slogan of the Occupy Wall Street movement, “We are the 99%”. This slogan, of course, does not directly map on to an analysis of class relations; it is a description of the income and wealth inequality associated with class relations. But it suggested a class structure in which the polarization of interests has become more extreme.

Another feature of contemporary discussion of these themes in the US is the continual reference to the power of corporations rather than of the capitalist class. This issue – the power of corporations – has become especially salient because of a recent Supreme Court ruling (the notorious “Citizens United” case) in which corporations were ruled to be “persons” with full rights of free speech, which included the right to spend as much money as one wants for political purposes. This opened the door for unlimited corporate spending in political campaigns.

Both of these phenomena – increasing inequality and corporate power – reflect changes in class relations in complex ways. Generally, however, the explicit connection to class in the Marxian sense is not drawn out. “Corporations”, after all, are not persons and thus they do not make choices about spending money on political campaigns; the CEOs of corporations in collaboration with other top executives and members of the boards of directors make such decisions. Both increasing inequality and new political uses of corporate power can be thought of as reflecting changes in class relations in the United States, and the task then is to understand the character of these changes, how they generate these consequences, and what might be done about it.

This is a big topic, needless to say. For interested people, I have a forthcoming paper in the journal *Transform !*, “Class Struggle and Class Compromise in the Era of Stagnation and Crisis”, which explores some of these issues. (The pre-publication paper is available on line [here](#)). Without presenting the arguments and analysis in any detail, here are the central conclusions:

The quarter century after the end of WWII in the United States was broadly a period of what can be called “positive class compromise” in which a relatively well-organized working class was able to coordinate some of its core interests with the interests of leading sectors of the capitalist class. Underlying this positive class compromise was a particular pattern of capital accumulation and political conditions which meant that capitalists received some positive gains because of the collective class power of workers. This may seem counter-intuitive at first glance: how does the organized power of workers help capitalists? The reason is that there are certain kinds of problems, such as creating adequate aggregate demand in an economy or providing high levels of skill formation among workers or even facilitating rapid technological change at the point of production which are facilitated when workers are well organized rather than disorganized.

Since the early 1970s and accelerating from the 1980s, this positive class compromise has deteriorated. Three interconnected factors have contributed to this deterioration: 1. The financialization

¹Details of these arguments, along with a discussion of the weaknesses in my approach, can be found in the last major work I published from this project, *Class Counts: comparative studies in class analysis*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

of the economy – the shift of profit-making opportunities from the real economy to finance; 2. Globalization –the shift of the geographic locus of accumulation for the leading U.S. capitalists from the domestic economy to the world economy, especially the move of manufacturing to developing countries. The interaction of financialization and globalization – the elimination of cross-border capital controls and the rapid speculative movement of capital globally – has intensified the consequences of both dynamics taken separately. 3. Neoliberalism – an incoherent cluster of ideological elements concerning the relationship between state and economy, but which has at its core the erosion of the state’s responsibility for providing public goods.

By the early XXIst century, these forces largely destroyed the foundations for positive class compromise. In the most obvious way this has created a class structure with more polarized interests, more asymmetrical power relations, and less room for collaboration. The wealthiest segments of the capitalist class no longer in general have any special stakes in the accumulation process within the United States and thus no particular interest in solving the specific problems of American domestic capitalism. Politically, the high income and wealth inequality that has resulted from these trends means that there is a broader segment of the population, not just rich capitalists as such, who can purchase high quality private substitutes for many public goods, and therefore also do not have strong interests in improving domestic conditions.

The result of these developments for the working class and the “middle class” (wage earners who occupy “contradictory locations within class relations”, or to put it with less jargon, whose conditions of employment within capitalist relations give them various kinds of privileges in terms of income, security, autonomy and power) has been a general stagnation of earnings in spite of rapid increases in productivity, and a widening experience of insecurity and vulnerability. In particular, the sense of vulnerability to unpredictable changes in economic conditions now extends well into the professional and technical ranks of the “middle class”.

