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### Engaging Emancipatory Social Science and Social Theory: A Symposium on Erik Olin Wright's Envisioning Real Utopias

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## Symposium

# Engaging Emancipatory Social Science and Social Theory: A Symposium on Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias*

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### Introduction

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Politics is frequently described as the art of the possible, but political science often takes the form of trying to understand, categorize, and explain what exists. Even work in our discipline that is explicitly motivated by concerns with deep democracy and egalitarian social justice customarily takes the form of critique. Implicit in such critiques, however, is the idea that alternative social, political, and economic arrangements are desirable, feasible, and achievable.

This implicit claim that “another world is possible” requires further scrutiny, especially in 2012. The collapse of “actually existing socialism” in Europe twenty years ago cast serious doubt on the idea that there could ever be a systemic alternative to capitalism. Yet in a different way, the decay of a strong social democratic politics in the US, as well as the severe limitations of the Obama presidency, have also cast doubt on the notion that New Deal-type liberal reforms are feasible and achievable in the US. Both the conventional radical and the conventional liberal alternative to the status quo seem very far from the politics of our time.

Erik Olin Wright's book *Envisioning Real Utopias*<sup>1</sup> combines social theory with copious examples of real world alternatives to make a major contribution to contemporary social and political thought. Wright, president of the American Sociological Association for 2012, has been thinking actively about the practical possibilities for radical change within contemporary capitalist societies since at least the early 1990s, when he launched the "Real Utopias" project at the University of Wisconsin. That project has produced half a dozen edited volumes (published by Verso) covering topics such as market socialism, participatory democracy, and gender equality, with contributions from numerous prominent political theorists, political scientists, economists, sociologists, and legal scholars. *Envisioning Real Utopias* goes a step further, by combining in one volume a critique of capitalism, a theoretical account of "social-ism," an identification of desirable and feasible alternatives with egalitarian substance in both the political and economic realm, and a theory of pathways towards radical change. In perhaps the book's most critical theoretical point, Wright draws a sharp distinction between "statism" and "socialism," and argues that a desirable alternative to capitalism must be one in which both political and economic power are subordinate to what he terms "social power."

In an effort to draw attention to and establish a dialogue with this important work, the New Political Science caucus sponsored a roundtable on Wright's book at the annual APSA meetings in Seattle in September 2011, including four of the contributors to this symposium as well as Wright himself. This symposium consists of revised versions of essays by Craig Borowiak, Mark Kaswan, Jason Maloy, and Thad Williamson, as well as an additional essay by Gar Alperovitz and Steve Dubb, followed by a response from Erik Olin Wright. Taken as a whole, this symposium explores in depth many critical issues involved in forging a new form of radical politics that challenges contemporary capitalism rather than accommodates itself to it. It is also intended to serve as an invitation for political scientists to join in the project of what Wright terms "emancipatory social science."

## Scaling up Utopias: E.O. Wright and the Search for Economic Alternatives

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Crisis has a way of opening new horizons. Such is the case with the current world economic crisis. Out of the tumult of economic hardship and insecurity, a great need for economic alternatives has been illuminated. It is, however, one thing to recognize such a need and quite another to have a vision of how concrete alternatives might be realized. Conceiving alternatives is particularly challenging in the current era, following two decades of neoliberal triumphalism in which capitalist economies have been treated as inviolable, and non-capitalist economic forms have been routinely dismissed as both undesirable and unviable. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (New York: Verso, 2010).

context, Erik Olin Wright's book *Envisioning Real Utopias*<sup>2</sup> makes a refreshing and timely intervention. Encyclopedic in scope and crisply analytical, the book charts the problems with both the present and new pathways for economic transformation. It calls forth both utopian aspirations and realist sensibilities, refusing in the process to concede the terms of the struggle to the cynicism of the neoliberal worldview. It is a magisterial book, chock full of insight and pregnant with provocative examples. In this essay, I critically engage Wright's book. I draw attention to some of the book's many strengths. I also develop three lines of critique. The first has to do with the way Wright analyzes alternatives in isolation from one another, while neglecting the connections among them. The second has to do with Wright's strong emphasis upon deliberate strategy and how this occludes the vital role that serendipity, creativity, and unscripted solidarities play in transformative social movements. The third has to do with Wright's understanding of scale and what I read—against the grain of his optimistic embrace of utopia—to be an underlying pessimism about the present prospects for systemic transformation. I illustrate these critiques with brief examples from the transnational movement for a social and solidarity economy.

### Opening the Horizon, Envisioning Alternatives

As Wright himself describes, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (along with his *real utopias* project more broadly) originated as a response to the ascendancy of neoliberalism and the apparent disarray among the post-Soviet Left. The collapse of centralized economies had left something of a void when it came to envisioning emancipatory political economies: Once communism was removed from the picture, it was not clear what alternatives to capitalism remained. As a result, the global political economy has become dominated by conservative utopias in which capitalist economies are cast as the best of all possible economies while alternatives to the status quo are construed as utopian fantasies. Progressive social theory has, in effect, ceded this ideological ground by shifting attention from class struggle to identity politics and disparate local struggles for recognition. *Envisioning Real Utopias* seeks to rectify this with an emancipatory social science that aspires for systemic change while remaining firmly attuned to practical possibility. An emancipatory social science, Wright tells us, must perform three essential tasks. It must: (1) diagnose and critique the status quo; (2) identify alternatives; and (3) elaborate strategies for scaling alternatives up in order to bring about systemic transformation. All three are necessary, he argues, if we are to generate economic alternatives that are not only desirable in the abstract, but also viable and achievable.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to the first task, Wright provides a stylized overview of eleven basic critiques of capitalism. These range from the proposition that capitalism perpetuates eliminable deficits in individual freedom to the propositions that capitalism corrodes community and destroys the environment. Guided by a normative commitment to what he calls "radical democratic egalitarianism," Wright's presentation of these critiques is exceptionally nuanced, lucid, and compelling. With them, he does not purport to offer a unified theory. He does wish to identify the

<sup>2</sup>Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

many problems that result when capitalist structures are allowed to dominate other economic forms. The overarching message is that capitalism, despite its potential for social benefit, undermines social and political justice and restricts broader efforts at greater emancipation. Thus the need for alternatives is clear.

Wright's exploration of alternatives in Part 2 of the book is, for my purposes, the most original and provocative section of the book. Distinguishing between state power, economic power, and social power, as well as between statist, capitalist, and socialist structures, he diagrams multiple pathways to social empowerment. He differentiates these pathways according to how the three types of power interact to affect the allocation of economic resources. For example, *statist socialism*, *social capitalism*, and *social economy* can be differentiated according to whether civil society influences the exercise of state power, the exercise of economic power, or the direct organization of economic activity, respectively. Here, Wright's distinction between statist and socialist economic structures is particularly important because it enables him to distance his project from state-led communist projects and the paralyzing disillusionment they engendered among leftist critics. By "socialist" he does not mean state socialism but rather economic structures that reflect the influence of the social power expressed through civil society. As he puts it, he wishes to take the "social" in socialism seriously.<sup>4</sup>

These categories and diagrams are particularly useful in that they challenge binary Cold War logics that construe capitalism and socialism as fundamentally incompatible. Such logics have fueled neoliberal discourse and have weighed down progressive social imagination. Pushing away from such purist paradigms, Wright argues that existing economies should be seen as amalgams of different structures: They are hybrid. In the US economy, for example, the state has considerable influence over the allocation of resources and over regulation of economic activity. The allocation of resources also has a socialist character to the extent that civil society influences the economic decisions of both business and government. The same could be said of other economies the world over, albeit with different compositions among the three types of economic structure.

Once we break our attachment to purist models, it becomes possible to identify economic practices and institutions that challenge capitalism in some respects even if they remain imbricated with capitalist circuits of power in others. Wright gives numerous examples of hybrid practices that enhance the scope and penetration of social power in economic life. These include: the innovations in the social economy carried out by *Le Chantier de l'Économie Sociale et Solidaire* in Quebec, Canada; Wikipedia and the open-source movement; arguments for and experiments with an unconditional basic income; labor-controlled solidarity funds (Quebec); share-levy wage-earner funds (Sweden); worker-owned cooperatives; employee stock ownership programs (ESOPs); the nested cooperatives of the Mondragón Corporation in Basque, Spain; proposals for market socialism; and arguments for participatory economics (parecon), to name just a few. In one way or another, these innovations defy the pure capitalist form. They do so despite being tied to the capitalist economy in other respects. With his examples and notion of hybridity, Wright helps to diversify the discursive frame

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 110.

from which alternatives might be identified. In so doing, his project resonates strongly with the “diverse economies perspective” pioneered by post-structural feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham, as well as with the efforts of Boaventura de Sousa Santos to theorize counter-hegemonic political economies.<sup>5</sup> It is curious that Wright does not engage these and related projects more directly, especially given that they use many of the same examples and similarly seek to expand our thinking about non-capitalist alternatives. Nevertheless, Wright’s examples are thought-provoking and give life to his theoretical framework.

I now turn my attention to some of the book’s more serious shortcomings.

### **Beyond the Smorgasbord: Finding Connections among Alternatives**

In his discussion of alternatives, Wright provides a diverse menu of possibilities for social empowerment. He tends, however, to treat the alternatives in isolation from one another. He presents a smorgasbord of economic alternatives with little indication of the connections that exist among them. Many of these and similar initiatives have evolved together. Wright also draws scant attention to alternatives whose primary contributions are to bridge other initiatives. He, for example, discusses the Quebec social economy, but does not mention the existence of a global social and solidarity economy network, in which Quebec is but one node. Many of the ideas percolating through the Quebec social economy emerged out of this network and through facilitated encounters with organizations in Latin America, Europe, and francophone Africa. Formalized in 2001 with the creation of RIPESS, the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy, this network is both a product of synergies among diverse economic initiatives and a bridging organization that facilitates new collaborations. Take, for instance, ESSGlobal,<sup>6</sup> a global initiative sponsored by RIPESS to map the social and solidarity economy. Over several years, groups in various countries (especially Brazil, Canada, Italy, and Spain) had been independently mapping social and solidarity economy organizations in their respective regions. With the support of RIPESS, they are now collaborating on a global mapping project that will draw local data into a shared world map without overriding the operational parameters of local maps. Such mapping networks not only build connections among economic alternatives, they are also alternatives *themselves*. They are generating new awareness, new social networks, new supply chains, and new cooperative connections among consumers and producers that depart from the capitalist paradigm.

To be sure, Wright sees the value of “interactions and synergies.” He regards such synergies as necessary for real progress. Nonetheless, he approaches such interactions and synergies more as potentialities than as realities. He, in fact, seems to use the ostensible absence of such synergies to shore up his own theorizing: “The prospects for such synergies, however, depend upon the possibilities for transformative struggles. And to understand those possibilities, we need a theory of

<sup>5</sup> See J.K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ed.), *Another Production is Possible. Beyond the Capitalist Canon* (New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.essglobal.info>>.

transformation."<sup>7</sup> While he may not have intended it this way, Wright's language makes it sound like cooperation among diverse economic practices on the ground only becomes possible through the work of social-political theorizing. The successful networking of wildly diverse organizations within the solidarity economy movement suggests that practices on the ground may have actually outrun Wright on this point.

### Strategy and Serendipity

One thing that sets Wright apart from others who theorize alternative economic activity is his orientation to the system level. Wright does not merely target capitalocentrism; he targets the larger structures of domination that inhibit social and political justice. For him, the challenge is to imagine and bring about an economy in which statist and capitalist structures are subordinate to the democratic authority of society, rather than the other way around. This brings me to the issue of transformative strategy, the subject matter of the third and final part of the book.

Wright insists upon the need for strategy. If alternatives are to be achievable and not just desirable and viable, he argues, they depend upon consciously pursued strategies to counteract capitalist domination.<sup>8</sup> Strategy matters, he writes, "because emancipatory alternatives are very unlikely to just 'happen.'" They can only come about, he continues, "because people work to implement them, and are able to overcome obstacles and forms of opposition."<sup>9</sup> On its face, this seems right. Alternative practices generally do not just happen. They involve actors making conscious decisions. At the same time, however, new transformative ideas and practices often do develop in unexpected ways along unplanned trajectories without being part of a larger strategy. New economic practices often emerge, not out of strategy but out of serendipity. Furthermore, even when alternative economic initiatives do reflect broader strategies of transformation, different participants often have very different (at times conflicting) motivations and strategic visions. Wright's emphasis upon common strategy and deliberate action overshadows the way any far-reaching transformation would entail a mishmash of peoples, agendas, coalitions, conflicts, and strategies. It also understates the possibility—indeed, importance for social movements—of creativity and receptivity to things, perspectives, and actions that are new and unexpected. As Arendt observed, revolution and novelty are intertwined.<sup>10</sup> Collective public action harbors the potential for novelty—for new beginnings, for natality—that exceeds our capacity to strategize. This is not to suggest that strategy is not necessary for the sort of transformations Wright has in mind. It is, however, to suggest that any such transformation will require social mobilizations that draw vibrancy from the eruption of new ideas, relationships, and ways of thinking.

To give one example, also from the social and solidarity economy movement, in October 2011, an international forum (FIESS) on the social and solidarity economy was held in Montreal, Canada. This forum happened to coincide with the launching of Occupy Montreal, the occupation of a public square a few blocks away by

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, p. 269.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, Revised Edition, 1965).

activists acting in solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement begun weeks earlier in New York. The coincidence of these events was unscripted. It became, however, an occasion for movement building. Seizing on the opportunity, several forum participants organized impromptu rallies and educational exchanges between the two venues. For many forum participants, these offered their first direct exposure to the occupy movement, with its unique tactics and interesting mix of local and translocal grievances. It was also a reminder of the importance of contentious politics for meaningful economic transformation. For many occupiers, the exchange provided new ideas for how protest might be channeled into concrete alternative economic practices. The new strategizing that took place in this setting was made possible by developments that were not themselves strategized. More generally, encounters such as these, whether they take place at a forum or by happenstance, are often what spark social imagination, as problems, agendas, technologies, and theories are juxtaposed in new ways.

Although Wright's framework may not altogether foreclose a role for contingency and novelty within transformative political projects, it also does not expressly allow for such a role. For all the creativity reflected in Wright's book, the creative process of movement making is left largely untheorized. This is an important occlusion, not least because openness to new practices, relationships, strategic directions, and worldviews is a hallmark of many alternative economy initiatives, not merely as a means to a larger strategic end, but as an indispensable feature of an emancipatory political economy.

