

ENVISIONING
REAL UTOPIAS



ERIK OLIN WRIGHT



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To my daughters, Jenny and Becky

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PREFACE

In 1970, facing the draft during the Vietnam War, I attended the Thomas Starr King School for the Ministry, a Unitarian-Universalist seminary in Berkeley, California. Students studying in seminaries were given a draft deferment and so seminary enrollments rose dramatically in the late 1960s. As part of my studies, I organized a student-run seminar called "Utopia and Revolution." For ten weeks I met with a dozen or so other students from the various seminaries in the Berkeley Graduate Theological Union to discuss the principles and prospects for the revolutionary transformation of American society and the rest of the world. We were young and earnest, animated by the idealism of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement and by the countercultural currents opposed to competitive individualism and consumerism. We discussed the prospects for the revolutionary overthrow of American capitalism and the ramifications of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," as well as the potential for a countercultural subversion of existing structures of power and domination through living alternative ways of life.

In order to facilitate our discussions in that seminar, I recorded the sessions and typed up transcripts each week to give to each of the participants. In the first session we discussed what each of us meant by "Utopia." Towards the end of the discussion I suggested the following:

It would be undesirable, I think, for the task of constructing an image of utopia, as we are doing, to be seen as an attempt to find definitive institutional answers to various problems. We can perhaps determine what kinds of social institutions *negate* our goals and which kind of institutions seem to at least move towards those goals, but it would be impossible to come up with detailed plans of actual institutions which would fully embody all of our ideals. Our real task is to try to think of institutions which themselves are capable of dynamic change, of

responding to the needs of the people and evolving accordingly, rather than of institutions which are so perfect that they need no further change.

In due course the system of conscripting young men into the army changed to a draft lottery and I got a good number, so in 1971 I was able to begin my graduate studies in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley.

For the next two decades my work revolved around the problem of reconstructing Marxism, particularly its theoretical framework for the analysis of classes. The problem of socialism and alternatives to capitalism surfaced from time to time, but was not the central focus of my research and writing.

I returned to the theme of utopia and emancipatory transformation in 1992. The Berlin Wall had fallen, the Soviet Union disintegrated. Neoliberalism and market fundamentalism dominated government policies in capitalist democracies. With the demise and discrediting of the centrally planned economies, many people believed that capitalism and liberal democracy were the only possible future for humanity. The "end of history" was announced.¹

This is the context in which I began the Real Utopias Project in the early 1990s as an attempt at deepening serious discussion of alternatives to existing structures of power, privilege and inequality. The idea of the project was to focus on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of different arenas of social institutions rather than on either general, abstract formulations of grand designs, or on small immediately attainable reforms of existing practices. This is a tricky kind of discussion to pursue rigorously. It is much easier to talk about concrete ways of tinkering with existing arrangements than it is to formulate plausible radical reconstructions. Marx was right that detailed blueprints of alternative designs are often pointless exercises in fantasy. What I and my collaborators in the Real Utopias Project wanted to achieve was a clear elaboration of workable institutional principles that could inform emancipatory alternatives to the existing world. This falls between a discussion simply of the moral values that motivate the enterprise and the fine-grained details of institutional characteristics.

1 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

By 2003 four books had been published from the Project (two more have appeared since then) and it seemed like a good time to step back from specific proposals and try to embed the Project in a larger framework of analysis.² At the same time I began work with Michael Burawoy on a book project, so far not completed, which we called *Sociological Marxism*. We had written a joint paper with this title for a handbook of sociological theory and thought it would be a good idea to expand that piece into a book-length manuscript.³ The core argument of the original paper was that the most robust and enduring aspect of the Marxist tradition was its class analysis, and that around class analysis it was possible to construct a wide-ranging sociological Marxism. In the projected book we planned to trace the historical roots of sociological Marxism in the Marxist tradition, for which Burawoy would take major responsibility, and to elaborate more thoroughly its theoretical foundations, for which I would have the principal responsibility. I began writing a draft of my part of the manuscript in which the concluding chapters were an elaboration of the idea of envisioning real utopias. As it turned out, Burawoy got elected President of the American Sociological Association and embarked on a new line of thinking and writing on the theme of "public sociology," so our joint book project was sidelined. He encouraged me to take those final chapters and use them as the core of a separate book, which eventually became *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

In the fall of 2004 I presented an initial version of the core argument of the book, written as a paper, "Taking the 'Social' in Socialism Seriously," at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association and the Society for the Advancement

2 The six books in the Real Utopias Project are: *Associations and Democracy*, by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (London: Verso, 1995); *Equal Shares: Making Market Socialism Work*, by John Roemer (London: Verso, 1996); *Recasting Egalitarianism: New Rules for Equity and Accountability in Markets, Communities and States*, by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (London: Verso, 1999); *Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, by Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (London: Verso, 2003); *Redesigning Distribution: Basic Income and Stakeholder Grants as Cornerstones of a More Egalitarian Capitalism*, by Bruce Ackerman, Anne Alstott and Philippe Van Parijs (London: Verso, 2007); *Gender Equality: Transforming Family Divisions of Labor*, by Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers (London: Verso, 2009).