Envisioning Real Utopias

Books and Ideas: For several years, you have been leading a project called “Envisioning Real Utopias” that gathered a lot of academic and political resources within a common frame. Could you tell us how this project emerged and what its intellectual and institutional roots were at the beginning?

Erik Olin Wright: The problem of thinking about broad visions of radical alternatives to existing structures was one of the things that brought me to sociology from the start. During the first part of my career, however, the central focus of my work was on the task of reconstructing Marxism as a theoretical framework for understanding the problem of emancipatory social transformation, especially around the problem of class.

It was only in the early 1990s that I turned to the problem of alternatives to capitalism as a central focus of my academic work. The context was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of its model of an authoritarian statist economy (typically referred to as “socialism”). This was an historic moment in which anticapitalist intellectuals felt an urgency in thinking about new possibilities, new models, new visions. Those of us who saw ourselves as democratic socialists generally saw the Soviet Union as a tremendous liability, since the popular identification of the idea of socialism with the Soviet Union discredited the very idea of socialism as a desirable alternative to capitalism. The end of the Soviet Union therefore was felt as an ideological liberation, making possible a more free-wheeling

expansive exploration of alternatives. The Real Utopias Project began in 1992 as a way of carrying out this agenda.

The term “real utopia” is meant to be a self-contradictory expression, but this is not in the spirit of linguistic provocation, but as a way of capturing the inherent tension between our moral aspirations for a world free of oppression and the practical difficulties we face in actualizing those aspirations because of the brutal constraints of social reality. I am especially interested in distinguishing two kinds of real constraints we face, which I refer to as limits of achievability and limits of viability. The former refer to what we can actually accomplish in practice in the world today because of the reality of political forces, balances of power, ideological confusions, and all the other things that impact on our practical struggles for change. The latter refer to the limits of possibility on what kinds of institutions would be viable, stable, and sustainable if they existed. I like to speak of the “snap your fingers” test: these are institutions which, if you could get there by snapping your fingers, you could stay there. This means that they do not generate perverse side effects and unintended consequences which would destroy their own conditions of possibilities. “Real Utopias” occupy the zone between the limits of achievability and the limits of viability. They are real because they would work if we could get there; they are utopian because they embody emancipatory ideals.

With this idea in mind, the big problem for academic work is to know how to study such possibilities. I have adopted two kinds of strategies – exploring theoretical models of institutional alternatives and looking for empirical cases that prefigure, in one way or another, emancipatory ideals. Examples of the former would include discussions of market socialism and unconditional basic income. A full, unconditional basic income has never been implemented, but there are many very interesting theoretical discussions of its possibility and consequences, including some analyses that construct formal models of market economies with an unconditional basic income. Examples of the latter include empirical studies of participatory budgeting, worker cooperatives, and the social economy. I will mention more examples of empirical cases in my answer to your fourth question below.

The Moral Principles of Real Utopias

Books and Ideas: As a social scientist, what are the moral foundations on which you rely to think in a normative way?

Erik Olin Wright: Moral principles play two critical roles in my approach to sociology in general and real utopias in particular: First, they provide the critical standards for the diagnosis and critique of existing institutions. And second, they provide the core criteria for exploring alternatives, both in terms of theoretical models and empirical cases.

Four moral principles have underwritten my approach to thinking about Real Utopias: equality, democracy, community, and sustainability. The first three of these have a strong resonance with classic ideas of human emancipation. The slogan of the French Revolution – *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* – is intimately connected to democracy, equality and community. The fourth has become a much more pressing issue because of the looming environmental crisis, especially around global warming. Let me briefly discuss each of these values²:

² I will draw, in my exposition here, from the text of a forthcoming paper in *American Sociological Review*, “Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias”, to be published February, 2013

Equality

In a socially just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the social and material conditions necessary for living a flourishing life. Four ideas are critical in this formulation. First, the ultimate good affirmed in the principle is human flourishing. This refers to the various ways in which people are able to develop their talents and capacities, to realize their potentials as human beings. The concept does not privilege one kind of capacity over another. These capacities are intellectual, physical, artistic, spiritual, social, and moral. A flourishing human life is one in which these talents and capacities develop.

