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## **Book Review: Envisioning Real Utopias**

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With this historical perspective, Moody is suspicious of the promises of union revitalization coming from the same old crowd of union leaders. He quotes Herman Benson who warns that “Sweeney and his co-thinkers seek” revitalization “by rhetoric, by lectures and classes, by teach-ins, . . . by every gadget and gimmick of public relations. They look everywhere except to what is most effective: the free independent democratic activity of union members inside their own unions.”<sup>11</sup> Moody is not surprised that Sweeney’s organizing initiatives quickly bogged down to be replaced by the type of top-down political mobilizing familiar to union leaders from earlier times. After firing Richard Bensinger, the new organizing director, Sweeney’s AFL-CIO embarked on a massive campaign to elect Democrats to Congress and the White House in hopes of enacting labor law reform, the Employee Free-Choice Act. While helping to return Democrats to power on Capitol Hill and to elect President Obama, labor’s political *demarche* has done nothing to restore union membership or power.

In the past, Sheila Cohen notes, unions grew from the grassroots, beginning “not with formal unionism but with self-activity and workgroup organization around concrete, highly specific issues of exploitation and work intensification. Such factors may impel union formation even ‘before the union comes along’ or when ‘a lot of workers didn’t know what a union was yet.’”<sup>12</sup> This “greenfields” union organization works where workers can directly challenge management without the intermediary of a union organization. Nowadays, however, militant workers confront not only bosses but established unions often with a vested interest in contractual and political relationships built around an exchange of labor peace for union recognition.<sup>13</sup> These volumes show that union revitalization today faces a hurdle beyond the bosses; it must overcome the unions themselves.

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### Envisioning Real Utopias

Erik Olin Wright, (New York and London: Verso, 2010), 394 pp., \$26.95 paper

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The world economy is in upheaval and capitalism is once again in crisis, possibly the greatest crisis in living memory. The need for systemic transformation has, perhaps, never been greater, while the times have, arguably, never been more ripe. Coming up with credible alternatives, however, proves surprisingly difficult given the hegemony of the capitalist worldview and the prevalence of conservative critics who routinely dismiss radical agendas as naïve and unrealistic, as, indeed, “utopian.” This is not to suggest that there are no alternatives. Alongside the

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>12</sup>International Labour Process Conference, *The Future of Union Organising*, 43.

<sup>13</sup>Steve Early, *Civil Wars in U.S. Labor: Birth of a New Workers’ Movement or Death Throes of the Old?* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2011); Friedman, *Reigniting the Labor Movement*; Moody, *US Labor in Trouble and Transition*.

economic tumult, we do find proliferating forms of grassroots experimentation as communities across the world explore new ways to democratize local economies and to cultivate new practices of cooperation and solidarity. It has not been clear, however, how these diverse, diffuse, and often small-scale initiatives might fit within a larger theory of social emancipation.

In this context, Erik Olin Wright's new book, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, is a timely and welcome intervention. Wright aims nothing less than to revivify leftist social theory, which he believes has grown stunted under the shadow of capitalism's triumph over state socialism. Rather than cede the language and aspirations of utopia to conservative naysayers, he calls for a utopianism that is simultaneously critical of the status quo and realistic about its own prospects for bringing about improvement. Encyclopedic in scope and dialectical in its argumentation, it is a magisterial book that both clarifies our situation and charts out new intellectual pathways for conceiving change.

The book opens with an outline of what Wright calls the three essential tasks of an emancipatory social science: 1) diagnosis and critique; 2) envisioning alternatives; and 3) elaborating strategies for transformation. Stated differently, an emancipatory social science must explain why we want to leave the status quo, where we should be going, and how we will get there. All three tasks are necessary, Wright argues, if we are to generate economic alternatives that are not only desirable in the abstract, but also viable and achievable. Accordingly, the remainder of the book is organized into three parts. Part one consists of a long stand-alone chapter that assesses the shortcomings of capitalism. Part two explores alternatives. Part three examines strategies for scaling social transformation up to the system level.

In part one, Wright, guided by a normative commitment to "radical democratic egalitarianism," outlines eleven basic critiques of capitalism. Drawn largely from the history of political economic thought, these range from the proposition that capitalism perpetuates eliminable forms of human suffering to the propositions that capitalism limits democracy and fuels militarism and imperialism. Although it is not entirely clear how Wright settled on eleven critiques rather than ten or twelve or twenty, he nevertheless does a service by bringing them together with an unmatched comprehensiveness and analytic clarity. He avoids both oversimplification and polemic, and he makes a point of acknowledging capitalism's strengths even as he identifies its limits and undesirable consequences. This section of the book will be a useful resource for students, scholars, and activists alike, both inside and outside the classroom.

The second part of the book—on alternatives—is arguably the most original and provocative. It includes both a critique of traditional Marxist paradigms and an effort to re-vision the problem of alternatives in ways that allow for hybrid economic forms. In lieu of purist revolutionary models, Wright offers what he calls a "socialist compass." We may not know when capitalist dominance begins and ends, but we can generate principles and sensibilities that, like a compass, orient us in the right direction. To develop this idea, Wright draws distinctions between economic power, state power, and social power and between capitalist, statist, and socialist structures. His distinction between statist and socialist structures is particularly important because it enables him to distance his project from the state-led Communist projects of the Cold War and the paralyzing disillusionment they engendered among leftist critics. By "socialist" Wright does not mean state socialism but instead economic structures that reflect the influence of the social power expressed through civil society. Writing in the tradition of Karl Polanyi and Robert Owen as much as that of Marx and Lenin, he purports to take the "social" in socialism seriously. He uses these various distinctions to diagram several different pathways to social and political empowerment. He diagrams, for example, the different pathways of *statist socialism*, in which civil society influences the exercise of state power over the economy; *social capitalism*, in which civil society influences the exercise of economic power; and *social economy*, in which civil society directly organizes economic activity.

