

**Sociology 929. Seminar in Class Analysis**

## ***Envisioning Real Utopias***

Spring semester, 2008

***Professor Erik Olin Wright***

**Thursdays, 4:30-7:00 pm  
8108 Sewell Social Sciences**

**Course webpage:**

**<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/soc929home-2008.html>**

### ***The Idea of “Real Utopias”***

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

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

This seminar will be built around a close and systematic reading of a draft of a book manuscript, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU.htm>), on which I have been working for some time. This book elaborates a general framework for thinking about radical democratic egalitarian alternatives to existing social structures and institutions. We live in an era of diminished expectations and, perhaps, diminished imagination. To most intellectuals the idea that the social world could be fundamentally changed in ways that would dramatically reduce the enormous inequalities in the world today and create the conditions in which all people could live flourishing lives seems naïve, perhaps even ridiculous. Capitalism reigns triumphant and at least in the developed capitalist world talk of socialism as an alternative has almost disappeared. I believe this radical pessimism and cynicism is itself a constraint on possibilities for creating a more just and humane world. Gramsci once described the struggle for social justice as requiring “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” I believe in the world today we need an optimism of the intellect as well: an optimism grounded in our understanding of the real potentials for emancipatory alternatives which can inform our practical strategies for social transformation. *Envisioning Real Utopias* attempts to contribute to this project of radical rejuvenation.

The book is organized around the central tasks of what might be called “Emancipatory social science”. Emancipatory social science, in its broadest terms, seeks to generate scientific knowledge relevant to the collective project of challenging various forms of human oppression and creating the conditions in which people can live flourishing lives. To fulfill this mission, any emancipatory social science faces three basic tasks: elaborating a systematic *diagnosis and critique* of the world as it exists; envisioning *viable alternatives*; and, understanding the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of *transformation*. The ten chapters of the book explore these tasks.

The goal of this seminar is to engage the ideas in this book both as a problem in sociological theory and as an empirical research agenda. *Envisioning Real Utopias* is not simply a problem for speculative philosophical reflection; it is also a problem for systematic empirical research.

In the first ten weeks of the semester we will discuss this book manuscript, reading one chapter each week along with some supplementary materials. The class will then not meet for four weeks, allowing students time to work intensively on their term papers. At the end of the semester, May 9-11 (Friday night through Sunday afternoon), there will be a two day conference, held at a U.W. center on the Wisconsin River, Upham Woods, at which students will present their term papers. There will also be a small seminar in Argentina at the University of Buenos Aires with five or six students meeting jointly with us, connected by videoconference during our discussions. At least some of these students will come to Madison for the mini-conference and present papers.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### 1. Weekly Reading Interrogations

Each week participants in the seminar need to prepare a brief analytical engagement with the assigned reading (which I refer to as reading interrogations). The purpose of these interrogations is to help frame the agenda for the seminar discussion. After you read the assignment you should ask yourself: “What conversation do I want to be sure to have in the seminar?” You should then write an interrogation that sets up that discussion. These should not be standard “reading notes” summarizing main points in an argument; rather they should be conversations with the readings in which issues are raised, arguments analyzed, problems specified. These interrogations will form a substantial basis for the seminar discussions so it is worth taking the task seriously. After you write an interrogation read it out loud to yourself (or to someone else – even better!) and ask: will this trigger the kind of discussion I want to have? I have no length specification for these interrogations. It is fine for them to be quite short – say 200 words or so – but longer memos are also OK (within reason – remember: I have to read and comment on all of these each week and everyone else in the class will read them as well). These memos should be emailed to me *by 6 pm on the Wednesday night* before the seminar meets. I will then read and comment on the interrogations and circulate them to the entire class by late Wednesday night or Thursday morning. Everyone should try to read all of these memos before coming to class on Thursday afternoon if at all possible. **It is very important that you send me your interrogations by the deadline so that I have time to write comments.**

### 2. Term papers

The term papers for the seminar will be on case studies in “real utopian” institutions and experiments. The idea is to look very closely at particular kinds of empirical attempts at building institutions that embody emancipatory ideals – either historical or contemporary cases -- or at theoretical models that have been sufficiently well specified as to be close to empirical cases. At the end of this syllabus is a set of questions that each case study needs to address. In the course of the seminar discussions we may add to this list and refine the questions in various ways, but I want all of the term papers to address the same set of questions.