3 Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright, "Sociological Marxism," in Jonathan Turner (ed.), *Handbook of Sociological Theory* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001).

of Socio-Economics. It seemed well received at both conferences. Then I presented the paper at the meeting of the Analytical Marxism Group, a group of academics that had been meeting almost annually since around 1980 to discuss each other's work.⁴ They did not like the paper very much, especially my effort at differentiating types of economic systems in terms of the particular form of power that was "dominant" within the organization of the economy. We had a long, intense (and somewhat frustrating) discussion of the problem of defining "dominance" of particular elements in a complex structure of relations. No one had any particularly constructive suggestions, and I left the gathering a bit demoralized.

On further thought in the months following the meeting I decided that while the analytical problem raised in the discussion was a real one, it did not seriously undermine the central substantive thrust of my approach to the problem (these issues will be discussed in chapter 5), and so I returned to the paper and gave it a thorough reworking in 2005. The result, which lays out the core ideas that are more fully elaborated in this book, was eventually published in *New Left Review* in 2006.⁵

By spring of 2005 I felt that I had a defensible core argument, but was not sure about how ambitious I wanted the book to be. Should it basically be a modest elaboration of the *NLR* piece? Should I try to embed the specific arguments around envisioning real utopias in a broader agenda of emancipatory social theory? Should I directly engage Marxism both to establish the location of my argument within the Marxist tradition and to specify the ways

⁴ The Analytical Marxism Group was begun to discuss central themes in Marxist theory, especially the concept of exploitation. In the course of the early 1980s the members of the group developed a distinctive style for exploring Marxism, which was eventually dubbed "Analytical Marxism." I was invited to participate in the group in 1981. Other members of the group (not all of whom were there from the start) include G.A. Cohen, John Roemer, Hillel Steiner, Sam Bowles, Josh Cohen, Robert van der Veen, Philippe Van Parijs, and Robert Brenner. Adam Przeworski and Jon Elster were members of the group in the 1980s but had left by the time I presented this work. For a collection of writings by members of this circle, see John Roemer (ed.), *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵ When submitted to *New Left Review* the paper still had the title "Taking the 'Social' in Socialism Seriously," but the editors of the journal said that they did not like long, wordy titles, and changed it to "Compass Points: Towards a Socialist Alternative," which played off a metaphor I used in the paper. While I still much preferred the original title, I acquiesced to their editorial judgment.

in which it departs from aspects of that tradition? I decided that the best way for me to resolve such issues was to begin publicly discussing the ideas in the book as widely as possible by accepting invitations to give visiting lectures whenever they came in. This would enable me both to refine the arguments themselves through a dialogic process and to get a better sense of how useful it would be to expand the agenda of the book itself.

So, I began what eventually became four years of traveling around the world giving lectures, seminars, workshops, and, in a few places, extended lecture series, on the book manuscript at universities, conferences, and other venues. I never anticipated that I would in the end give over 50 talks in 18 countries:

2005: University of Arizona; University of Umea, Sweden (four lectures); Charles University, Prague; Seminar at the Czech Parliament, Prague; University of Trento, Italy; Croatian Sociological Association, Zagreb; University of Zagreb; Conference on Moral Economy, University of Lancaster; School of Social Ecology, U.C. Irvine; School of Social Justice, University College, Dublin.

2006: Department of Sociology, Princeton University; Conference on Hegel, Marx, and Psychoanalysis, Sarajevo, Bosnia; London School of Economics; University of California, Berkeley (six lectures); Midwest Social Forum, Milwaukee; University of Toronto.

2007: NYU (four lectures); Columbia University; Haverford College; Wheaton College; Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan; Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan; Kwansai Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan; Kyoto University; University of Tokyo; University of Buenos Aires, Argentina; Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile; Renmin University, Beijing; Tsinghua University, Beijing; Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing; Sun-Yat Sen University, Guangzhou; Nanjing University; Fudan University, Shanghai; Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, South Africa (four lectures); University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg; COSATU leadership workshop, Johannesburg; University of California, Berkeley (series of eight lectures and seminars); University of Trondheim, Norway (three lectures); Middle Eastern Technical University, Ankara (four lectures); Bogazici University, Istanbul; University of Minnesota.

2008: University of Barcelona; University of Milan; University of Sienna; University of the Basque Country, Bilbao, Spain; Sciences Po, Paris; Colegio de Mexico, Mexico City; Lancaster University.

One might have thought that eventually there would be significant diminishing intellectual returns from giving such a large number of talks. But this really was not the case. Each wave of presentations and discussions occurred in the context of recent revisions and new formulations, and some of the most important refinements were triggered by discussions very late in this process.⁶ At these talks I took careful notes of the discussions, and at some of them I recorded the discussions and prepared written transcripts.⁷ From these notes, written during the four years of discussions, I accumulated an inventory of problems, unresolved issues, and possible revisions. I more or less continuously revised the manuscript, posting the most current draft of chapters on the web. Often when I gave lectures some of the participants had read some of the pieces of the book-in-progress and had prepared comments in advance.