Second, the egalitarian ideal in the principle is captured by the idea of equal access, not just equal opportunity. Equal opportunity is also, of course, desirable, but as a moral ideal it is consistent with a very punitive view towards people who fail to take advantage of opportunities. As long as people have “starting gate” equal opportunity, there is nothing unjust about their later deprivations if they blow their opportunities as young adults. This reflects a sociologically impoverished view of the life course, of how motivations are formed and disrupted at different stages of life, and a completely unrealistic sociological and psychological account of the degree of “responsibility” for the consequences of one’s actions that can be appropriately assigned to persons. Equal access implies a more compassionate view of the human condition than simple equal opportunity, but also a more demanding principle of justice: people, in an on-going way throughout their lives, should have access to the conditions to live a flourishing life. Third, the egalitarian principle of social justice refers to both material and social conditions necessary to flourish, not just material conditions. This means that issues of social stigma and social exclusion are issues of social justice along with the more conventional concerns with access to material resources. Finally, the principle of equality as stated above refers to all persons. This means that in a fully just world all persons regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, ethnicity, religion, nationality, citizenship status, or geographical location would have broadly equal access to the material and social conditions necessary to live a flourishing life.

Democracy

In a fully democratic society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things which affect their lives.

The value that underlies democracy is the value of self-determination, of people being in control of their lives rather than having their lives controlled by others. This includes both the freedom of individuals to make choices that affect their own lives as separate persons, and their capacity to participate in collective decisions which affect their lives as members of a broader community. When the democratic value is defined this way, then the idea of individual freedom and the idea democracy basically share the same core value. This is why *liberté* in the French Revolution is so intimately linked to democracy as a core value of social emancipation.

Community

Community embodies the core idea of solidarity and reciprocity in which our interactions with others are guided by our desires to support and help each other rather than simply to advance our own self-interest.

The ideal of community is not an indictment of self-interest as such, but rather an affirmation of the importance of self-interest being bounded by reciprocity and solidarity. Community understood in this way is both instrumentally important for the realization of other values – equality and democracy are more realizable and stable under conditions of strong and widespread solidarity – and intrinsically

valuable for human flourishing. As a value community does not refer only to the interpersonally dense reciprocities of local settings, but to any social arena of interaction and interdependency. Just as egalitarian notions of justice extend, in principle, globally, so does the value of community. The value of community has a particularly complex relationship to ideals of social emancipation and human flourishing, because in many social contexts, reciprocity and solidarity also act as exclusionary mechanisms that generate sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Community that is anchored in exclusionary identities thus simultaneously expresses the value of reciprocity and violates the value of equality as defined above.

Sustainability

Future generations should have access to the social and material conditions to live flourishing lives at least at the same level as the present generation.

This way of understanding environmental sustainability is closely connected to the equality principle of social justice. Equality is a social justice principle among the people in the world today. Sustainability is a justice principle for people in the future.

Books and Ideas: How does the current situation appear in the light of these moral foundations?

Erik Olin Wright: Let me first answer this question for capitalism in general, and then turn to the present moment. Capitalism in general imposes severe limitations on the fullest possible realization of all of these values. This does not imply that capitalism is completely antithetical to these values, but rather that it limits their fullest realization:

Equality

Capitalism has promoted a massive growth in human productivity and the material conditions for human flourishing, but it also inherently generates high levels of inequality in access to these conditions and thus perpetuates eliminable deficits in human flourishing. The issue is not simply unequal opportunity for children, but unequal access to the conditions to live a flourishing life throughout the life course as a result of insufficient income to live at a culturally-defined dignified level and the unequal vulnerability to life-risks connected to capitalist labor markets. These material injustices of capitalism are intrinsic to the ordinary functioning of capitalist economies; they are not simply the result of crises or special economic conditions. This does not imply that the only solution is necessarily to get rid of capitalism. It might be possible to significantly mitigate this form of injustice through mechanisms that would at least partially counteract the unjust inequalities of capitalism and still leave capitalism the dominant structure of the economy. The experiences of a few northern European capitalist countries indicate that significant mitigation of capitalism-generated inequality is possible. Still, even in these cases it is important to recognize that this mitigation is the result of developing non-capitalist institutions capable of counteracting the effects of capitalist processes, and as a result their economic systems have become less purely capitalist.

Democracy

Capitalism generates severe deficits in realizing democratic values for three reasons: by excluding crucial decisions from public deliberation, by allowing private wealth to affect access to political power, and by allowing workplace dictatorships. The first of these is intrinsic to the very concept of private property in the means of production. The word “private” in private property means that the owners have the right to exclude other people from most decisions about the use that property, particularly decisions to invest and disinvest which potentially have massive effects on the lives of

people excluded from participation in the decisions. Capitalism also contradicts the full realization of democracy by allowing private wealth to affect access to political power. This is true everywhere; no capitalist democracy is able to insulate political decision-making from the exercise of power connected to capitalist wealth. And finally, capitalism allows work-place dictatorships, depriving employees of rights of participation in decisions which affect their lives in important ways.

Community

Capitalist competition is inherently corrosive of the value of community by placing the singled-minded pursuit of self-interest at the center of economic life. As G.A. Cohen has put, capitalism fosters interactions between people based on greed and fear – greed for self-advancement; fear of the competition from others. Of course reciprocity and solidarity continue to exist, since capitalism is not the only determinant of social interactions within capitalist societies, but the core mechanisms of capitalism reinforce values inimical to community.

Sustainability

Capitalism inherently threatens the quality of the environment for future generations because of the ways it fosters consumerism and imperatives for endless growth in material production. The world is finite; endless growth in material consumption is simply not compatible with the long-term sustainability of the environment. This does not mean that prosperity as such is incompatible with the environment, but simply that prosperity dependent on a dynamic of endless growth is incompatible with environmental sustainability.

These are generic ways in which capitalism imposes limits on the realization of the four core moral principles. In the current situation, the dynamics of capitalism have exacerbated all of these problems. As already mentioned, globalization and financialization and their interaction have dramatically increased inequality in access to the material conditions of human flourishing in many parts of the world. Democracy has been eroded by increasing concentrations of wealth. In the United States democracy has been further weakened by changes in the rules of the game which enable wealth to even more directly influence politics and by the relentless assault on the labor movement. Community has been eroded by the ways in which increasing inequality destroys of the idea that “we are all in this together”, and by the punitive forms of austerity that intensify the sense of zero-sum competition over public goods and social welfare. And finally, the value of sustainability is farther than ever from realization because of the complete unwillingness of most capitalist countries, especially the United States, to take it seriously and come to terms with the problem of constraining capitalist consumerism and rethinking the patterns of economic growth as a necessary condition for countering global warming.

Radical Emancipatory Alternatives

Books and Ideas: What alternatives do you have in mind when you envision real utopias?

Erik Olin Wright: The idea of real utopias mainly focuses on institutions that in one way or another prefigure more radical emancipatory alternatives to existing institutions and social structures. Sometimes these are created in contexts of political struggles, other times they emerge quietly, without sharp confrontations. Sometimes they are in deep tension with dominant institutions; other times they occupy niches in the socioeconomic ecosystem, in ways which make them nonthreatening. Below are some examples, drawn from my forthcoming paper “Transforming Capitalism through real utopias”:

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a transformation of the way urban budgets are created. Instead of city budgets being created by technical experts working with politicians, the budget is created by ordinary citizens meeting in popular assemblies and voting on budget alternatives. In the model of PB initiated in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in the early 1990s by the Brazilian Workers Party, neighborhood assemblies throughout the city are empowered to debate budgetary priorities, to propose specific kinds of budgetary projects and then to choose delegates to a citywide budget council who bring all of the proposals from the different neighborhood assemblies together and reconcile them into a coherent city budget. This basic model has spread to many other cities in Latin America and elsewhere, most recently in a novel form to some city council districts in Chicago and New York. The result is a budget much more closely reflecting the democratic ideal of equal access of citizens to participate meaningfully in the exercise of power.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is an example of something that no one would have thought possible until it happened: Several hundred thousand people around the world actively cooperate without pay to write and edit what has become the world's largest encyclopedia (over 4 million English language entries in 2012, and at least some version of Wikipedia in over 100 languages). It is made available without charge to anyone in the world who has access to the internet. The quality is in places uneven, but overall quite high. Wikipedia is the best known example of a more general model of non-hierarchical cooperative economic activity: peer-to-peer distributed production with open source property rights.

Public libraries

“To each according to need” is part of a familiar distributional principle associated with Karl Marx. You go into a library and check out the books you need. You go to a bookstore, go to the shelf, find the book you need, open it up, see that it is too expensive and put it back. Public libraries are fundamentally anti-capitalist institutions that allocate resources on the basis of need and ration them by waiting lists. Some libraries lend much more than books: music, videos, art work, even tools. They often provide public space for meetings. They increase equality in access to the material conditions to live a flourishing life.

Worker-owned cooperatives

Perhaps the oldest vision for an emancipatory alternative to capitalism is the worker-owned firm. Capitalism began by dispossessing workers of their means of production and then employing them as wage-laborers in capitalist firms. The most straightforward undoing of that dispossession is its reversal through worker-owned firms. In most times and places, however, worker cooperatives are quite marginal within market economies, occupying small niches rather than the core of the economic system. One striking exception is the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in the Basque region of Spain, a conglomerate of over 100 separate worker cooperatives that produce a wide range of goods and services including high-end refrigerators, auto parts, bicycles, industrial robots and much more. The cooperatives in the conglomerate have weathered the severe Spanish economic crisis much better than conventional capitalist firms.

The Quebec social economy council

The term “social economy” refers to a variety of economic organizations, often community-based, that produce directly to meet needs rather than for profit. Examples in Quebec include community-based daycare centers, elder-care services, job-training-centers, social housing, and much more. In Quebec there exists a democratically elected council, the *chantier de l'économie sociale*, with representatives from all of the different sectors of the social economy, which organizes initiatives to

enhance the social economy, mediates its relation to the provincial government, and extends its role in the overall regional economy. The *chantier* enhances democratic-egalitarian principles by fostering economic activity organized around needs and developing new forms of democratic representation and coordination for the social economy.

Urban agriculture with community land trusts

In a number of cities in the United States there are serious initiatives for developing urban agriculture. Some of these have the familiar character of community gardens with individual plots, but there is also in some cities efforts to develop community-based urban farms capable of providing work for people and partial solutions to problems of the “food desert” in decayed central cities. A critical issue in such efforts is the nature of the property rights involved in the urban agriculture and how such development can be sustained in a way that is accountable to communities. The proposal for community land-trusts for urban agriculture is one approach to this problem.

Randomocracy

Democratic governance is generally thought as either involving elected representatives or direct participatory assemblies. A third form involves representation without elections through randomly selected assemblies. The jury is the classic example. In ancient Athens, legislation was done by an assembly of citizens chosen by lot. What are known as “policy juries” adopt that procedure for various kinds of public policy in situations where nonpoliticians might have a greater capacity to weigh alternatives in a disinterested community-oriented way. One could also imagine a two-chamber legislative system in which one house was elected and the other was a citizens assembly of randomly chosen representatives. Such institutions allow for the capacities and ideas of ordinary citizens to be deployed in democratic governance even at geographical scales where direct democracy would not be feasible.