Wright goes on to illustrate his schematic with a survey of recent political and economic initiatives (mostly grassroots) that enhance the scope and penetration of social power vis-à-vis the state and economy. These range from associational democracy, participatory budgeting, and citizen assemblies on the one hand, to Wikipedia, worker cooperatives, and participatory economics on the other. The real content of noncapitalist alternatives is not provided by Wright's theories but by proliferating social, economic, and democratic experiments taking place on the ground in a diffuse yet increasingly networked manner. What Wright's book does is to situate those experiments within a theoretical framework that acknowledges their individual transformative potential and seeks to channel them into a broader agenda. Here, Wright's embrace of hybridity is crucial. Once we break our attachment to pure models, it becomes possible to identify and valorize economic practices and institutions that challenge capitalism in some respects even if they remain inserted into capitalist circuits of power.

This said, Wright's project extends beyond merely identifying diverse economies. He also recognizes the existence of macro structures that seriously constrain emancipatory agendas. In the context of hybrid economic structures, what makes an economy "capitalist" is not its purity from other elements but rather the "dominance" of capitalist structures over noncapitalist ones. When capitalism is dominant, non-capitalist alternatives are contained in niches, and efforts to extend and deepen the weight of social empowerment confront counteractions from powerful actors whose interests are threatened. The challenge, then, is to bring about an economy in which statist and capitalist structures are subordinate to the (democratic) authority of society.

The final part of the book explores strategies for overcoming such structural obstacles. If alternatives are to be achievable, Wright argues it will take consciously pursued strategies to counteract capitalist domination on the system level. Towards this end, he identifies three transformational logics: *ruptural transformation*; *interstitial transformation*; and *symbiotic transformation*. Like many other contemporary social theorists, he is deeply skeptical about the plausibility of revolutionary (i.e., ruptural) transformation in the current age. He sees more hope for the other two types of transformation, although there, too, he tempers his optimism with realist concerns. Wright defines interstitial strategies as strategies that foster new emancipatory forms of social relations through direct action rather than through the state. On one hand, Wright defends such strategies, which he associates with anarchism, against critics who would dismiss them as marginal dead ends in the larger struggle against capitalist forces. He believes they play a positive role in a long-term trajectory of emancipatory social transformation, as they bring about changes of consciousness and new exposure to alternative modes of being. On the other hand, Wright expresses skepticism that such strategies, taken alone, could erode the basic structural power of capital sufficiently to dissolve capitalist limits on emancipatory social change. For this reason, strategies of symbiotic transformation that engage directly with statist elements acquire greater significance. Governments bring essential resources and coercive powers that can be used to check capital and support alternative initiatives in ways that interstitial strategies alone cannot accomplish. Still, given the historical record, symbiotic strategies, too, must be approached with considerable skepticism. Too often, government involvement has ended up sapping the energy of social movements while further consolidating capitalist hegemony rather than challenging it. The best bet, it appears, is to deploy interstitial and symbiotic strategies in tandem. This mixture of skepticism and hope is perhaps to be expected in a book on real utopias.

Given its great ambitions, Wright's book will inevitably invite criticism. His efforts to wed realism and utopianism leave him vulnerable to accusations that he is insufficiently utopian and/or insufficiently realistic. Anarchists and revolutionaries may find the book too accommodationist. Liberals may find it too socialist. The book might also have done more to engage directly with the utopian tradition, as well as with other scholars studying alternative (social)

economies. Additionally, some might find Wright's schematic approach and sharp analytic distinctions overly rigid. And his insistence upon deliberate strategy may leave others wondering about the role that serendipity, novelty, and unexpected convergences should play in transformative social movements.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, *Envisioning Real Utopias* is a tour de force that models the value of thinking systematically about social emancipation. Especially in these times of crisis, it provides a wonderful resource for social theorists who wish to push forward new visions of post-capitalist futures while also remaining sensitive to the innovations and constraints of the present.

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**The Rise of Neoliberalism in Advanced Capitalist Economies: A Materialist Analysis**

M.C. Howard and J.E. King; Basingstoke, UK, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, vi + 320 pp., \$100 (hardback).

**New Capitalism? The Transformation of Work**

Kevin Doogan; Cambridge (UK) and Malden (MA): Polity Press, 2009, 240pp., \$69.95 (hardback), \$28.95 (paperback).

**The Bonds of Debt**

Richard Dienst; London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2011, 192pp., \$24.95 (hardback).

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While for many of us neoliberalism's policy bankruptcy may have been confirmed conclusively by the continuing international crisis, it has proved remarkably resilient as the ideological legitimation for further privatization, deregulation, and austerity, being presently implemented with peculiar severity in Greece. Neoliberal policies, so pivotal to the onslaught of crisis, continue to be widely presented, especially in international decision making, as the only policy response to crisis. Each of these books, although they also deal with topics other than neoliberalism as ideology, provides considerable insights into how, despite overwhelming evidence of failure, neoliberalism has achieved and retained this hegemonic status.

A particular value of Howard and King's book is its coherent articulation of a specific theoretical position, whereby they consistently relate political and ideological changes to the development of the productive forces. Their explicitly functionalist variant of historical materialism draws on an eclectic range of theoretical sources, Marxist and non-Marxist, stretching back to the French and Scottish enlightenments. Within this framework, Howard and King analyze neoliberalism as an ideology whose success within advanced capitalist economies is attributable to a conjunction of material factors in which the forces of production (means of production plus labor power) have primacy. Whereas classical liberalism emerged within relatively small states, neoliberalism is a pro-market ideology adapted to contemporary states with their far more extensive