### **Capitalist Hegemony and Emancipation Deferred**

Having insisted upon the need for strategy in general, Wright outlines three types of strategy: ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic, roughly corresponding to revolution, anarchism, and social democracy, respectively. What stands out about Wright's account of strategy is not only his optimistic desire for pathways of transformation, but also—and more striking given the book's utopian aspirations—his gloomy outlook on the present. Like many other contemporary social theorists, he is deeply skeptical about the plausibility of revolutionary (that is, ruptural) transformation in the current age. More surprising is how little confidence he has in the other two types of strategy. He doubts that interstitial initiatives working outside of both the state and capitalist industry can alone erode the basic structural power of capital sufficiently to dissolve capitalist limits on emancipatory social change. He is similarly skeptical about symbiotic initiatives that seek transformation by directly engaging the state—these are too easily co-opted in ways that consolidate rather than challenge capitalist domination. We can interpret this skepticism as a mark of Wright's realism. It is a realism that becomes especially manifest when Wright unequivocally declares that capitalism is so secure and flexible that no strategy seriously threatens it.<sup>11</sup> This is a startling concession, if only because of the optimism that otherwise pervades the text. In the end, the real utopias project entails a deferral: systemic transformation will have to wait for another time. For Wright, this need not entail quiet acceptance. There are things we can do now in the hope of

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<sup>11</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, pp. 327, 364.

opening possibilities for the future.<sup>12</sup> The best bet, according to Wright, is to use interstitial and symbiotic strategies in tandem with the hope of opening possibilities for the future.<sup>13</sup> It is a deferral nonetheless.

This prioritization of *systemic* transformation—a prioritization that is in other respects one of the book's greatest strengths—comes at a certain cost. As Gibson-Graham have argued in response to their own critics, the imperative to scale up alternatives exercises its own hegemony over emancipatory social imagination by denying the value of projects that undertake less systemic agendas and operate at lower levels.<sup>14</sup> There are hints of such a dynamic in Part 3 of Wright's work. There, he acknowledges that many of the actors in alternative economic initiatives see themselves as taking part in strategies for social change, but he nevertheless discounts these actors and strategies once they are held up to the standards of systemic transformation.<sup>15</sup> The problem is not that there are no strategies, it is rather that the strategies are improperly scaled. What is at issue is not the mere capacity to expand the scale of economic alternatives—we know this is possible, as evidenced by the rapid expansion of the aforementioned social and solidarity economy movement—but rather the capacity to scale them up sufficiently to fundamentally transform the system as a whole.<sup>16</sup> This sets an incredibly high bar. Fixating upon such a grand agenda can lead to the very sort of disillusionment that Wright himself decries.

Systemic transformation may be desirable, but it is not the only measure of social change. The emancipatory effects of economic alternatives can be identified on lower levels without having to wait for a revolutionary moment to arrive or until a coherent and compelling strategy for system-wide transformation has been formulated. New economic forms and subjectivities can be affirmed “here and now, in any place or context,”<sup>17</sup> not merely because they may lead to structural transformation in the future but because they embody, in themselves, *real* projects of social emancipation in the present.

*Envisioning Real Utopias* is one of the most comprehensive and inspiring works of social theory to come out in recent years. It clarifies the capitalist condition. It opens new conceptual space to acknowledge and encourage individual economic alternatives in our midst. And it aims to channel economic experimentation into a broader emancipatory agenda. Above all else, the book is an invitation for further action, research, and thinking about alternatives. This essay and its critiques are intended as a response to this invitation. Envisioning a post-capitalist era poses some real challenges, not least of which are the need for responsiveness to new ideas, an ability to recognize and create connections among initiatives, and sensitivity to the multiple levels at which emancipation can occur. On these points, I expect Wright would fully agree.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>14</sup> J.K. Gibson-Graham, “Beyond Global vs. Local: Economic Politics Outside the Binary Frame,” in Andrew Herod and Melissa Wright (eds), *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 25–60.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, p. 328.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>17</sup> Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, p. xxxvi.

## Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Interstitial Transformation and the Cooperative Movement

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Nearly a billion people worldwide are members of cooperatives, according to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), the apex organization for cooperative associations worldwide.<sup>18</sup> According to the UN, which designated 2012 as the International Year of the Cooperative, fully half the world's population is affected in some way by cooperatives.<sup>19</sup> In the US, about thirty thousand cooperatives hold over three trillion dollars in total assets, generate over six hundred and fifty billion dollars in revenue, some seventy-five billion dollars in wages and benefits, and account for about two million jobs.<sup>20</sup> So if, as Erik Olin Wright suggests in *Envisioning Real Utopias*,<sup>21</sup> his most recent contribution to an impressive collection of work, one considers cooperatives to be a part of an interstitial strategy for social transformation, the space they already occupy would appear to be quite large indeed.

Wright clearly recognizes the importance of cooperatives in his project for social transformation. He argues that, as "participatory democratic forms of organization," cooperatives "play ... a central role in social economy activities [by affirming] the emancipatory values of egalitarianism."<sup>22</sup> Worker and consumer cooperatives are listed first among a set of "candidates for elements of an interstitial strategy of social emancipation," as a way to build "alternative institutions" and foster "new forms of social relations,"<sup>23</sup> and he notes their value in helping to promote social transformation in any transitional period.<sup>24</sup> There are problems with Wright's approach, however, as his nearly exclusive focus on worker's cooperatives leaves out the vast majority of the existing cooperative movement and isolates what remains from its ideological framework. Wright's analysis fails to capture the diversity of the cooperative movement, and so fails to recognize not only some of its strengths, but also some of its weaknesses and potential pitfalls. Because his discussion of cooperatives is limited, my first task is to fill in some of the missing detail.

### The Modern Cooperative Movement

In 1995, the ICA adopted a revised set of Cooperative Principles as part of a Statement of Cooperative Identity.<sup>25</sup> The statement reflects, if not always the

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<sup>18</sup> Founded in 1895, the ICA is one of the only working-class based organizations to have survived both world wars and the Cold War, and was one of only three organizations given special reporter status by the United Nations (UN) at its founding.

<sup>19</sup> International Cooperative Alliance, "Statistical Information on the Co-operative Movement," <<http://www.ica.coop/coop/statistics.html>>.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Deller, Ann Hoyt, Brett Hueth, and Reka Sundaram-Stukel, *Research on the Economic Impact of Cooperatives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>25</sup> ICA, "Statement on the Co-operative Identity," <<http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html>>. The committee that drafted the revised principles also published a

reality, at least the aspirations of the cooperative movement. It defines "the cooperative" as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise." Stated values include "self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity."<sup>26</sup> An accompanying white paper asserts that the principles reflect "a fundamental respect for all human beings and a belief in their capacity to improve themselves economically and socially through mutual self-help," and that the success of the cooperative movement shows that "democratic procedures applied to economic activities are feasible, desirable, and efficient" and that "democratically-controlled economic organisations make a contribution to the common good."<sup>27</sup> The principles themselves include voluntary membership, democratic governance on a one-person one-vote basis, common ownership, and limits on both capital accumulation and the role of outside capital. Additional principles call for cooperatives to engage in educational activities, especially regarding the cooperative principles themselves, as well as cooperation among cooperatives and sustainable development practices.<sup>28</sup>

Two features of the cooperative movement stand out: Its size and its diversity. The ICA bills itself as "the world's largest non-governmental organization,"<sup>29</sup> with 233 member organizations representing close to a billion people in over one hundred countries worldwide. All of the world's leading economies have vibrant cooperative sectors. For example, one out of every three families in Japan is a member of a cooperative, while in Singapore cooperatives claim 50% of the population as members. In Quebec, 70% of the population is a member of at least one cooperative.<sup>30</sup> They are also important parts of the economies of many developing nations, for example in Kenya where they account for 45% of the economy.<sup>31</sup>

Cooperatives have also attained substantial diversity of form. Almost any kind of business can be organized as a cooperative, but the most significant differentiation is based on the particular stakeholder group that constitutes its owner/members: Consumer cooperatives, including credit unions and retail stores, are owned by those who purchase the goods or use the services of the cooperative; producer cooperatives, which are typically primarily engaged in distribution and marketing, are owned by people or enterprises producing similar goods, and are especially common in agriculture and artisan communities; and worker cooperatives, owned and governed by the people who carry out the functions of the enterprise—that is, the workers.<sup>32</sup> The principles are implemented

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Footnote 25 continued

white paper, which provides much in the way of history, detail, and explanation. Ian MacPherson, *Co-operative Principles for the 21st Century* (Geneva: International Co-operative Alliance, 1995). First adopted at its founding in 1895, this was the third major revision.

<sup>26</sup> MacPherson, *Co-operative Principles*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> ICA, "Introduction to ICA," <<http://www.ica.coop/ica/index.html>>.

<sup>30</sup> ICA, "Statistical Information."

<sup>31</sup> Report of the United Nations Secretary-General, *Cooperatives in Social Development* (No. A/64/132) (New York: United Nations General Assembly, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> There are several different typologies; see, for example, Johnston Birchall, *The International Co-operative Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA), "About Cooperatives," <<http://www.ncba>

differently in each of these, and some of these differences are quite significant in terms of the kind of social transformation Wright is interested in.

Post-Marxists like Wright often favor worker cooperatives because they most directly address the problem of the subordination of labor to capital. However, in economic terms, they have had the least success in the developed economies. They are uncommon in comparison to the other types, and are generally fairly small enterprises with no more than a few dozen members. Wright's exemplar, Mondragón, with eighty-five thousand employees, is a significant departure from the norm.<sup>33</sup> As will be seen below, there are further reasons for not putting all the transformative eggs in this basket.

Consumer cooperatives are in many ways the "face" of the cooperative movement. As retail stores, credit unions, and utilities they may be the most recognizable, but they are also unquestionably the largest in terms of the number of members. They account for 92% of all US cooperatives and over 98% of all co-op memberships.<sup>34</sup> Their diversity is significant: They range from small buying clubs to REI (Recreational Equipment, Inc.), one of the world's largest cooperatives with some four million members.

While consumer cooperatives may predominate, producer cooperatives are significant for their dominance in particular markets. Some of these, including Sunkist, Ocean Spray, and Land O'Lakes are very large companies, although most Americans would probably be surprised to learn that they are co-ops. About 30% of all agricultural produce in the US is handled by cooperatives, including some 90% of all dairy.<sup>35</sup> Like the agricultural cooperatives, craft and artisan cooperatives are associations of independent producers whose primary reason for coming together is the marketing and distribution of their goods.<sup>36</sup>

### Cooperatives and Social Transformation

Despite this diversity, Wright focuses almost exclusively on worker cooperatives. Consumer cooperatives are mentioned on occasion without elaboration, and he seems to admit that they may be part of a strategy of interstitial transformation,<sup>37</sup> but they are never described or discussed. He acknowledges the diversity of form (in a footnote), but asserts that while the other types "may embody some principles of social empowerment, . . . they do not pose as sharp a contrast—and perhaps

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*Footnote 32 continued*

org/abcoop.cfm>; and UN Secretary-General, *Cooperatives in Social Development*. For the purposes of this article I have chosen to limit my discussion to just these three types, as they are the simplest, most direct, and most representative.

<sup>33</sup> In terms of membership, Mondragón alone has more members than all the worker cooperatives in the US combined. Deller et al., *Research*, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> NCBA, "About Cooperatives."

<sup>36</sup> There may be some confusion over the use of the term "producer" here, but the point is that it is a cooperative of independent producers for the purpose of marketing and distribution, not for production. Wright himself conflates the terms at times, for example where "worker-owned cooperatives" and "producer cooperatives" appear in the same sentence in a way that seems to indicate that he believes they are the same thing: Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, p. 373.

<sup>37</sup> For example, *ibid.*, 330.

challenge—to capitalism as worker-owned cooperatives.”<sup>38</sup> It would have been helpful if Wright had provided an argument to support his claim, because in dismissing consumer and producer cooperatives as, in effect, insufficiently radical, he dismisses the vast majority of what stands as the world’s largest existing, organized alternative to liberal capitalism. This is, I think, a serious mistake.

Wright’s orientation may be understandable given his long history of work centered on class analysis. This perspective is not foregrounded in *Real Utopias* as it is in some of his other work, but the focus on worker cooperatives suggests that it is still operating in the background. From a theoretical perspective, however, there are few things about a worker cooperative that will necessarily make it transformative. Workers may be unlikely to outsource their own jobs, and are at least somewhat more likely to function in a more sustainable fashion. But there is no getting away from the fact that the cooperative is the private property of its owners, and nothing prevents them from engaging in self-interested behavior in their collective interest at the expense of the larger community. The fact that worker cooperatives tend to operate in a more socially responsible manner is not necessarily a function of their ownership or governance structure. Rather, it could simply be that the people who are most likely to form or join them are more likely to already hold progressive values or become acculturated to them by others in the company.

Finally, breaking down the institutional separation between members of the cooperative and the broader society, one of Wright’s objectives, requires a kind of openness that is impossible in a worker’s cooperative. No matter how progressive they may be, worker cooperatives are necessarily exclusive. They simply cannot meet the requirement of the principles for “open membership” because they can only have so many workers. While absent in most worker cooperatives, however, this inclusivity is an important characteristic of consumer cooperatives.<sup>39</sup>

Advocates of consumer cooperatives have argued that worker cooperatives are still “capitalistic” as they produce goods for profit (even though all profit is for the benefit of the workers and not outside investors), whereas consumer cooperatives are more socially oriented, because there is no “profit” in the traditional sense, only excess revenue to be returned to the consumers themselves.<sup>40</sup> Workers may be expected to limit their demands because they are consumers within the same system; similarly the cooperative is constrained from exploiting the workers because the workers are also part of the community. In effect, the choice is between “the idea of manufacture organised by groups of producers, *for exchange* with the

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>39</sup> The principle of open membership articulated by the ICA does leave room for some exclusion, to the extent that members must “accept the responsibilities of membership.” Even consumer cooperatives may place limits on membership by requiring, for example, that members live within a certain area. Acceptance of the cooperative principles is also generally accepted as a requirement of membership, which may serve to exclude some people.