The cases chosen for a term paper can be contemporary or historical empirical cases or theoretical models that contain systematic institutional elaborations (for example, unconditional basic income or market socialism). A paper can study a single concrete example of a particular type of institution, or it can examine a range of examples. The papers should not be primarily philosophical discussions of the abstract principles or values that emancipatory institution should try to embody (although some discussion along those lines could be appropriate). Rather, these papers should examine concrete examples of new structures and institutional designs.

The following is a partial list of the kinds of institutions which would be appropriate for the term paper:

- Co-housing
- Community land trusts
- Co-ops – large and small

- Policy juries
- Citizen assemblies for referenda (the state of Washington)
- Habitat management councils, watershed councils
- participatory forest management councils (The Quincy Library Group <http://www.qlg.org/>)
- Trans-border labor standards commissions – WRC
- Equal Exchange, Global Exchange, Fair Trade
- Open Source programming, Wikipedia
- Kibbutzim
- Union venture capital funds (Canada)
- Social Economy and solidarity cooperatives (Quebec); social cooperatives (Italy)
- Charter schools: progressive and reactionary variants
- Participatory budgets: EU examples
- CSAs and other progressive food-production and distribution processes
- Just Coffee
- Worker councils, “council communism”
- Co-determination, co-management
- “Socially responsible” investment funds: do these matter? Alternative designs?
- Pension fund socialism (Blackburn)
- Newspapers, summer camps, social clubs, etc. organized by political parties (SPD in Germany in early 20<sup>th</sup> century; communist parties in Europe and the US; etc.)

**TERM PAPER PROPOSAL (DUE FEBRUARY 21)**

Students should prepare a term paper proposal by the fifth week of classes. This does not need to be very elaborate, but should explain clearly what the general topic of the paper is and, if possible, what specific cases will be examined.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY & THEMATIC SKETCH (due March 27)**

The thematic sketch should be in the neighborhood of 2-3 pages long and discuss the central ideas you will explore in the case study. This can include some initial framing of the normative issues, some discussion of the central elements of the institutional design (how things work), thoughts on the nature of the dilemmas and contradictions that the institutional design faces, and so on. The more you can formulate at this stage, the better will be the feedback I can give you for the final work on the paper.

**FINAL PAPER (due May 9)**

The papers must be completed in time to be presented at the weekend mini-conference, May 9-11. There is no specific length requirement, but the general expectation is that these papers will be around 7,500-9,000 words (25-30 double spaced pages).

### WEEKLY SEMINAR CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS

All chapters of *Envisioning Real Utopias* are available at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU.htm>.

SESSION	DATE	READING
1	Jan. 24	Introduction to the seminar
2	Jan. 31	Preface and Chapter 1. The Tasks of Emancipatory Social Science
3	Feb. 7	Chapter 2. What's so bad about Capitalism?
4	Feb. 14	Chapter 3. Thinking about Alternatives to Capitalism
5	Feb. 21	No seminar session
6	Feb. 28	Chapter 4. The Socialist Compass
7	March 6	Chapter 5. Real Utopias I: Social Empowerment and the State
8	March 13	Chapter 6. Real Utopias II: Social Empowerment and the Economy
9	March 27	Chapter 7. Elements of a theory of transformation
10	April 3	Chapter 8. Ruptural Transformation
11	April 10	Chapter 9. Interstitial Transformation
12	April 17	Chapter 10. Symbiotic Transformation
13	April 24	No seminar session
14	May 1	No seminar session
15	May 8	No seminar session
	May 9-12	Mini-conference, Upham Woods

**SUPPLEMENTARY READING ASSIGNMENTS**

(most of these are available at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU.htm>.)

For a number of sessions there are supplementary readings that students will find useful for the class discussion. I may add additional supplementary readings as the semester progresses. These are not required readings, but students are strongly encouraged to read as much of this as possible.

**Session 2. The Tasks of Emancipatory Social Science**

G.A. Cohen, "[Back to Socialist Basics](#)", *New Left Review*, 1995

**Session 4. The socialist compass**

Erik Olin Wright, "Capitalism's Futures", chapter 6 of *Interrogating Inequality*. (available on my website at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/selected-published-writings.htm>. This is an earlier formulation of my theoretical understanding of socialism, written originally in the early 1980s.