Unconditional basic income

Unconditional basic income (UBI) is a proposal to give every legal resident of a territory an income sufficient to live above the poverty line without any work requirement or other conditions. Nearly all existing public programs of income support would be eliminated. Minimum wage laws would also be eliminated since there would no longer be any reason to prohibit low-wage voluntary contracts once a person’s basic needs are not contingent on that wage. UBI opens up a wide array of new possibilities for people. It guarantees that any young person can do an unpaid internship, not just those who have affluent parents who are prepared to subsidize them. Worker co-operatives would become much more viable since the basic needs of the worker-owners did not depend on the income generated by the enterprise. This also means worker cooperatives would be better credit risks to banks, making it easier for cooperatives to get loans. UBI, if it could be instituted at a relatively generous level, would move us decisively towards the egalitarian principle of giving everyone equal access to the conditions to live a flourishing life.

Many other examples could be added to this list. Taken one at a time, especially in limited and incomplete forms, they do not constitute significant challenges to the dominance of capitalism within the economy. But taken collectively and scaled up, they potentially constitute elements of a more comprehensive alternative. In the next section I will elaborate a general framework which embeds these kinds of partial and limited transformations in a system alternative.

Books and Ideas: How do you see the current (2012) presidential race in relation to your project? Do you see something like a window of opportunity that would make it possible to implement real utopias

in the coming years?

Erik Olin Wright: In an era where the core achievements of social democracy – both in its strong forms in some parts of Europe and its shallower forms in the United States – are under such pressure, the immediate political task for progressives desiring a more equal, democratic, solidaristic and sustainable world is mainly defense: defending the public goods, market regulations, and redistributive policies of the affirmative state. In the United States this means defending even the half-baked moves towards universal publicly supported health insurance enacted in 2010. This seems hardly a propitious moment for significant implementation of new real utopian projects.

And yet, in the United States in recent years there has been considerable growth in interest in worker cooperatives and the social economy. Experiments in participatory budgeting have been introduced in a number of cities, most notably in certain city council districts in Chicago and New York. Novel projects of community-anchored urban agriculture have begun in a number of decaying urban centers. And for a time, the Occupy Wall Street movement captured the national imagination and brought issues of equality and democracy into the mass media and public discussion. In the face of economic crisis and political stalemate between the extreme right and the center at the national level, these initiatives have occurred entirely from grass-roots initiatives from below.

I do not think there is much prospect for any kind of decisive breakthrough nationally which would dramatically expand the space for real utopia projects. The outcome of the 2012 presidential election will be important for some critical issues, but it will not have much impact on the opportunities for implementing real utopias in the immediate future. But there are prospects for local struggles and local initiatives to creatively build new economic institutions and spread alternative economic practices. There are also increasing efforts among social movements and grass-roots activists to build social networks, share ideas and coordinate activities. If these can be connected to symbiotic strategies at the level of municipal and state governments which would provide various kinds of needed support, then at least in some parts of the United States these initiatives could begin to make real the idea that “another world is possible” in the lives of significant numbers of people.

The source of optimism in these grass-roots, locally-anchored initiatives is that there may be – to use some technical jargon – strong nonlinearities in the underlying dynamics in play. Let me explain. Some processes of social struggle and social change have a “linear” character: small changes in capacities for action generate small changes in results. But sometimes there are strong nonlinearities with critical tipping points where change accelerates. This can happen, for example, when underlying a process of social change is the formation of social networks in which the gradual formation of such networks has little discernible effect until the networks reach a certain density and complexity, and then suddenly they have a huge impact on collective capacities. This, then, could be the dynamics in play in the current period. In a context where bold projects for a more egalitarian and democratic economy at the national level seem so limited because of globalization, financialization and political paralysis, nonlinearities and synergies at the local level linking grass-roots initiatives with local and regional states could suddenly accelerate the creation of transformative real utopias. Only time will tell if this is grounded optimism or wishful thinking.

Published in booksandideas.net, 16th November 2012

©**booksandideas.net**