<sup>40</sup> Beatrice Potter Webb and Sidney Webb, *The Consumers’ Co-operative Movement* (London and New York: Longman’s, Green, 1921), pp. 182–187. A related question has to do with whether or not consumer cooperatives should serve non-members. While allowing that it may be a way of drawing in new members, Lambert argues that if “most” of a cooperative’s business came from non-members, it would “cease to be genuine.” Paul Lambert, *Studies in the Social Philosophy of Co-operation*, trans. J. Létargez (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1963), pp. 65–66.

rest of the world [as opposed to] manufacture organised by the whole democracy of consumers, for their consumption or service [and] therefore *for use*.<sup>41</sup>

Labor is still alienated in a consumer-oriented system, although under completely different conditions from traditional capitalism. Someone who works in a community based enterprise is more likely to understand that they are a part of something larger than themselves, that they are not simply being exploited to produce surplus value for the enrichment of a small class of investors. Ultimately, where all consumers are organized into vertically integrated cooperatives, the alienation of labor would be overcome because the workers would, in effect, exchange with one another through the distributive mechanism of the cooperative system. All surplus, then, would be returned to the workers, albeit not in their role as workers but in their role as consumers. Starved of profit, capitalist enterprise would then collapse.<sup>42</sup>

Some aspects of consumer cooperatives limit their revolutionary potential. The most important is the patronage refund itself, because, so long as it is the primary motivation for membership, it reinforces individualistic, as opposed to social, attitudes. It also provides greater rewards for those who spend the most. While this is clearly an advance over one person accumulating profits from someone else's activity, it would do little to address, and may even perpetuate, economic inequality. Further, if social cooperation seeks to alter the relationship of members of a community to one another, this would be minimal in a cooperative where most members have little interaction with one another; indeed, since most retail consumer co-ops are open to the public, it can be hard to tell who in the store at any given time is a member.<sup>43</sup> Consumer co-ops also can, by instituting a restrictive membership policy, take advantage of non-members by increasing non-member prices in order to ensure a higher net revenue refunded to members.<sup>44</sup> Finally, in large-scale cooperatives the principle of democratic control is quite weak, because the "members only" function with respect to governance is through periodic votes for members of the board of directors, and evidence suggests that participation levels tend to be quite low.<sup>45</sup>

The issue of scale is significant for all cooperatives, for several reasons. The larger the co-op, the less connection its members are likely to feel with it, the more alienated it becomes from them, the less it must rely on member involvement and the more it must rely on professional management. Professionalization of management has problematic tendencies insofar as it leads to a class of officials whose interests, focus, and concerns may be different from those of the membership, and it can loosen members' sense of responsibility to the organization. Although the concern is most acute in consumer co-ops, it has proven to be no less a problem in Mondragón.<sup>46</sup>

Producer cooperatives should not be left out of consideration, either. After all, in terms of revenue and market share, these are some of the largest. However, when it

<sup>41</sup> Webb and Webb, *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement*, pp. 185–186.

<sup>42</sup> Lambert, *Studies*, p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> To some extent, cooperatives can counteract this by developing a more socially oriented, participatory culture.

<sup>44</sup> This is unlikely, however, for two reasons: Increasing membership is usually a better strategy for survival, and exploited non-members could respond by forming their own cooperative or shopping elsewhere. See also note 40, above.

<sup>45</sup> See Lambert, *Studies*, pp. 71–74.

<sup>46</sup> George Cheney, *Values at Work: Employee Participation Meets Market Pressure at Mondragón* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

comes to the agricultural cooperatives in particular (or any cooperative made up of independent enterprises), serious problems arise with regard to their ability to adopt the Cooperative Principles. After all, the 1995 Statement of Cooperative Identity specifically defines a cooperative as an “association of persons,” and the idea that cooperatives “put people at the centre of their business and not capital” is what the ICA calls the “Cooperative Difference.”<sup>47</sup> However, many agricultural co-ops are owned by family farms that are run as independent, for-profit businesses that associate in order to, as Sunkist puts it, “gain a mutually larger market share,”<sup>48</sup> and demonstrate little regard for a more just and equitable society.

This having been said, agricultural cooperatives may be the only thing preserving the family farm and standing in the way of the complete take-over of American agricultural production by giant agribusinesses. In some parts of the world, agricultural and artisan producer cooperatives have been an important means of economic, social, and political empowerment in subaltern communities.<sup>49</sup> Thus, while producer cooperatives, particularly those in the agricultural sector, may not be seen as agents of social transformation as currently constituted, it would be unwise to exclude them entirely from a transformative strategy.

With respect to social transformation, then, each of the primary sectors of the cooperative movement has its strengths and weaknesses. From a strategic perspective, the best path would be one that takes advantage of the strengths and addresses the weaknesses of each. A fairly new approach referred to as “multistakeholder” cooperatives includes membership categories for each stakeholder group—principally consumers and workers, but in some cases including suppliers and even financiers.<sup>50</sup> Hoyt describes this type of cooperative as “a community institution in which many actors have an economic interest in its success.”<sup>51</sup> The model is attractive for the way it ensures that, as Hoyt puts it, “The unique interests and goals of each [stakeholder group] are explicitly recognized in the membership requirements and organizational structure.”<sup>52</sup> It only works, however, within the specific context of a single cooperative, and, indeed, is most relevant only in retail operations in which consumers play a significant and direct role. But if Wright errs by only considering labor, it is similarly the case that focusing on retail alone means that half of the economic equation is missing. To affect a meaningful social transformation it is necessary to alter the mode of distribution *and* that of production, of labor *and* of consumption.

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<sup>47</sup> ICA, “What is a Co-operative?,” <<http://www.ica.coop/coop/index.html>>.

<sup>48</sup> Sunkist, “Cooperative,” <<http://www.sunkist.com/about/cooperative.asp>>. Not all agricultural cooperatives are like this. Examples of more socially oriented agricultural cooperatives include the Cabot dairy cooperative based in Vermont (see <<http://www.#160#cabotcheese.coop/>>), and the CROPP Cooperative (see <<http://www.farmers.coop/our-story/overview/>>).

<sup>49</sup> Birchall, *The International Co-operative Movement*.

<sup>50</sup> Ann Hoyt, “Consumer Ownership in Capitalist Economies: Applications of Theory to Consumer Cooperation,” in C.D. Merrett and N. Walzer (eds), *Cooperatives and Local Development: Theory and Applications for the 21st Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 281. Wright includes a brief discussion of something similar to multistakeholder cooperatives—called “solidarity cooperatives”—in his discussion of the social economy in Quebec (Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, pp. 207–208).

<sup>51</sup> Hoyt, “Consumer Ownership,” p. 281.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

In his discussion of the “socialist compass,” Wright refers to “social ownership,” noting that the term “society” here refers to “any social unit within which people engage in interdependent economic activity which uses means of production and generates some kind of product.”<sup>53</sup> The “cooperative market economy,” as Wright describes it, consists mostly of worker cooperatives.<sup>54</sup> His is a production-oriented model, but not all enterprises are focused on production. I would suggest, however, that the scope of interdependency be enlarged to incorporate both production and distribution, to include both workers and consumers. If the point is to establish a more democratic system so that people can exert more control over the institutions that establish the conditions for the fulfillment of their needs, one must consider not only their status as workers but also their status as consumers. What is needed is a model that can break down the worker/consumer dichotomy. Wright does not provide this.

### Conclusion

*Envisioning Real Utopias* gives us a valuable collection of tangible ideas about ways to move towards a more livable world, with cooperatives as an important part of any strategy for fundamental social change. Wright offers us a hint—but only a hint—of what the cooperative movement has to offer. By limiting his view to just one sector, and presenting it without the benefit of the larger context, Wright ends up downplaying the significance of the movement and the contribution it can make to radical social change. The fact of the matter is that cooperatives already play a significant role in strategies for change and provide an institutional model that embodies the progressive values of equality and democracy that we may hope will be realized in the future. As the world’s oldest and largest democratic social movement and the oldest and largest existing alternative to the liberal capitalist model, the cooperative movement offers a tremendous amount of history and diversity that can be of value moving forward. If we are serious about making utopias real, we should, as one writer suggests, “consider the cooperative sector as a powerful potential ally for positive change in the world—a sleeping giant that needs to be awakened and challenged.”<sup>55</sup> This requires that we recognize, and seek to engage, the potential for social transformation that exists in all types of cooperatives.

## Real Utopias in a Gilded Age: The Case of American Populism

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In 1877 some neighbors in Lampasas County, in north-central Texas, organized something they called the Farmers’ Alliance. They had already been cooperating in

<sup>53</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, p. 116.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–140.

<sup>55</sup> Greg MacLeod, “The Business of Relationships,” in C.D. Merrett and N. Walzer (eds), *Cooperatives and Local Development: Theory and Applications for the 21st Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 292.

various activities of agrarian self-help: catching horse thieves, cutting barbed wire fences, shooting the hired guards who defended the fences, and so on. They regarded enclosed lands that were often left unused by railroad companies and other absentee owners as a commons on which they had a right to collect water and to graze their stock. After some early fits and starts, the Farmers' Alliance in Texas became, by the late 1880s, one of the principal hubs of the nationwide political movement that culminated in the organization of the People's Party and has since been known as Populism.<sup>56</sup>

What was happening in Lampasas County in 1877 reflected political trends of national importance. Farmers' Alliances, Anti-Monopoly Leagues, and other agricultural organizations were springing up in Texas, Kansas, New York, and elsewhere, providing the backbone of the People's Party by 1891.<sup>57</sup> The birth of one reform movement coincided with the death of another, since 1877 was the year in which the Republican Party withdrew federal troops from the reconstructed South, having cheated its way to victory in the previous year's election. The new party's "mission creep" from abolitionism and "free labor" to office-holding for its own sake was complete. It was also the year of the great strikes in Chicago and elsewhere, but no national party dared to take up the cause against what some of the strikers called "wage-slavery." That would become the underlying purpose of the effort to join agrarian and industrial labor under the banner of the People's Party.

The story of Populism as a movement for democratic reform in the first American Gilded Age holds special interest for those who regard the early twenty-first century as a second edition. Populism rose to prominence in an era of general economic growth and social and technological change which was punctuated by economic crises. Its adherents tried to imagine alternative forms of economic and political organization that would use the tool of democracy to do the job of justice. In broad outline, they would have recognized the reform projects analyzed in E.O. Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010)<sup>58</sup> as kindred endeavors.

But a closer inspection of nineteenth-century Populism reveals important differences as well and suggests a provisional conclusion about the Real Utopias project: middle-class leftism is destined to remain one of the smaller and less influential faith-based communities on the global social landscape. After reviewing Populism's brief career as a democratic reform movement, I will attempt to use this falsifiable proposition as a prompt for some hypotheses and lessons for theorists and practitioners of democratic reform today.

### Economic Justice and Political Insurgency

American life between the end of Reconstruction (1877) and the Spanish-American War (1898) was colorfully described in Parrington's classic history:

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<sup>56</sup> R.C. McMath, "The Movement Culture of Populism Reconsidered: Cultural Origins of the Farmers' Alliance of Texas, 1879–86," in H.C. Dethloff and I.M. May (ed.), *Southwestern Agriculture, Pre-Columbian to Modern* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1982).

<sup>57</sup> R.C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social History, 1877–98* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), pp. 3–18; L. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 67–73.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

The spirit of the frontier was to flare up in a huge buccaneering orgy. Having swept across the continent to the Pacific coast like a visitation of locusts, the frontier spirit turned back upon its course to conquer the East, infecting the new industrialism with a crude individualism, fouling the halls of Congress, despoiling the public domain, and indulging in a huge national barbecue.<sup>59</sup>

Observations of a similar nexus of economic inequality and political influence have led some observers to describe recent decades as a second Gilded Age.<sup>60</sup> This nexus came to be designated in the first Gilded Age by the term “plutocracy,” or “rule by money.”

In the first phase of the Populist assault on plutocracy, agrarian reformers responded to the perceived injustices of the post-war economy by crafting alternative economic institutions. First and foremost was the cooperative enterprise, a non-governmental solution true to the Jeffersonian tradition of self-help but also inspired by European examples such as the Rochdale Plan. Farmers bundled their crops together and held out for higher prices instead of dealing with purchasing agents one at a time; negotiated group rates with railroads, warehouses, and grain-elevators; and pooled funds to establish non-profit insurance and banking services. Farmers in the South, for instance, sustained a boycott of the jute trust, which set the price of the fiber used to make the bags in which cotton was shipped and stored, from 1888 to 1892. Through the Farmers’ Alliance, small-scale cotton growers organized their own cooperative factory to produce jute bagging and attracted thousands of customers away from the trust, forcing the price of bags down in the process.<sup>61</sup> These are classic cases of what Wright calls “interstitial” efforts at democratic reform.<sup>62</sup>

The Populists’ cooperative enterprises met with more failure than success, as hostile interests (railroads, merchants, banks) colluded to defeat them. The Farmers’ Alliance in Texas operated a cooperative cotton exchange near Dallas, for example, as well as a “joint note” lending program by which farmers could get low-interest loans secured on pledges of future crops. The exchange succeeded in raising the prices paid for crops, but the lending program foundered on the refusal of banks to refinance existing loans and of merchants to accept Alliance notes as payment for supplies.<sup>63</sup> For those who are poor in capital, success in one area of economic life is easily undermined by failure in another. As a result, these interstitial strategies depended on the inability or unwillingness of powerful economic actors to squeeze and collapse the interstices themselves. Broader structural problems of power, as Wright recognizes, call for redress through a political strategy. Indeed interstitial failure spurred unprecedented numbers of farmers to “political insurgency” in the later 1880s and early 1890s.

<sup>59</sup> V.L. Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860–1920* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1930), pp. 4–5.

<sup>60</sup> K. Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (New York: Broadway, 2002), p. 297; L.M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (New York: Russell Sage, 2008), pp. 6–13.

<sup>61</sup> R.C. McMath, *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers’ Alliance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), pp. 54–60.

<sup>62</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Chapter 9.

<sup>63</sup> Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, pp. 125–145.

### Political Mobilization and Sham Reform

Having seen the obstacles confronting them in the private sector, the Farmers' Alliance and other agricultural organizations turned to legislative and bureaucratic solutions, and to electoral mobilization and partisan politics. This was the moment when Jeffersonians discovered the modern state. But was state power to be grasped through "ruptural"<sup>64</sup> or "symbiotic"<sup>65</sup> means?

State railroad commissions were some of the first regulatory agencies to appear in response to organized voting blocs associated with the Farmers' Alliance. But governors and legislatures, after creating the commissions in dramatic public gestures, often staffed them with personnel friendly to the railroads. Even when state commissions did act to lower rates, federal judges stood ready to nullify the new regulations. In response, Populists moved on to national politics and in some cases to governmental ownership of railroads; by the logic of sovereign public functions, telegraphy and banking also came within this state-socialist or "nationalist" purview.

The regulation of currency was already an accepted governmental function, and Populists gave it special emphasis in their early agitations. The leadership of the Farmers' Alliance took the Greenbacker idea of government-issued paper money and gave it a twist in the "sub-treasury" plan. Instead of letting private banks alone regulate the supply of money and the availability of credit, the Populists proposed that the government loan money directly to farmers, secured by the value of their produce. The job of the sub-treasuries was to issue government notes at a low rate of interest (1 or 2%) to farmers who deposited crops in a government warehouse. Instead of selling his crops at low prices at harvest time, in desperate need for cash to pay the bills, a farmer could instead use these government notes while crops were held off the market until prices rose above their usual harvest time nadir. The middlemen, accustomed to bleeding farmers dry, would be foiled by state action: banks would have to compete with the low interest rates, and purchasers would have to raise their offer prices to keep produce out of the warehouses.<sup>66</sup>

The sub-treasury plan, however, was a non-starter in Congress: hearings were held and no bill reported; candidates who campaigned on the sub-treasury (especially southern Democrats) abandoned it when they got to Washington. It did not even attain the formal trappings of success which briefly graced the state railroad commissions. Having discovered the indispensability of the modern state, and then their own inability to harness its forces through these early symbiotic strategies, Populists had to contemplate a move that many democrats have by now given up on: basic institutional reforms of the political system.