**Session 6. Real Utopias I: Social Empowerment and the State**

Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *Associations and Democracy*. [Chapter 1 "Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance"](#)

Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy*: Chapter 1. [Thinking about empowered participatory governance](#); Epilogue. [Countervailing power in empowered participatory governance](#)

Amy Lang, "[But is it For Real? The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly as a model of state-sponsored citizen empowerment](#)" (*Politics & Society*)

**Session 7. Real Utopias II: Social Empowerment and the Economy**

Jean-Louis Laville, Benoît Lévesque and Marguerite Mendell "[The Social Economy, Diverse Approaches and Practices in Europe and Canada.](#)"

Nancy Neamtam, "[The Social Economy: Finding A Way Between The Market And The State](#)"

Philippe van Parijs and Robert Van der Veen, "[A Capitalist Road to Communism](#)"

Erik Olin Wright, "[Why Something like Socialism is needed for the transition to something like communism](#)"

Erik Olin Wright, "[Basic Income as a Socialist Project](#)" (*Basic Income Studies*, issue #1, 2006)

**Session 9. Interstitial Transformation**

Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Syracuse University Press, 1996 edition – originally published in 1948).

This is an interesting, concise exploration of anarchist perspectives on "real utopias" and is quite relevant to the discussion of interstitial transformations. There are numerous copies, new and used, available through internet sellers.

# Questions to ask of Real Utopian Case Studies and Proposals

**1. Normative Foundations:** What are the fundamental goals the proposal hopes to achieve, and what are the normative principles embodied in those goals? This is not always a simple question. Thus, for example, in talking about universal basic income, it is not really enough to say that this proposal reflects a commitment to egalitarian values. What is needed is a clarification of what kind of egalitarian principle basic income is thought to embody, what the egalitarian ideal really consists of. There may, of course, be more than one value in play in any proposal.

**2. Design Principles.** What precisely are the institutional design principles of the proposal? How is it supposed to work? What are the “rules”?

**3. Context Conditions.** Are there conditions in the social/institutional context of a proposal that are essential for its viability? How restrictive are those conditions – are they very exacting, or fairly loose? In workers’ coops, for example, there may be hostile or conducive conditions in the broader political economy which make it easy or difficult to establish coops and reproduce them over time – things like public subsidies, tax policy, credit policies, etc.

**4. The problem of robust sustainability.** Are there internal contradictions within the proposal that make the reproduction of the project difficult over time? Does the dynamic over time of the institution tend to reinforce or undermine its viability? For example, basic income may reduce labor supply to the point that the basic income cannot be financed through taxation.

**5. Scalability.** Some proposals can be instituted in small scale, local settings, but cannot be scaled up. A worker coop, for example, is certainly much easier in a small taxi cooperative or a farm than in a multinational automotive corporation. Deliberative democracy is easier in a town than in a large nation state. So, for every proposal it is important to think about scale issues.

**6. Divisibility.** Can the proposal be partially implemented in ways that would accomplish some of its goals, or is the institutional design basically an all-or-nothing design? Are there critical threshold effects in the implementation of the proposal so that the positive effects only kick in after some threshold is reached? A very small basic income may generate none of the desirable effects of a generous BI, but a modest basic income might. Weak forms of deliberative democracy might still be improvement over purely representative democracy; or, perhaps, weak forms would lose the advantages of representative democracy without the gains of deliberative democracy.

**7. Negative unintended consequences.** Every institutional innovation has unintended consequences – side effects other than those which are the goals of the innovation. Some of

these may be positive, unintended yet desirable effects. But some may be negative. Language policies that subsidize minority languages in the name of cultural diversity may increase the isolation of a minority culture, reduce social integration, and increase hostility. Central planning in socialist economies, designed to eliminate the “anarchy of production” of the market, may generate all sorts of pathologies of planning irrationality.

**8. Positive unintended consequences.** Often with wide-ranging institutional innovations there can be positive effects others than those that motivate the innovation. Basic income, for example, may increase political activism and the arts by providing a wage subsidy for non-commodified activity.

**9. Political feasibility.** What kinds of political economic conditions are likely to be needed to institute a particular kind of proposal? Some proposals may be possible without political mobilization: a group of people can self-organize a workers coop. Others require massive collective action: market socialism cannot be instituted from below. Political conditions include such things as: the necessary coalition of social forces for a proposal to be supported, the power of the potential political opposition, the procedural rules in state institutions that might block a proposal, etc.