### Political Democracy and Institutionalized Power

The Populists proposed to alter the procedures by which institutionalized power gets distributed in American society, and some of these proposals have since become entrenched in the political infrastructure of the second Gilded Age.

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<sup>64</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Chapter 9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 11.

<sup>66</sup> N.B. Ashby, *The Riddle of the Sphinx* (Des Moines: Industrial Publishing, 1890), pp. 302–305; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, pp. 149–153.

The prime institutional targets, thanks to their veto powers and their carefully designed insulation from popular demands, were the presidency, the US Senate, and the federal judiciary. Most Populist manifestoes called for the direct popular election of the first two, and a few commentators did the same for the third.

Occasionally the abolition or neutering of the veto-holders was contemplated. James Weaver, the presidential nominee of the People's Party in 1892, claimed that Gladstone's proposal to abolish the British House of Lords "struck a popular chord" with critics of the US Senate; a Boston magazine called the presidential veto an unacceptable vestige of British monarchy; and a state convention of the Texas Knights of Labor in 1889 called for the abolition of all senates, federal as well as state. After the judicial nullification of the federal income tax in 1895, a constitutional amendment was suggested providing that a two-thirds vote of the Supreme Court be required to suspend an act of Congress for a period of review, after which legislators would be free to act on it, or not, without further judicial constraint.<sup>67</sup>

Though the substantive ethical ideal of economic justice remained the underlying motive of the Populists' proposals, political democracy was identified as the tool for getting the job done. To them democracy meant, simply, popular control over public life. The initiative and referendum, imported from Switzerland, was a trendy way to exercise control by going over office-holders' heads. According to William Peffer, the first and most die-hard of the People's Party's national elected officers, "if there is anything on which the Populist heart is chiefly set, it is the right of the people to propose legislation and to pass on important measures before they take effect as laws."<sup>68</sup>

Of course, corruptions of the voting process were even more overt than they are now, and Populists were key movers of voting reforms like the secret ballot and the direct primary. Other electoral reforms were put forward to render entrenched elites vulnerable to the power of the ballot, but more haltingly. A "Non-Partisan" convention in Texas first proposed term-limits for federal elected officials in 1888, and the Democrats took the issue seriously enough to call for "reasonable" term-limits at their next two state conventions. A state People's Party convention in 1894 proposed proportional representation, widely seen as an antidote to gerrymandering.<sup>69</sup>

Of course the heart of the Populists' "political insurgency," as it was often called, was the third party itself. In a world of blue and gray, Yankees and Rebels, Republicans and Democrats, attempting to bust the two-party alignment was as radical as any legal reform. Not all their proposals were successful, and those that were (and some that were not) may not have been well considered, but democratic reformers would be wrong to relegate institutional reforms of this sort outside their projects of critical-utopian thinking. All in all, the Populists' insurgency was

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<sup>67</sup> J.B. Weaver, *A Call to Action* (Des Moines: Iowa Printing, 1892), p. 11; W. Clark, "The Election of Senators and the President by Popular Vote," *The Arena* 10 (1894), p. 460; E.W. Winkler (ed.), *Platforms of Political Parties in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1916), p. 275; J.M. Ashley, "Should the Supreme Court Be Reorganized?," *The Arena* 14 (1895), pp. 222–224.

<sup>68</sup> W.A. Peffer, "The Passing of the People's Party," *North American Review* 166 (1898), p. 22.

<sup>69</sup> Winkler, *Platforms*, pp. 261–262, 288, 319.

neither as ruptural as a violent revolution nor as symbiotic as what eventually triggered the demise of the People's Party.

### Party Integration

When William Jennings Bryan gave his "cross of gold" speech to accept the Democratic Party's nomination for president in 1896, many Populists lent him their support in what looked like a climactic battle for a democratic economy. The "free silver" mantra that, as a result, will forever be attached to Populism's memory was initially a complementary but ultimately an alternative scheme in relation to the other economic proposals. Its intent was to offer a more respectable way than "fiat" paper money towards an inflationary, easy-credit economy which would garner support among western mining interests and eastern labor on the way to making agriculture more prosperous. The People's Party convention of 1896 embraced the Democrats' nominee as its own, thereby accomplishing "fusion" at the top of the ticket, and the ensuing defeat in the November elections left Populists demoralized and discredited.<sup>70</sup>

Fusion with the Democrats was the culminating instance of symbiotic strategy. The Populists did not just make pragmatic compromises on transient issues; they thereby wove themselves and their cause into the fabric of the two-party system. Despite crushing defeat in 1896, ever since then they have remained the "progressive" wing of the Democratic Party, where many of them found a permanent home. Others stuck with the People's Party for a while and eventually drifted into socialist and other reform parties, while still others joined the "progressive" wing of the Republican Party until Theodore Roosevelt led them out of it again.

Is it better to be a robust autonomous movement or a fringe element of an established party? The answer partly depends, of course, on the broader cultural and institutional ecology of a particular political system. In the USA, the cultural legacy of the Civil War tended to reinforce the two-party system, as did the voting and districting procedures (plurality voting in single-member districts) adopted by most states. In a presidential system, it is rare for third parties to be able to play kingmaker for coalition governments. Without changing the fundamental rules of the electoral game, becoming a fringe element of an established party may have been what economists would nowadays call "rational." Wright and his readers doubtless have their own views of how well this particular symbiosis has worked out.

### Lessons and Prompts

Wright has supplied useful conceptual categories for understanding how historical cases from different political-cultural traditions can offer guidance, both within and outside those traditions, to present and future attempts at democratic reform. This is certainly a signal achievement for any effort to make social science serve public life, as opposed to the purely contemplative aims traditionally associated with utopianism since Plato's *Republic*.

*Lesson 1: the strategic priority of politics.* The first lesson to emerge from the Populists' story seems to transcend cultural boundaries and is embodied in what

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<sup>70</sup> Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, pp. 422–458.

might be called Wright's "preface to democratic theory."<sup>71</sup> Most people most of the time take democracy as a means to other more important things in life: fairness, dignity, security, opportunity, and so on. Therefore, Wright's point is well taken that democracy is an effort to establish political justice as a necessary but not sufficient condition of social justice. Encountering this essential cultural and rhetorical truth, the Populists found that political change was a prerequisite of their economic objectives: the latter came first in their hearts, but the former had to come first in their strategies. Wright also recognizes the role of politics as a means and, thanks to his guidance, reformers in the second Gilded Age do not have to waste time and energy relearning this lesson.

*Lesson 2: the limitations of symbiosis.* As to what form political struggle should take, Wright's tripartite typology of ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic transformation also seems to have a general, trans-cultural utility. One view of American Populism holds that the organizational hub of the movement lay in local voluntary associations, especially the Farmers' Alliance chapters and their cooperative enterprises. The decline of the movement after 1896, on this account, was a result of interstitial decay, a diversion of energies into the national electoral party. When ruptural change is eschewed entirely, as it was by the Populists, symbiotic appeals pose a danger of diminishing the interstitial foundations of a movement. Perhaps symbiotic strategies should only be pursued from a position of strength—"strength" meaning precisely ruptural and interstitial capacities.

*Lesson 3: the importance of democratic statism.* The third party and its agenda of institutional reform embodied something between ruptural and symbiotic transformation: a "political insurgency" meant to alter the basic partisan and institutional landscape without relying on either violent revolution or negotiated compromise. The Populists' institutional reforms, of course, were tethered to the modern idea that voting is effective participation, and in this regard their practical failure may owe something to imaginative and intellectual failure. Their most successful proposals involved the direct election of US senators and state-level initiative and referendum. Possibly they would now recognize the weaknesses of this "direct democracy" and would accept things like the Porto Alegre project as superior alternatives. Another weakness was that they never thought seriously about alternative ways of financing campaigns, and options like the "patriot card" scheme offer a considerable advance. And they paid little notice to one of the staple institutions of radical democracy in the Anglo-American tradition: the jury. We now have abundant research on how far deliberative polling can and cannot work as well as a burgeoning literature on how randomly selected juries might wield power, even at the level of the modern state.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps the tasks of party building and institutional reconstruction involve a fourth type of strategy (neither ruptural, interstitial, nor symbiotic) and require a distinct mode of analysis. In any case, before adopting the sort of symbiotic strategies that the Populists found to be self-defeating, or beating a retreat into the interstitial precincts recently fashionable among the anti-statist elements in academic political theory, we

<sup>71</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Chapter 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155–179; J.S. Maloy, *The Colonial American Origins of Modern Democratic Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 186–189; J.P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Chapters 5, 8.

should ask ourselves whether the idea of a democratic state has been given a fair chance.

*Lesson 4: the potential of agriculture and money.* The Populists had a flair for bread-and-butter issues, and today people still need to put food on their tables through participation in complex monetized economies. If unexpected, exogenous shocks were to open windows of opportunity for radical change in the future, agriculture and money might be part of the cause and would in any case be high on the post-ruptural agenda. Any movement of political reform, democratic or otherwise, must have something to say about “how we’re going to build a sustainable financial system” and “how we’re going to feed people” when the old ways are defunct. The vast, transnational systems currently responsible for agriculture and money pose key analytic challenges to social scientists wishing to carry the Real Utopias project further.

*Lesson 5: the indispensability of rhetoric.* The paradox of “real utopias” points to the key problem of uniting science and rhetoric in particular cultural contexts, but the overall vision behind Wright’s book has a fatal rhetorical flaw. At times realist modesty gives way to utopian fanaticism. As the “socialist compass” is introduced, for example, Wright says we should be prepared to embark on a “voyage of exploration” with no guaranteed destination and no concrete sense of what might lie ahead.<sup>73</sup> This kind of intrepid voyage is what the Pilgrims faced before they crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1620, and the parallel reminds us that the Pilgrims persevered through hard times to establish a foundation on which much grander things were much later built. Maybe that is precisely how a realistic democrat must think. But the Pilgrims represented a hard core of religious fanatics, and they were one of a handful of success stories among dozens of abject failures in the overseas colonies of the time. Who else but a band of desperate utopians will continue embarking on similar journeys? People are needed who know what they are up against yet feel called by higher powers to undertake great risks in defiance of the ordinary human desire for practical pay-offs; people who do not feel a higher calling for this kind of perilous journey, or who do not enjoy perilous journeys for their own sake, or who do not have the job security and guaranteed income to make such journeys seem less than perilous, are excluded.

The overarching hypothesis suggested by the Populists’ story, then, is that the Real Utopias project reflects the needs of middle-class leftists who are driven by a quasi-religious sense of mission to remake the world in the image of something they choose to call “democratic empowerment.” The Populists could certainly vouch for the rhetorical and organizational power of faith-based fervor, but they built their movement on massive congregations (mainly Methodists and Baptists) not tiny sects. Most humans aspire to the realization of modest social and economic goals under schemes of less than democratic empowerment. If they could be convinced that nothing less than democracy is necessary to meet their modest material and cultural needs, they could respond either by lowering their goals still further in order to live with something less than democracy, or else by stepping up to the demanding democratic regimen. But the challenge of taking the latter rather than the former option depends more on the localisms of rhetoric than the universalisms of science.

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<sup>73</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, pp. 107–109.

## Building Real Utopias: The Emerging Project of Evolutionary Reconstruction

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In his famous 1845 eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Karl Marx declared: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>74</sup> By "change" he meant systemic change, of course. It is a message that has all too often fallen by the wayside in the academic and political debates among the modern "philosophers" of our time. Today, more than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the failure of state socialism in the Soviet Union and in what was then Eastern (now Central) Europe still looms large. But the question remains: "If you don't want capitalism and you don't want socialism, what do you want?"

In tackling precisely this question, Erik Olin Wright performs a valuable service.<sup>75</sup> Although we differ from Wright's approach in certain key areas, three of his contributions are particularly worth highlighting at the outset: First, Wright develops a typology for examining capitalist, state, and popular power in distinct social, political, and economic spheres. Second, Wright's idea of "hybrid structures" provides a useful framework for thinking about a range of potential political-economic regimes with different combinations of state, capitalist, and social power. Third, stemming from these first two contributions, Wright provides a fresh way of thinking about the problem of transition from present day American corporate capitalism, for example, to a more democratic political economy.

The economic, social, and state power spheres that Wright develops, of course, are interconnected and not fully independent of each other. Nonetheless, Wright is able to use his distinctions to illuminate possible axes of resistance to capitalism. These include ways to leverage the obvious tensions between democracy and capitalism, but also less obvious areas of tension, such as a variety of divergent logics among business leaders and government officials.

Also important is Wright's emphasis on hybrid structures—"no actual economy has been purely capitalist" Wright reminds us.<sup>76</sup> The point is at once simple and obvious, yet profound. Too often, progressives and radicals get mired in a debate between the twin poles of reform and revolution. Reform, of course, is often devoid of significant impact—and, these days, increasingly so in the United States where globalization and the decline of labor unions have combined to constrain liberal politicians, especially in the arena of economic policy. Meanwhile, revolution vacillates between being a meaningless Madison Avenue advertising slogan or, if taken seriously, a seemingly impossible outcome.

If reform is devoid of meaning and revolution unviable, why should anyone be surprised when we encounter political apathy? Wright points us in a different direction: the question is not revolution or reform—rather, it is about using the levers of power that we do have, where we have them, to effect change that, over

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<sup>74</sup> <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>>.

<sup>75</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

time, *may* lead to a different kind of economic system. For example, a different kind of hybrid social-political-economic system, where he hopes socialist and democratic values predominate over capitalist ones rather than vice versa.

Wright advances the discussion by identifying three different paths or ways of thinking about transition: one involves the pursuit of reforms that have system-transforming potential (he calls this a *symbiotic* path, because the reform benefits the system while *also* increasing the chances for long-term systemic change); a second involves traditional organizing for a revolution (he calls this a *ruptural* path); and a third involves creating a new economy in the shell of the old (he calls this an *interstitial* path because development of the new economy occurs “in the seams” of the old economy). Consistent with his emphasis on hybrid economic systems, Wright acknowledges that most successful social movements will involve a *combination* of these three strategies.

Although *Envisioning Real Utopias* makes a substantial contribution to thinking about the question of systemic change, Wright leaves many questions unanswered. In particular, Wright says little about the nature of the specific structural context facing countries like the United States today, and hence little about what *form* of hybrid strategy might be most useful in the present moment.

Wright instead highlights a number of micro processes of progressive social change, which he calls “practical utopias.” Examples include Wikipedia, the Quebec social economy, participatory budgeting, and the Mondragón cooperatives of Spain. One could quibble with Wright’s choices—for example, whether Wikipedia is emancipatory or the degree to which participatory budgeting provides meaningful democratic empowerment—but even accepting Wright’s selections, broader questions remain regarding how these “real utopias” can become part of a broader social movement.

We do not pretend to have complete answers, but we do believe recent theoretical and practical work done by the Democracy Collaborative can help advance the discussion. In particular, we wish to focus on the importance of the political-economic context and the critical role of certain forms of *institution building* to help create a movement for systemic change. Additionally, we wish to argue that in the present historical juncture a strategy of what we call *evolutionary reconstruction* offers the most promising path for long-term, progressive social, political, and economic change in the specific context facing the United States. Furthermore, we suggest that the concept of a *pluralist commonwealth* provides a practical vision of a destination point that is, to use Wright’s terms, a viable hybrid form that maximizes democratic values within an economic framework that allows for centralization where necessary, but does so while maximizing decentralized economic control wherever it is viable.

The argument we advance is based on three principal assumptions. First, we contend that the radical decline of organized labor *as an institution* in the United States from 35% of the labor force to 6.9% in the private sector (11.9% overall, and, unfortunately, still falling) requires that progressive politics build new institutional foundations. If not, it will likely continue to remain in an essentially defensive and ultimately declining posture.

Second, we maintain that such a new longer-term institution-building effort—one that at its core is based on the democratization of capital, beginning first at the community level and then increasing in scale as time goes on—is both essential and possible. At some level, such a strategy might be defined, in Wright’s terms, as

interstitial. This is accurate, as far as it goes, but it also misses the essence of the strategy. The critical point is not simply to “occupy” space in the seams of the current system, but to build a political and economic base that both expands over time and also, in Gramscian terms, fosters a new idea of what is possible and thereby develops an effective and understandable counter-hegemonic vision and base of organizations that can ultimately alter the system.

Third, we believe that our current historical context is likely to create conditions that slowly open the way to such a strategy, and also help compel needed awareness. The framework that Wright provides is valuable, but putting the argument in the historical context faced by specific nations is important in order to analyze the actual options we face. Only by doing so can individuals and groups in diverse settings begin to answer the historic question: *What is to be done?*

At the center of the traditional reform theory, at least in social democratic experience (in Wright’s terms, *symbiotic* strategy), is the hope that the political and economic power of the large corporation can be contained economically and politically through political mobilization, aided, abetted, and bolstered by the organizational and financial power of labor unions. The “main finding” of international research on the relationship of union membership to political outcomes in industrialized countries, the late Seymour Martin Lipset and Noah Meltz observe, is: “support for unions is associated with social democratic strength.”<sup>77</sup>

Studies by Emory sociologist Alexander Hicks of European social democracy also reveal a “[near]-perfect relationship between mid-century [social] program consolidation and working class strength.” Yale University political-economist David Cameron adds: “The existence of a relatively high level of unionization is . . . an important prerequisite for enduring leftist government.”<sup>78</sup> Clearly, recent decades have been marked by the rise of the Right, especially in the United States. Although globalization, automation, and the rise of neoliberalism internationally are all factors, most important is what has *not* been present in modern American experience: the fact is that previous “progressive” eras in twentieth-century US history were highly dependent on massive global crises. The most obvious is the Great Depression, indisputably the permitting condition of the New Deal and the related rise of labor unions. (Union membership stood at a mere 12% of non-farm workers in 1929; it rose to 26.9% by 1940.)

Fewer still dispute that the “post-war boom” was essential for the Great Society reforms of the 1960s. Only a few analysts, however, have underscored the obvious point that this post-war boom is inseparable from the conditions created by World War II, the second extremely unusual twentieth-century crisis-driven radicalization of historical context. Notably, World War II further extended labor union power—from its 26.9% level in 1940 to 35.4% in 1945.

Recognition of how unusual the “post-war boom” context was is instructive: the post-war period was a brief moment in political time when high economic

<sup>77</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset and Noah M. Meltz, *The Paradox of American Unionism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander Hicks, *Social Democracy and Welfare Capitalism: A Century of Income Security Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), quotes on p. 233. David R. Cameron, “The Expansion of the Public Economy: A Comparative Analysis,” *American Political Science Review* 72:4 (December 1978), p. 1257.

growth and high tax revenues coincided with the years of twentieth-century labor unions' temporarily enhanced power.

Confronting the realities of labor's decline is not easy, but realities they are. This means, quite simply, that along with the decline, traditional reform strategies lost a good part of their power base; and, in our judgment, unless some new institutional source of political capacity is developed, advocates will likely remain in a defensive and weakened posture.

Viewed in this larger perspective, "the dog that did not bark," Sherlock Holmes' famous insight into what was not present, looms large. Absent in the United States in recent decades is the key driving force behind past great periods of reform: Namely, massive crisis (and intimately related after-effects).

What this larger historic pattern tells us is that unusual crises can shift the rule, but the rule in most areas is substantially one of the stalemating of traditional reform. In the US context, at least, in our view, the symbiotic strategies that Wright highlights hold little promise, much as we would concur with Wright's suggestion that we pursue such strategies in those rare moments when opportunities for traditional liberal reforms are available (and, of course, it is important where possible, more commonly, to defend past gains).

We maintain, however, a cautious and paradoxical optimism that a new (and potentially newly energized) institutional way forward is possible. Our optimism stems from two observations. First, just below the surface of media attention literally thousands of grassroots institution-changing, wealth-democratizing efforts—which we have labeled *community wealth building*—have been quietly developing throughout the nation for several decades.<sup>79</sup> Although typically *without* a conscious movement, these correspond very roughly to the *interstitial* strategies that Wright highlights. These include more than ten thousand businesses owned in whole or part by over ten million employees and one hundred and thirty million Americans who are members of various urban, agricultural, and credit union cooperatives.

Second, related to this is a "paradoxical dynamic" that is generating more forms of institutional change even as traditional reforms falter. The state of Ohio offers an illustration of just what this can mean over time in one of many now ongoing sectoral paths of change. In 1977, the collapse of Youngstown Sheet and Tube threw five thousand workers onto the streets. Inspired by a young steel worker, an ecumenical religious coalition put forward an innovative plan for community-worker ownership that captured widespread media attention, the support of Ohio's Republican governor, and an initial two hundred million dollars in loan guarantees from the Carter Administration.<sup>80</sup>

Corporate and political maneuvering ultimately undercut the Youngstown initiative. But its impact was nonetheless ongoing, especially in Ohio, where the *idea* of worker-ownership became widespread in large measure due to the

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<sup>79</sup> For more information, see Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland, *Building Wealth: The New Asset-based Approach to Solving Social and Economic Problems* (Washington, DC: Aspen, 2005). See also: <<http://www.community-wealth.org>>, which tracks a wide range of community economic institutions.

<sup>80</sup> For more information, see: Staughton Lynd, *Fight Against Shutdowns: Youngstown's Steel Mill Closings* (San Pedro, CA: Singlejack Books, 1982); Terry F. Buss and F. Stevens Redburn, *Shutdown at Youngstown: Public Policy for Mass Unemployment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983).

Youngstown effort, as well as the persistence of policy failures and resulting pain throughout the state. In the decades since the Youngstown collapse, numerous employee-owned companies have been developed in Ohio. Individual lives were also changed and inspired by the Youngstown effort. Importantly, the late John Logue, a Professor at Kent State University, established the Ohio Employee Ownership Center, which provides technical assistance to help firms become worker owned throughout the state.<sup>81</sup>

At the heart of this trajectory of paradoxical evolution in the wake of the failure of traditional policies is a process of partially forced institutional innovation—a process that, once underway, suggests further possibilities. Recently, a major effort in Cleveland has built upon the long developing institutional work in Ohio. The “Cleveland model,” now underway in that city, involves an integrated complex of worker-owned cooperative enterprises targeted in significant part at the three billion dollars in purchasing power of such large-scale “anchor institutions” as the Cleveland Clinic, University Hospital, and Case Western Reserve University. The complex also includes a revolving fund so that profits earned help establish new ventures as time goes on.

The first of the linked co-ops is a state-of-the-art commercial laundry that provides clean linens for area hospitals, nursing homes, and hotels. The thoroughly “green” company uses (and only has to heat) less than one third as much water per pound of laundry as competitors. The enterprise pays above-market wages, provides health insurance, and competes successfully against commercial laundries. Another company, a solar cooperative, provides weatherization services and installs, owns, and maintains solar panels on the rooftops of large university, hospital, and civic buildings.

A commercial hydroponic greenhouse that covers 3.25 acres and will produce three million heads of lettuce and three hundred thousand pounds of herbs a year broke ground in October 2011. Additional businesses are being developed. Organizers aim to have at least ten worker-owned cooperatives up and running within the next five years.

The United States is the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. By the end of the twenty-first century it will have the technological capacity to increase the income of its citizens many times over or to radically reduce work time and thereby allow a new flowering of democracy, liberty, and personal and community creativity. The new century could be—and should be—one of innovation, hope, even excitement. Yet few see it this way. The future appears to be an era of great economic and political peril.

The kind of change that we believe is possible in the United States involves an unusual combination of strategic approaches. Like reform, it involves step-by-step non-violent change. But like revolution, the process aims to develop quite different institutional structures to replace traditional corporate forms over time. It might appropriately be called “evolutionary reconstruction.”

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<sup>81</sup> The leaders of the Youngstown effort were fully aware of the implications of what they were doing: they judged that even if it failed, the dramatic effort might help suggest possibilities for other, future efforts that built upon its central themes. Ohio Employee Ownership Center, *Impact on Ohio's Economy* (Kent, OH: OEOC, February 20, 2009); John Logue and Jacquelyn Yates, *The Real World of Employee Ownership* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

Critically, such a strategy is not simply “interstitial.” Rather it aims, first, to begin to slowly *displace* corporate power with new institutions. Moreover, it provides a new power base, giving local mayors, for instance, an alternative to giving in to corporate demands for tax incentives. A second key element is ideological in the best sense: such efforts introduce in a very practical form new ways to think about democratizing wealth; hence they begin to challenge traditional ideological stereotypes.

They also stress the strategic importance of focusing on *community-encompassing* efforts (as illustrated, for instance, by the Cleveland model). These move beyond a narrow focus on one or another worker-owned firm, each with its own interests and outlook. The explicit goal is to develop firms that nurture the broader community as a basis for democratic practice in general—and also as critical to reconstructing a culture of community, necessary for any broader social vision and economic strategy. The idea of a “community sustaining” economic and political system offers a compelling—and, we believe, ultimately necessary—vision that takes us beyond the piecemeal nature of the diverse avenues of tactical and strategic approaches that Wright tends to emphasize.

A politics based on evolutionary reconstructive principles does not abandon reform when it can achieve gains, but such a politics explicitly is a politics of historical perspective and commitment to the long haul.

We have characterized the overall approach as a “Pluralist Commonwealth.” We use “Pluralist” because the system it describes involves diverse, plural, and decentralized institutional forms of democratizing wealth. We use “Commonwealth” because common to all the forms is ownership of wealth and capital by the many rather than the few. Four principles underlie the democratic theory of the systemic model: (1) democratization of wealth; (2) community, both locally and in general, as a guiding theme; (3) decentralization in general; and (4) substantial but not complete forms of democratic planning in support of community, and to achieve longer-term economic and ecological goals. In many areas, much as in Cleveland, decentralized worker co-ops and related enterprises, linked to local publicly influenced institutions, appear likely to work effectively to meet democratic, social equity, and economic goals. (At the time of writing efforts are also underway in Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Washington, DC, and elsewhere.)

“Evolutionary reconstructive” institution changing efforts of this kind are not restricted to community development. Dozens of states, for instance, are considering plans for state-owned banks like that of North Dakota, and even more are exploring single-payer health programs. General Motors was nationalized in the recent crisis, and there is now also related exploration of longer-term national strategies, including, for instance, how quasi-public national firms (perhaps jointly owned by workers) might in the future develop high-speed rail and mass transit. More broadly, we need to understand much more clearly which industries (for technological, marketing, financial, institutional power, or other embedded reasons) appear inherently likely to reach large scale under any system—and with such scale, attain sufficient power to compromise the effectiveness of traditional anti-trust and regulatory strategies unless taken directly into the public domain.

Often activists and academics alike avoid questions of fundamental political vision and democratic theory. Traditional reformers think systemic change impossible; hence, the question is irrelevant. Radical activists sometimes fall back on largely unexamined rhetorical statements as they demand a different but often

undefined “system.” Wright’s work helps us move forward to a number of new categories of change. A close look at evolving institutional change opens the possibility of moving beyond the avoidance of larger systemic design questions, both in the economic realm and also in terms of democratic political theory. Doing so is ultimately likely to add both rigor and new energies to the long term “evolutionary reconstruction” of our nation. We need to know clearly where we are going and where we want to go. And we need to begin to face and debate matters of structure, principle, and theory now and as we go.

## Emancipatory Politics, Emancipatory Political Science: On Erik Olin Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias*

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This article examines Erik Olin Wright’s concept of an “emancipatory social science.” I consider two key questions: First, whether “emancipatory social science” makes sense as the basis for a systematic research program that might be embraced by political theorists and political scientists; and second, what additions or emendations to the concept, as presented by Wright in *Envisioning Real Utopias*<sup>82</sup> (henceforth “*Real Utopias*”), political science might offer. The thrust of my argument is as follows: Wright’s framework of an emancipatory social science does in fact lay the basis for a systematic research program that progressive and left political scientists could and should take up. Moreover, Wright’s method of surveying actual social practices as a way to consider what sorts of alternative arrangements we might consider bears a family resemblance to Aristotle’s search for the best regime in *The Politics*.<sup>83</sup> But consideration of *politics* as a partially autonomous realm of activity generally takes a back seat in *Real Utopias*, and consideration of the specific politics of our time and place is almost totally absent. Given the purposes of the book, this is understandable and perhaps necessary, but *Real Utopias*’s relative inattention to these questions leaves plenty of room for political scientists to make vital contributions to an emancipatory social science. Here I argue that arguments for emancipatory, “real utopian” approaches can and should be connected to increasingly vocal criticisms of American “democracy” and its problem-solving capacity articulated by mainstream political scientists and political theorists. In a short concluding section I consider *Real Utopias*’s relevance beyond the academy as a political intervention, particularly in light of the Occupy Wall Street (“#OWS”) movement of autumn 2011.

### Defining Emancipatory Social Science

What is emancipatory social science? Wright says that such a social science involves three principal components: first, “elaborating a systematic diagnosis

<sup>82</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

<sup>83</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

and critique of the world as it exists"; second, "envisioning viable alternatives"; third, "understanding the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of transformation."<sup>84</sup> We soon learn that the first task, diagnosis and critique, necessarily invokes normative standards of evaluation. Wright's critique of capitalism is taken up from the point of view of what he calls a "radical democratic egalitarian" conception of social and political justice, premised on the ideas that "all people [sh]ould have broadly equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives" (social justice) and that "all people [sh]ould have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things which affect their lives" (political justice).<sup>85</sup> Wright goes on to specify that political justice involves both individual freedom (ability to make choices that affect one's own life) and a share in collective freedom (having an equal voice in collective choice that affects communal conditions).

This framework allows for an expansive view of what is to count as "emancipatory social science." Plausibly, in this view, discrete empirical studies of what Wright terms the "facts of oppression," or which attempt to show "how American society works" count as contributing to the work of emancipatory social science. Wright himself is engaged in work of this kind.<sup>86</sup>

But an important implication of Wright's view is that not just *any* kind of discrete empirical work should count as emancipatory. A study of, say, the marginal effects of increases or decreases in welfare expenditure on a recipient's likelihood of successfully finding employment, or of the marginal effects of minimum wage increases on total employment, both concern problems of poverty and issues facing poor people. But such studies are not inherently emancipatory for two reasons. First, the research is generally carried out within the assumed confines of the existing political-economic system. Second, the implicit purpose of such research often is to assist the managers of that system in making policy that better advances their goals. It is not to effect an emancipation of the welfare recipients or minimum-wage workers, or a transformation of the socio-economic conditions which create large numbers of poor people, but rather, at best, to effect some gradual improvement in the lives of such persons without having to challenge the fundamentals of the political and social order. In contrast, I take it that an emancipatory social science of *critique* must take as its premises both the normative aims Wright endorses as well as the view that an alternative is possible and achievable. To have an emancipatory character, descriptive work examining "how the system works" must proceed from the premise that alternative, fundamentally different social arrangements are available.

The work of criticism is one dimension of emancipatory social science. A second, equally important dimension is the notion of developing a science of emancipation—that is, a systematic way of thinking about what alternatives are possible, desirable, *and* available to us. At first glance, the use of the term "science" in this context is unsettling: it seems to call up echoes of Marxist determinism, and

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<sup>84</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 10.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>86</sup> See Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How it Really Works* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

the idea that with sufficient knowledge we can predict how history will—or must—move. But in fact Wright’s aims are very different. He explicitly rejects the traditional Marxist conception of an inevitable collapse of capitalism to be effected as a result of capitalism’s internal crises, as well as the growing power of a revolutionary working class. Rather, what Wright is up to is a systemic sorting of different ideas for possible futures: looking around at the world as it is, and seeing what interesting experiences, experiments, and partial precedents we can find that might help us to forge a realistic utopia.

### **Aristotle’s Politics and Wright’s Emancipatory Social Science—A Comparison**

The spirit of this enterprise carries considerable analogy to the kind of political science pioneered by Aristotle in *The Politics*.<sup>87</sup> In that book, Aristotle engages in open-ended consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of political arrangements, as well as consideration of the stability and instability of different sorts of constitutions. Aristotle uses the word “constitution” to refer to the specific mechanisms of political governance (“distribution of offices”), but he analyzes these mechanisms in conjunction with the system of property and social practices that define particular social orders. Like Wright, Aristotle is taken by the idea that functional, desirable constitutions are usually hybrids, and, like Wright’s, Aristotle’s judgments about the disadvantages of different regimes as well as the nature of the “best” regime are informed by explicit normative criteria.

The differences between Aristotle’s political science and Wright’s effort to discover emancipatory possibilities for twenty-first century societies are equally instructive, however. First, Aristotle’s view of the political community is shaped by his ontology of human nature, which includes features widely rejected today (such as the assumption of patriarchal control of the household).<sup>88</sup> Like Aristotle, Wright is committed to the idea of human flourishing, but his utopian thoughts do not hinge on the idea of realizing a putatively natural order.

Second, Aristotle’s *Politics* involves the study of city-states. Wright in contrast is considering a political-economic system, capitalism, within which the state is embedded. Wright’s view thus reflects the classic sociological understanding of the state as a subset of capitalism, rather than as a wholly autonomous entity that has the supreme power in shaping the life of the community. To be sure, the state is still an important part of thinking about contemporary utopias, and Wright devotes considerable energy to the questions of both how to create more democratic states and how state power might be constructively used in shaping a new system. Further, Aristotle himself considers questions of property and its distribution, and makes clear that the question of class and social power is critical in describing how polities operate. The idea that political power is closely tied to social class is central to Aristotle’s thinking about politics,<sup>89</sup> but he did not have to grapple with the idea that the state could be dominated by the internal logic of a system of accumulation and economic growth.

<sup>87</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*.

<sup>88</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 5–6.

<sup>89</sup> This is not to suggest that Aristotle’s conception of class groupings maps neatly onto the familiar analysis of class relations within capitalism provided by Marx.

Third, whereas for Aristotle regime stability is the elusive goal, for Wright regime stability is in a sense the problem to be overcome. Aristotle can assume that coups, revolutions, and other modes of regime change are as common as grass; while it is important to study why they happen and how they can be prevented, the internal mechanics of such change requires no special explanation. Similarly, the method of how a new constitution comes into being is straightforward: at the revolutionary moment there is a lawgiver (or lawgivers) who designs the constitutional architecture. Wright, in contrast, needs to show that change is possible within a system that usually appears fundamentally stable, and/or that the apparent stability of the system is either illusionary or temporary. But this observation also illustrates the deep similarity between what Aristotle and Wright are up to. For both thinkers, the effort to engage in systemic classification of different kinds of regimes is informed by a sense that the future is open-ended, and not necessarily determined by the limits of existing institutions.

### Beyond Dichotomies: The Socialist Compass

While Wright is very clear that a realistic utopia that realizes radical democratic goals must be a hybrid system, his account does not rest upon a dichotomous specification of what constitutes a “socialist” as opposed to a “capitalist” regime. There is social power, statist power, and economic power in any hybrid system, and the character of the system overall depends on the relative balance of power between them at any given moment. Political-economic systems are thus seen to lie on a three-dimensional continuum, with “socialism,” “statism,” and “capitalism” serving as ideal types rather than as literal descriptions of any actual regime. Wright then goes on to provide seven different models of how the economy, state, and civil society might be arranged so as to promote democratic control over the economy: statist socialism, social democratic economic regulation, associational democracy, “social capitalism,” cooperative market economy, social economy, and participatory socialism.<sup>90</sup> Importantly, Wright does not see these models as mutually exclusive, at least not at this stage of development.

This view can be contrasted with conceptions of “socialism” which associate the concept with some specific set of ownership arrangements. For social power to predominate in the economy, effective control of the bulk of financial and productive capital must be socialized. Wright explicitly agrees on this point,<sup>91</sup> but I take theorists of full-blown participatory socialism or “economic democracy” such as David Schweickart and Gar Alperovitz to be suggesting (or assuming) that there are decisive tipping points between one kind of system and another, and that the image of a hybrid is potentially misleading.<sup>92</sup> In terms of the seven models provided by Wright, Schweickart and Alperovitz would likely deny that social democratic regulation that does not alter control of capital is an emancipatory mode of politics. A system in which capitalist interests control the bulk of productive capital will tend to reproduce itself and place strong limits on how

<sup>90</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, pp. 131–144.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>92</sup> See Gar Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Democracy Collaborative, 2011); and David Schweickart, *After Capitalism*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

much social-izing of capital and society is possible; creating a stable social-ist economy and society would require ownership and control patterns over capital that decisively tipped in favor of social interests. Crossing that tipping point into decisively different patterns would of course involve what Wright terms “ruptural” change. Wright might reply that this critique of regulatory strategies taken alone is accurate, but that such strategies might have a useful role to play in conjunction with the other strategies, many of which do target control of capital.

In practice, the differences between Wright’s pluralistic account of what useful social-ist politics consists of and Alperovitz’s own vision of a “Pluralist Commonwealth” and the pragmatic politics needed to advance it are, in my view, small. But there is one notable difference: whether there is in fact value in offering (like Alperovitz or Schweickart) a fully worked out conception of what an alternative political-economic system would look like—a very clear answer to the question “if you don’t like capitalism, what is it you want?”—rather than simply a somewhat open-ended list of emancipatory strategies that assumes that these strategies might evolve in different ways in different places as a result of specific local conditions and the contingency of politics. The issue here is whether Wright’s “Socialist Compass” is sufficient to inspire individuals and guide social movements seeking to build a more social-ist economy, or whether a more specific “Socialist Architecture” of the kind provided by Alperovitz and Schweickart is required (especially if ruptural change is ever to be achieved).

### **Real Utopias and American Politics**

In considering the relevance of Wright’s work for American politics today, it will be helpful to introduce one more Aristotelian distinction: the distinction between critiquing a state on the basis of its departure from the best sort of regime, and critiquing a state on the basis of its departure from its own stated or intended values. This distinction is quite relevant in discussing Wright’s work, because Wright has framed the project of emancipatory social science in terms of ideals, and quite demanding ones at that: radical democratic egalitarian conceptions of political and social justice. Wright is prepared to jettison existing features of the American political constitution, for instance, if this is necessary to achieve social transformation. An alternative approach, however, might begin with the assumption that here in the United States there are deep commitments to a certain kind of political constitution (for instance, federalist rather than unitary government) and a certain kind of political regime, namely one which permits and encourages the institution of private property. One might also add further assumptions about features of political and social culture (that is, “Americans admire the rich because they wish to join them”) that might be thought to be relatively permanent. Such an analysis then asks, given this history, this starting point, and the continued strength of these institutions and this set of ideas, what ought to be done to better realize this system’s stated values and goals?

Wright’s analysis suggests that the most fundamental characteristic of American society is not its constitutional tradition or particular political culture, but rather the operation of a political-economic system—capitalism—that he regards as unjust and severely limiting of democracy. Hence, it seems fairly clear that Wright is—must be—committed to what Aristotle would term an external critique of the American regime, as opposed to an internal critique that America is not living up to its own

founding ideals. But to make that observation is also to illustrate what an uphill task “emancipation,” so described, faces in the United States: it seems that it would involve not only forging new institutions based on different principles than capitalism, but also treating the American tradition of constitutional law and the characteristic political cultures of the United States more as enemies than allies. When we consider some recent decisions of the United States Supreme Court that have lent support to advocates of political oligarchy, perhaps that is the only honest position that can be taken by someone with Wright’s normative commitments. But surely if there is any route to emancipation it must, at least in its initial stages, draw on ideas or ideals widely (not necessarily universally) held in the political culture, and/or on *new* ideas (or new formulations of ideas) that have a reasonable hope of attracting the support of a considerable portion of the population.

Wright provides a generalized account of how to envision a structural alternative to capitalism. He provides almost no discussion of the specifically *American* obstacles to developing such an alternative. I have in mind here not just the weakness of labor (which Wright notes), but questions of race, of our distinctively federalist system, of our sprawling land use patterns and the politics this form of development characteristically produces, of the extreme ideological hostility to not just “socialism” but the state itself, of the relentless pro-corporate legal philosophy now governing the country via the Supreme Court, of the cult of the Founding Fathers and the treatment of the Constitution as a work of quasi-divine eternal wisdom, and of the simplistic “everyday libertarian” ideology that has a strong pull on the political thinking of many Americans.<sup>93</sup> In short, the kinds of issues that preoccupy students of American political science and that are typically highlighted in our work do not take center stage in Wright’s account. To be fair, Wright discusses many particularities of American society in his excellent critique *American Society: How it Really Works*, co-authored with Joel Rogers, so we can be certain Wright is not ignorant of these questions. Yet, these peculiar features of the American landscape play almost no role in the discussion offered in *Real Utopias*. It seems hard to believe that Wright thinks that radical social change, if it happens, will happen identically in different kinds of capitalist societies. The more likely explanation is that he thinks he has identified generalizable *problematics* that democratic egalitarians in recognizably capitalist societies will have to come to terms with, and also suggests a number of ideas about empowerment in the state and economy that have general applicability for the direction of future efforts. The work of figuring out how this problematic might be addressed in any particular society is thus necessarily the work of another book, another set of analyses.

This is a reasonable explanation for why *Real Utopias* does not dwell on the particular circumstances of the US or any other capitalist society. Yet it needs to be said that we need that follow-up book—I think of it perhaps as Erik Olin Wright meeting the latter-day Robert Dahl—as urgently as we need the overarching framework Wright has put on the table.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, some learned people have

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<sup>93</sup> See Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel, *The Myth of Ownership: Taxes and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>94</sup> Gar Alperovitz, “Neither Revolution Nor Reform: A New Strategy for the Left,” *Dissent* (Fall 2011), provides one such analysis, focused on banking issues. See also Robert Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

already come to the conclusion that the United States is now a land “beyond justice,” a country where democratic and egalitarian aspirations have simply lost out to more potent ideologies and stronger social forces. I am very hesitant to accept that conclusion, in part out of deep respect for those who have struggled in the past in this country for social and economic justice and created an indigenous liberation tradition, and in part because there is no hope of the global community addressing its shared problems (especially the climate change problem) without a sea change in American politics and policy. Yet, at first, second, and third glances, there seems to be much to the view that the US has now been so captured by corporate interests, and its populace so anesthetized to corporate rule and uninterested in radical politics, that persons interested in building a model of a democratic, egalitarian society should give up the ghost and focus their efforts elsewhere.<sup>95</sup> What signs or portents can be pointed to that might help us believe that even in the US, and maybe especially in the US, constructive steps towards radical systemic change can be taken, and that social agents and social movements might emerge determined to take—or forge—those steps?

### **Towards an Emancipatory, Problem-solving Political Science**

In the final sections of this article, I consider possible answers to that question from two vantage points: that of progressive political scientists interested in taking up the framework of emancipatory social science, and that of on-the-ground radical activists, as exemplified by those in the OWS movement.

Wright’s account of social change makes clear that he believes symbiotic strategies—strategies aimed at solving widely shared problems while also enhancing the position and power of non-elites (or the “working class”)—have a crucial role to play in utopian politics, even though they do not directly displace elites or alter the basic terms of the system. This insight might be fruitfully married to the deepened, almost panicked, concern voiced in recent years by many political theorists and political scientists about both the weakened condition of American democracy and its seeming inability to meaningfully address major problems.

The James Madison Award Lecture at the 2011 APSA Meetings in Seattle, given by democratic theorist Jane Mansbridge, is an excellent statement of this view. Mansbridge’s talk, “On the Importance of Getting Things Done,” begins by observing that American politics has entered a period of “drift,” in which it is unable to address “problems vaster than any that James Madison conceived,” in particular global climate change.<sup>96</sup> This incapacity is directly related, Mansbridge argues, to both the growing concentration of wealth and income over the past four decades and the greater ease with which such money and capital is converted into political influence, in a mutually reinforcing cycle. This critique is familiar,

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<sup>95</sup>This view is increasingly common among progressive political theorists. See for instance the highly pessimistic assessment of Sheldon Wolin in his *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>96</sup>Jane Mansbridge, “On the Importance of Getting Things Done,” James Madison Lecture, given at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, 2011. Published in *PS: Political Science and Politics* 45 (January 2012), pp. 1–8. Quote from p. 1.

but the interesting move Mansbridge makes is insisting that a democratic theory of *resistance* to these trends, while quite prevalent within academic political theory, is inadequate to meet them. Addressing both the practical problems before us and the underlying structural deficiencies of current democratic practice necessarily will require a positive theory of *democratic action*—that is, an account of how things might actually get done in a democratically legitimate manner. Such an account cannot shy away from the reality that *coercion*—the use of state power—is a necessary ingredient of democratic action (particularly when the aim is to rein in or transform corporate power).

Mansbridge's account, read in light of Wright's work, suggests the path an emancipatory *political* science might take as a research program. Mansbridge's emphasis on problem-solving and getting things done invites not just a critique of the political status quo, but also creative and emancipatory thinking about what "real utopian" solutions to these problems would entail. The real payoff from such thinking is in showing that "utopian" approaches—that is, approaches that incorporate a redistribution of power and wealth as a central component—are actually more realistic approaches to solving a given problem than proposed solutions that leave the current structures of capitalism in place.

A paradigmatic example is that of climate change. At a broad level, coping with climate change and achieving large-scale reductions in carbon emissions are difficult if not impossible to square with an economy predicated on continual growth; but movement towards a "steady-state" economy would obviously require a significant departure from capitalism, and it would (paradoxically) require that citizens be offered more rather than less economic security in order to undercut pressures towards growth. (When a significant number of citizens are economically insecure, that makes the argument that growth is needed in order to generate the resources needed to satisfy the needs of the insecure politically attractive.) So, movement towards something like a guaranteed income for individuals and households is probably a precondition of building support for a less growth-oriented economy. Likewise, stabilizing the economic bases of cities is critically linked both to making central cities more attractive and stemming carbon-intensive sprawl and to building political support at the urban and regional levels for strong sustainability policies. Stabilizing cities economically, in turn, implies a shift away from a reliance on corporate forms of investment to more place-based, and, likely, more democratically organized, forms of capital that will be rooted in particular places for the long haul.

This form of argumentation—both showing that redistributions of wealth and power are needed to solve widely acknowledged problems, *and* providing examples and ideas on how to carry out such solutions in practice—offers the potential of a fusion between Mansbridge's emphasis on getting things done and Wright's real utopianism. What is critical here—to avoid eliding real utopianism into mere policy analysis—is to distinguish clearly among three types of inquiry: problem-solving for its own sake (conventional policy analysis); problem-solving in ways guided by the lens of some version of democratic egalitarianism (for example, policy analysis that explicitly prioritizes the needs of the least well off); and problem-solving in ways that redistribute power, create new, or reform existing, institutional arrangements in a more egalitarian direction, and incorporate radical democratic alternatives as a central part of the solution. We might call this type of fusion a

“Symbiotic Plus” strategy, in that it follows much of the same logic of Wright’s symbiotic strategy but more directly incorporates the type of radical democratic alternatives associated with the interstitial strategy. Underlying this idea is the view that progressive political scientists, rather than holing up in a corner to discuss utopian theories quietly among themselves, ought to boldly engage with and challenge mainstream policy analysts who simply look for better solutions within the status quo. This means taking seriously the imperative of finding effective solutions to real-world problems while also unashamedly advancing real utopian strategies as an integral part of such solutions.

### **Real Utopias and the Utopian Moment**

Between the original iteration of this symposium as an APSA panel in September 2011 and its final version in December, something unexpected happened: the emergence in American cities, starting with New York, of an ongoing protest movement offering a new frame for understanding the politics and economics of our time: the division between the financial and political elites said to be controlling the political-economic system in their own interest and that of the “99%” of ordinary persons disempowered and (often) disadvantaged by this system. In short order, the movement took on global proportions and focused media and political attention on both economic and political inequality, and showed that a large proportion of the American public is sympathetic to populist, even radical, critiques of the existing order.

The movement also has been a fascinating experiment in combining direct, face-to-face democracy with modern communication tools to reach a global audience. In his contribution to this symposium, Craig Borowiak rightly notes the role of creativity, invention, and spontaneity in both the Occupy movement and in social change more generally. Nonetheless, by the end of 2011 it was increasingly clear that to make the transition from (in Mansbridge’s terms) momentary resistance to enduring movement, some sort of coherent strategy would need to be developed. One way to evaluate the significance of Wright’s *Real Utopias* is by asking whether the basic framework of change it offers could be usable and useful to actual activists on the ground seeking to develop strategies for pursuing long-term, fundamental change.

The answer to that question, in my view, is overwhelmingly “yes”—and not just because it offers a trenchant critique of capitalism as well as a wealth of important information about practical alternatives. Its greatest value is in offering an account and explanation of how anarchist, social democratic, and revolutionary minded people might be friends, and come to see themselves as part of a common political effort. The Occupy movement has included all three orientations, sometimes in uneasy tension with one another. In discussions with and engagement in both my local movement (Occupy Richmond) and the national movement, I have generally seen an extraordinary degree of tolerance and open-mindedness. But I have also seen occasional signs of political purism—for instance, the insistence of some radicals that the movement be described as “anti-capitalist” as opposed to “populist” or “anti-plutocratic,” that the first group of people to start occupying Wall Street were the true prophets whose views and practices should carry extra weight, and that those left liberals who tried to engage the Occupiers and use the moment to put pressure

on Barack Obama were illegitimately trying to capture or water down the movement.

Wright's book strongly argues against putting any particular political strategy or orientation on a pedestal, and against making the mistake of creating false dichotomies between different modalities of political action. Pursuing interstitial strategies—directly creating alternatives—is essential work, work compatible with an anarchist orientation. Symbiotic strategies—aimed at implementing practical reforms and redistributing power in the process—also are a necessary part of any evolution towards a social-ist alternative. Finally, there is also a role for analyses showing the need, desirability, and feasibility of replacing capitalism with fundamentally different arrangements—that is, the rupturalist or revolutionary strategy—even if such strategies seem quixotic in the short run. In my view, having some clear picture of the revolutionary alternative in mind—not just a compass, but a clearer destination point—is critical in evaluating what *kinds* of interstitial and symbiotic strategies should be pursued at a given moment. (A challenging question is whether it is possible for movement participants to have meaningful discussions about long-term destination points in a non-doctrinaire fashion.)

In short, among its many other contributions, *Real Utopias* offers a blueprint for a twenty-first century left that is internally tolerant, not overrun by sectarian factionalism, and capable of recognizing the value and importance of pursuing multiple political strategies on very different tracks, all at the same time. At the same time, consonant with Mansbridge's emphasis on the need for a theory of democratic action, Wright's work takes us far beyond a politics of resistance and a mere celebration of what Sheldon Wolin famously termed "fugitive democracy."<sup>97</sup> Instead, *Real Utopias* offers a compelling framework for a politics of the long haul in the United States. In the places where that framework is necessarily incomplete, political scientists should join in the task of filling it in.

## Reply to Comments on Envisioning Real Utopias

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The contributors to this symposium—Craig Borowiak, Mark Kaswan, J.S. Maloy, Gar Alperovitz and Steve Dubb, and Thad Williamson—have raised a range of interesting and thoughtful issues in their generous discussion of my book, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.<sup>98</sup> In my comments here I will focus on three clusters of issues they discuss: (1) Gaps in my discussion of real utopian institutional proposals; (2) Limits in my account of transformation and strategy; (3) Problems in the ideological resonance of my critique of capitalism and my vision of alternatives for motivating people to struggle for social change.

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<sup>97</sup> Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations* 1 (1994), pp. 11–25.

<sup>98</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

### Institutional Proposals

Craig Borowiak and Mark Kaswan each identify important gaps in my account of real utopian institutional proposals that point us beyond capitalism: the absence of a discussion of social economy networks (Borowiak) and an incomplete account of cooperatives (Kaswan).<sup>99</sup>

Borowiak argues that while I give many examples of interesting real utopian initiatives in the social and solidarity economy and explain how these constitute prefigurative alternatives to capitalism, I generally treat these as isolated cases rather than as embedded in emerging social networks that both connect these cases and foster the development of new initiatives:

In his discussion of alternatives, Wright provides a diverse menu of possibilities for social empowerment. He tends, however, to treat the alternatives in isolation from one another. He presents a smorgasbord of economic alternatives with little indication of the connections that exist among them. Many of these and similar initiatives have evolved together. Wright also draws scant attention to alternatives whose primary contributions are to bridge other initiatives.<sup>100</sup>

Borowiak is correct that the anti-capitalist potential of social economy initiatives is likely to be enhanced by such networks, both because of the way networks may constitute a mechanism for diffusing new models of social emancipation and for the ways they provide critical aspects of coordination and support for local projects. I point to this issue in a very limited way in the discussion of the contrast between isolated worker-owned cooperatives in a capitalist market economy and worker-owned cooperatives which are interconnected in a dense network of cooperatives (which I refer to as a cooperative market economy): robust networks among cooperatives help individual cooperatives solve all sorts of problems which would make them much more precarious when they are forced to operate in strictly capitalist markets. As Borowiak argues, this point applies much more broadly to all social economy projects: expanding the prospects for sustainable anti-capitalist forms of social economy may significantly depend on embedding local projects in new forms of networks and “networks of networks” (a phrase used in the Quebec social economy movement). This also suggests that a central focus of research on real utopias should be on the design and operation of emerging networks of the social economy: understanding how these networks work, how some forms of networks facilitate energetic democratic participation more than others, how networks can undermine as well as enhance local experiments, how new information technologies can facilitate the formation of effective networks, and so on. Especially given the increasing role of the internet and social media in providing technological platforms for facilitating network formation, it is possible that new forms of networks connecting grass-roots initiatives will help dramatically expand the space for counter-system economic practices in the future.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Craig Borowiak, “Scaling up Utopias: E.O. Wright and the Search for Economic Alternatives,” *New Political Science* 34:3 (2012), pp. 359–365; Mark J. Kaswan, “Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Interstitial Transformation and the Cooperative Movement,” *New Political Science* 34:3 (2012), pp. 366–372.

<sup>100</sup> Borowiak, “Scaling up Utopias,” p. 362.

<sup>101</sup> The role of the internet in the formation of networks that enhance the anti-capitalist potential of the social and solidarity economy is an interesting example of the classic

Mark Kaswan argues that, in my discussion of cooperatives, my nearly exclusive focus on worker-owned cooperatives misses much that is radical and anti-capitalist in the broader array of cooperatives. Kaswan's diagnosis of my choice here is on target: as a Marxist, worker-owned cooperatives are attractive because they directly attack the foundations of capitalist exploitation and the capitalist organization of production, and thus seem more central to the problem of prefigurative alternatives to capitalism than consumer cooperatives or producer cooperatives. Worker cooperatives also involve a much deeper level of commitment by their members and pose greater problems of institutional design than do consumer cooperatives, and thus seem a more apt focus for a discussion of real utopias. Nevertheless, I think Kaswan makes some very telling arguments that my neglect of other forms of cooperatives—especially consumer cooperatives and credit unions—is a weakness of the analysis. In particular, he makes two very interesting interconnected points: First, worker cooperatives, by their very nature, involve exclusive membership, and thus violate a central principle of a socialist alternative. Consumer cooperatives, in contrast, are open to everyone and thus, in a way, more fully embody the idea of social ownership than do worker cooperatives. Second, in certain critical ways consumer cooperatives prefigure a much broader democratic control over the economy than do worker cooperatives. Worker cooperatives are inherently limited to democratic control over the internal operations of specific units of production. Following the ideas of Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Kaswan argues that consumer cooperatives could potentially be the central institution for the overall governance of the market:

Ultimately, where all consumers are organized into vertically integrated cooperatives, the alienation of labor would be overcome because the workers would, in effect, exchange with one another through the distributive mechanism of the cooperative system. All surplus, then, would be returned to the workers, albeit not in their role as workers but in their role as consumers. Starved of profit, capitalist enterprise would then collapse.<sup>102</sup>

While the details of this argument are absent in the Kaswan comment, the idea is very suggestive. The implication is that a cooperative market economy—one of the configurations of social empowerment I analyze that points beyond capitalism—should not be conceptualized as simply made up of worker-owned firms, but needs to include both consumer and worker cooperatives, articulated in ways that deepen the social character of ownership and democratic processes of governance over the economy.<sup>103</sup>

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*Footnote 101 continued*

Marxist theme of ways in which the development of productive forces make possible new forms of production relations.

<sup>102</sup> Kaswan, "Awakening the Sleeping Giant," p. 370.

<sup>103</sup> Kaswan also argues that producer cooperatives deserve more attention because of the role they play in allowing small businesses, especially small family farms, to survive in an otherwise hostile capitalist market. While this may be true, and while producer cooperatives may be desirable for this reason, they do not seem to embody the idea of social empowerment in the same sense as either worker or consumer cooperatives.

### Strategy and Transformation

Two of the comments—by Craig Borowiak and by Gar Alperovitz and Steve Dubb—raise a number of issues concerning the analysis of strategy and logics of transformation in *Envisioning Real Utopias*.<sup>104</sup>

Borowiak makes two basic points with respect to strategy: First, he argues that the focus on strategy tends to underplay the importance of all sorts of messy and creative characteristics of social change:

Wright's emphasis upon common strategy and deliberate action overshadows the way any far-reaching transformation would entail a mishmash of peoples, agendas, coalitions, conflicts, and strategies. It also understates the possibility—indeed, importance for social movements—of creativity and receptivity to things, perspectives, and actions that are new and unexpected.<sup>105</sup>

Second, he argues that my focus on the problem of systemic macro-transformation implies that emancipatory aspirations need to be deferred until the future, thus “denying the value of projects that undertake less systemic agendas and operate at lower levels.”<sup>106</sup>

I do not think that either of these criticisms accurately reflects the arguments in the book. A central theme in my analysis of strategy and transformation is the importance of democratic experimentation rather than pre-formed blueprints. This is especially relevant for interstitial strategies, which involve efforts at building new institutions through creative trial-and-error and learning-by-doing in response to opportunities that become contingently possible. My critique of Marx's theory of history is also rooted in a claim that contingencies and complexity make it impossible to build strategies in the present based on a coherent theory of the long-term trajectory of development into the future. The opacity of future limits of possibility means that strategies must have a real learning capacity to deal with the unexpected. To talk about “strategy,” then, is not to specify rigid plans set out in advance, but rather to talk about appropriate ways to mobilize collective, cooperative efforts in the face of uncertainty and shifting opportunities. Creativity and messiness is central to this.

Borowiak's second claim—that my concern with macro-transformation effectively devalues micro-level, local, partial transformation—also misses a central point of the framework elaborated in the book. The book rejects the binary conception of capitalism versus socialism, and certainly rejects the idea that advances in social emancipation must wait until “after the revolution.” The whole idea of hybrids as the proper way of understanding social systems is that it is possible to make meaningful and important advances in emancipatory transformations even within a system that remains dominated by capitalism. To say that an economic system is dominated by capitalism means that the harms created by capitalism continue to matter and that distinctive capitalist obstacles to social emancipation remain. This is why it does matter whether or not the system as a whole can move beyond capitalism and why the long-term objective is system

<sup>104</sup> Borowiak, “Scaling up Utopias”; Gar Alperovitz and Steve Dubb, “Building Real Utopias: The Emerging Project of Evolutionary Reconstruction,” *New Political Science* 34:3 (2012), pp. 380–386.

<sup>105</sup> Borowiak, “Scaling up Utopias,” p. 363.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

transformation. But this does not in any way mean that emancipatory values must be deferred until after this system-level transformation has been achieved. I ask of projects of social transformation within capitalism whether or not they point beyond capitalism because of the desire to eventually move beyond capitalism, but not because this implies these projects only acquire their value and improve the conditions of life of people once capitalism is transcended.<sup>107</sup>

Gar Alperovitz and Steve Dubb broadly endorse the categories I use in my discussion of strategies for social transformation—interstitial strategies, symbiotic strategies, and ruptural strategies. However, they feel that an alternative strategic vision which they call “evolutionary reconstruction,”—a strategy that “*at its core is based on the democratization of capital, beginning first at the community level and then increasing in scale as time goes on*”<sup>108</sup>—more adequately charts the way forward in the United States.

They raise two objections to my analysis of strategies. First, they see the idea of “interstitial strategy” as in certain respects too narrow or even superficial:

At some level, such a strategy [evolutionary reconstruction] might be defined in Wright’s terms as interstitial. This is accurate, as far as it goes, but it also misses the essence of the strategy. A critical point of the strategy is not simply to “occupy” space in the seams of the current system, but to build a political and economic base that both expands over time and also, in Gramscian terms, fosters a new idea of what is possible and thereby develops over time an effective counter-hegemonic vision and base of organizations that can ultimately alter the system.<sup>109</sup>

Second, they see symbiotic strategies as valuable in some contexts, but as having little prospect for effectiveness in the United States in the current era:

In the US context, at least, . . . the symbiotic strategies that Wright highlights hold little promise, much as we would concur with Wright’s suggestion that we pursue such strategies in those rare moments when opportunities for traditional liberal reforms are available (and, of course, it is important where possible, more commonly, to defend past gains).<sup>110</sup>

Both of these criticisms reflect misunderstandings of my arguments. First, while interstitial strategies do occupy spaces within existing social structures and institutions, the strategic objective is not simply to “fill” existing spaces, but to expand those spaces by eroding their limits. As I write in the chapter in *Envisioning Real Utopias* devoted to interstitial strategies: “The important idea is that what appear to be ‘limits’ are simply the effects of the power of specific institutional arrangements, and interstitial strategies have the capacity to create alternative institutions that erode those limits.”<sup>111</sup> Interstitial strategies are thus

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<sup>107</sup> This general point about the relation between macro-systemic transformation and more partial, limited transformation applies to many other contexts as well. For example, in an authoritarian anti-democratic political regime, we can talk about moves in the direction of democracy which open up greater space for political action and see these as both positive in their own right (it is better to live in a system with such spaces than without them) and as moving in the direction of a deeper systemic change in the political system.

<sup>108</sup> Alperovitz and Dubb, “Building Real Utopias,” pp. 381–382.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>111</sup> Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, p. 334.

precisely strategies that operate at the community level, build new institutions and open up possibilities for scaling up and out, and by doing so contribute to the erosion of hegemonic understandings of the limits of possibility.

Second, symbiotic strategies are not restricted to national level class compromises as represented by the successful examples of social democracy. A symbiotic strategy is any strategy for transformation that utilizes dominant institutions of power to solve practical problems in ways that both serve some interests of dominant groups and expand the space for popular social empowerment, including strategies organized at the local and regional levels of political and economic institutions.<sup>112</sup> In the chapter on symbiotic strategies I write:

Symbiotic strategies of emancipatory transformation [occur]...when increasing social empowerment can be linked to effective social problem-solving in ways that also serve the interests of elites and dominant classes. Positive class compromise is one example of such a linkage, but this logic is not restricted to class-based collective action; there is a wide range of projects of social change not directly rooted in class relations that have at least some elements of this logic. In particular, there are many kinds of local processes of collaborative problem-solving, sometimes grouped together under the rubric "the civic renewal movement," in which civic groups of various sorts are empowered to participate in problem-solving collaboration with powerful local actors such as city governments, regional authorities, and business elites. These efforts at locally rooted symbiotic transformations have involved such things as watershed councils, community development projects, community health projects, labor market training partnerships, and many other things. In each of these instances there are practical problems which in one way or another challenge the interests of elites as well as ordinary citizens and in which, under some conditions, a collaborative strategy of seeking solutions to the problem becomes attractive to contending social forces.<sup>113</sup>

The interesting initiatives in Cleveland discussed by Alperovitz and Dubb are excellent examples of such symbiotic strategies of transformation at the urban level: to help solve employment and community development problems, the city government and other powerful institutions in Cleveland worked with community activists and civil society organizations to develop worker-owned cooperatives. By creating the beginnings of a locally anchored cooperative sector, this potentially opens up space for greater social empowerment in the future, while in a pragmatic way solving certain kinds of pressing problems faced by both elites and ordinary citizens in the present. In short, the vision of evolutionary reconstruction advocated by Alperovitz and Dubb involves a combination of interstitial and symbiotic strategies.

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<sup>112</sup>To be fair to Alperovitz and Dubb, in the theoretical discussion of the logic of symbiotic strategies I do emphasize the classic examples of centralized forms of positive class compromise, especially as embodied in the most successful social democratic cases. Such cases, however, do not define the theoretical boundaries of the concept.

<sup>113</sup>Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, p. 361.

*Ideological Resonance*

J.S. Maloy and Thad Williamson, in different ways, raise the question of the ideological appeal of the arguments in *Envisioning Real Utopias* to broad sectors of the American population.<sup>114</sup>

On the basis of his research on the history of nineteenth-century American Populism, Maloy is concerned that, in its current form,

the Real Utopias project reflects the needs and aspirations of middle-class leftists who are driven by a quasi-religious sense of mission to remake the world in the image of something called “democratic empowerment.” . . . Most humans aspire to the realization of modest social and economic goals under schemes of less than democratic empowerment.<sup>115</sup>

These statements involve two distinct claims: first, that because democratic empowerment is at the center of the institutional designs in the real utopian proposals, these proposals will only resonate ideologically if one has a foundational commitment to democracy, and second, that most Americans do not put much value on democracy as such, seeing it as purely instrumental to the realization of social and economic goals. These are both interesting and provocative empirical claims about rhetoric and values. I am skeptical of both of them.

First, most of the examples of real utopian institutions and proposals in *Envisioning Real Utopias* do not illustrate the idea of democracy as an intrinsic value, but democracy as a way of advancing the social and material interests of most people. The whole framework is generated by a critique of capitalism in which most of the harms discussed concern the negative impact of capitalism on most people’s lives. While democratic empowerment in different forms is the pivotal dimension of institutional design that runs through the proposals, its purposes are deeply linked to social and economic justice and well-being. I do not think that it requires a quasi-religious commitment to democracy as an intrinsic value to believe that shifting power away from capital towards various forms of popular empowerment is crucial for solving a range of problems most people face in their lives.

Second, when democracy is understood as people having control over the decisions that affect their lives, I think that most Americans do in fact believe in democracy as an intrinsic value, not simply instrumental for other values. To be sure, people may be skeptical on pragmatic grounds about the prospects for a real, thorough-going democracy, and they may have very confused ideas about the connection between the problem of the control over decisions that affect their lives as separate, individual persons and the decisions that affect their lives as members of a community.<sup>116</sup> And, of course, given that people hold many different values, when there are trade-offs between democracy and some other value, democracy is

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<sup>114</sup> J.S. Maloy, “Real Utopias in a Gilded Age: The Case of American Populism,” *New Political Science* 34:3 (2012), pp. 372–379; Thad Williamson, “Emancipatory Politics, Emancipatory Political Science: On Erik Olin Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias*,” *New Political Science* 34:3 (2012), pp. 386–395.

<sup>115</sup> Maloy, “Real Utopias in a Gilded Age,” p. 379.

<sup>116</sup> In *Envisioning Real Utopias* (p. 18) I argue that the conventional terms “freedom” and “democracy” both reflect the *same* underlying value—the value of people having as much control as possible over the decisions which affect their lives. When decisions only affect their lives as separate persons, we call control over these decisions “freedom”—the right to

unlikely to have lexical priority for most people—most people are willing to sacrifice some degree of democracy, for example, for significant improvements in personal security and material well-being.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, I think most Americans hold the value of democracy to be intrinsically important, if not paramount, and a perspective on emancipatory social transformation that places democracy at the center of its institutional designs taps into this value.

Williamson raises different issues about the ideological resonance of the framework of *Envisioning Real Utopias*.<sup>118</sup> He expresses two concerns: first, that the complexity and heterogeneity of the proposals makes the package less inspiring than some other visions of alternatives, and second, that the framework in the book is disconnected from American traditions and values and thus will be seen as alien.

Williamson poses the problem of complexity in a comparison of my approach with the analyses of Gar Alperovitz or David Schweickart:

But there is one notable difference [between Wright's formulation and others]: whether there is in fact value in offering (like Alperovitz or Schweickart) a fully worked out conception of what an alternative political-economic system would look like—a very clear answer to the question “if you don't like capitalism, what is it you want?”—rather than simply a somewhat open-ended list of emancipatory strategies that assumes that these strategies might evolve in different ways in different places as a result of specific local conditions and the contingency of politics. The issue here is whether Wright's “Socialist Compass” is sufficient to inspire individuals and guide social movements seeking to build a more social-ist economy, or whether a more specific “Socialist Architecture” of the kind provided by Alperovitz and Schweickart is required (especially if ruptural change is ever to be achieved).<sup>119</sup>

I cannot say whether or not the ideas in *Envisioning Real Utopias* are or are not inspiring, but I do not think the inspiration of a vision of an alternative depends on the simplicity or complexity of its specific institutional proposals. Rather, I believe it depends on the character of its moral underpinnings and the clarity of institutional principles that animate the proposals. The moral underpinnings of *Envisioning Real Utopias* are quite simple: all people should have equal access to the social and material conditions to live flourishing lives. This is very much in line with traditional socialist egalitarian ideals. And the core institutional design principle is also simple: power within institutions and society should be as democratically organized as possible.

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*Footnote 116 continued*

make choices for oneself. When the decisions affect the lives of others by virtue of the interdependencies of social life, we call control over the decisions “democracy.”

<sup>117</sup> Even though radical democratization is at the center of the institutional designs in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, I also would not give democracy absolute lexical priority over all other values. The problem of confronting painful trade-offs among core values is inherent in any project of realizing in practice the ideals of a “good society.” While there may be greater urgency in safeguarding some values over others in any given historical context, I believe no single value has absolute lexical priority over others.

<sup>118</sup> Williamson, “Emancipatory Politics, Emancipatory Political Science: On Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias*,” *New Political Science* 34:3 (2012), pp. 386–395.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

Still, even if the burden of inspiration comes from the underlying values and principles, it could still be the case that the institutional pluralism and heterogeneity of the vision of an alternative society could be an ideological liability, obscuring those values and principles rather than exemplifying them. I do not think this is the case, for the institutional pluralism allows for a kind of pragmatic enthusiasm that is also important for social movements. The map of alternative pathways to social empowerment shows that there are lots of different ways to move forward, tapping into many different forms of social action and styles of political engagement. The framework rejects the arrogance of “there is one best way” and encourages activists to embrace experimentation and openness. This probably will not appeal to people for whom inspiration requires dogmatic certainties, but I think it may provide a matrix of ideas that bolster the pragmatic enthusiasm of many activists and social movements.

Williamson’s second concern about ideological resonance revolves around the nature of the critique I offer of existing institutions:

Hence it seems fairly clear that Wright is—must be—committed to what Aristotle would term an external critique of the American regime, as opposed to an internal critique that America is not living up to its own founding ideals. But to make that observation is also to illustrate what an uphill task “emancipation,” so described, faces in the United States: it seems that it would involve not only forging new institutions based on different principles than capitalism, but also treating the American tradition of constitutional law and the characteristic political cultures of the United States more as enemies than allies.<sup>120</sup>

I do not think this adequately characterizes the argument of the book. The criticisms I elaborate in Chapter 3, “What Is So Bad About Capitalism?,” involve both internal and external critiques of capitalism. I stress a variety of ways in which capitalism in general, and American capitalism in particular, fails to live up to various ideals and values that it is thought to embody: capitalism is supposed to be the highest realization of the value of individual freedom, yet real freedom and autonomy are inherently restricted by capitalist social relations; democracy is undermined by private power derived from concentrations of wealth and the supremacy of property rights; pervasive negative externalities inherent in capitalism violate liberal principles of individual rights; the potential for human flourishing created by the productivity of capitalism is blocked by the deep inequalities it fosters; and so on. These are all internal critiques.

At the very core of American political culture is the ideal of democracy as rule “of the people, by the people and for the people.” The central argument of *Envisioning Real Utopias* is that the structures of power rooted in the capitalist economy systematically thwart this ideal, and thus the realization of the political ideals of real democracy requires a transformation of the power relations within the economy, not merely in the formal political arena. To be sure, this argument implies a challenge to certain conventional American beliefs about democracy and capitalism—namely that capitalism is a necessary condition for democracy—and a rejection of some elements of the dominant political culture, but it is an argument that is also anchored within the values of that tradition.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 390–391.

In the current political climate in the United States it is extremely hard to formulate a political-ideological framework for an emancipatory alternative to existing institutions that does not seem alien to American political culture and to the commonsense understandings of how the world works, what is possible, and what is desirable. After all, in 2012 Barak Obama is called a socialist by his right-wing critics even though his policy reforms fall squarely within the moderate, pragmatic traditions of the conventional regulation of capitalism. Any serious approach to emancipatory transformation has to challenge these commonsense understandings. And yet, Williamson is also right that it is important to do so in ways that resonate with values in a political tradition.

Framing radical social change in terms of democracy, I believe, is the best way to do this in the American context. The two words that are most central to the rhetoric of American politics are *Freedom* and *Democracy*. Other terms have some play—fairness, opportunity, prosperity, the American Dream, responsibility, faith, community—but the most potent symbolic anchors for American political culture are freedom and democracy. The right wing has always been more comfortable with freedom, and certainly in the present era the right has effectively appropriated and narrowed this term for its own purposes. Democracy makes conservatives nervous. It is the symbolic anchor for the left and many popular social movements. The struggle to extend and deepen democracy is as organic to American political culture as is the defense of freedom, even if the idea of extending democracy to the economy violates American commonsense.

Anchoring an emancipatory project in radical democracy can also serve as a route for reappropriating freedom as a dimension of social emancipation, as individual freedom and collective democracy tap the same core value of self-governance: people should have the power to control the decisions that affect their lives. Understood in this way, real freedom and real democracy are both central to creating the conditions for human flourishing. Connecting these normative ideas to practical institutional proposals that collectively constitute an emancipatory alternative to existing structures of power and inequality is the central objective of *Envisioning Real Utopias*.