In planning such far-flung lecture trips in such different parts of the world I had anticipated getting sharply different reactions in different places. Surely the questions people would pose in China would be different from those asked in Norway. The most striking fact of my discussions in these venues, however, was the commonality of issues raised, the commonality of criticisms and concerns, and also the commonality of the general enthusiasm for the agenda I laid out. Everywhere people seemed to appreciate the institutional pluralism of the conception of socialism I proposed and the moral vision of social justice I defended, but also, everywhere, people were skeptical about the possibilities of social power rooted in civil society providing a basis for transcending capitalism, especially under conditions of globalization. Of course, there was considerable self-selection on the part of my audiences: the people who were most likely to show up at a lecture called "Envisioning Real Utopias" would be critics of existing institutions and already positively disposed to thinking about emancipatory alternatives. Still, it was reassuring to me that with a few interesting exceptions people were receptive both to the idea of placing democracy and social power at the center of the problem of transforming capitalism into an emancipatory

⁶ For example, to anticipate some of the discussion in chapter 5, two "pathways of social empowerment" were added after my visit to Barcelona in May of 2008.

⁷ Some of the transcripts of the discussions of the book manuscript in these lectures and seminars, and some of the audio recordings as well, are available on my website: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright>.

alternative, and to exploring the institutionally heterogeneous ways in which this could be realized in practice. I felt that I was part of a global conversation on the dilemmas of our time, and even if many people remained unconvinced about the feasibility of real utopias, the analysis I laid out nevertheless resonated.

In the spaces between all of this travel, I taught a PhD level seminar on real utopias at the University of Wisconsin in 2005 and 2008. In the spring semester of 2008 I organized this seminar around the existing draft of the book—students read and commented on one chapter each week. The seminar also involved a weekly video-conference connection with a group of sociology students at the University of Buenos Aires who had attended my lectures there in May of 2007 and wanted to participate in the Wisconsin seminar.⁸ At the end of the semester the students from Argentina came to Madison for a two-day mini-conference on "Envisioning Real Utopias" with the students from Wisconsin and a few from Berkeley, NYU, and Minnesota who had also been involved in the lectures and seminars I had given at their universities. The final consolidation and revision of the book came in the immediate aftermath of this intensive and (for me anyway) extraordinarily productive seminar.

It is very hard in a process like this to know exactly where all of the new ideas and refinements came from. The most accurate description is that they came out of the extended dialogue in which I was so vigorously engaged. Of course, it is always true that ideas are social products, not just the result of individual imagination springing from interior reflection. But in the case of this book, the ideas are not simply a social product, but a collective product generated by the collaboration of hundreds of people around the world with whom I have discussed its arguments. I am deeply grateful to the many people who came to these discussions and contributed their thoughts to the collaborative process of developing the ideas in this book.

I worry about thanking specific people, since I am sure that I will leave off someone whose skepticism, poignant comment or suggestion has played an important role in pushing the arguments of the book forward. Still, there are some specific people that I must acknowledge: Michael Burawoy has been both my most

⁸ Audio recordings of most of the weekly discussions in this seminar, along with student comments and my responses, are available online at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright>.

consistent critic and one of my two most consistent supporters. He is relentlessly enthusiastic about the idea of real utopias, and equally relentlessly critical about many of the details of my analysis. He, more than anyone else, has emphasized the importance of the word “social” and it was through our discussions (especially on bike rides and hikes in Northern California) that the specific terminological convention of talking about the “social” in “socialism” emerged. My wife, Marcia Kahn Wright, has been the other most consistent supporter of this work and has not only continually refueled my commitment to the Real Utopias Project and tolerantly put up with the disruptions caused by my travel, but has substantively contributed important ideas to the book in our periodic late-night discussions of particular problems and themes. Harry Brighouse has become in recent years the person with whom I have discussed the problem of real utopias and its philosophical underpinnings the most. The specific elaboration of the concepts of social justice and human flourishing underpinning the normative foundations of this book owes much to our discussions. Two of my students, Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Amy Lang, did their doctoral dissertations on specific problems of real utopian institutional innovations, and I learned a tremendous amount from them about the fine-grained details of their cases and the implications these have for the broader problem of deepening democracy. My collaboration with Archon Fung in writing the anchoring essay of volume IV of the Real Utopias Project, *Deepening Democracy*, was of fundamental importance in helping me to understand why democracy is the core problem for transcending capitalism. My earlier work had emphasized the centrality of exploitation to capitalism, and of course exploitation is pivotal to the way capitalism works. But the central axis of transcending capitalism is democracy. Joel Rogers has been involved in various ways with the Real Utopias Project from the start. Indeed, he proposed the name on one of our weekly Sunday morning walks with my golden retriever in the early 1990s, as we were planning the conference on associational democracy that eventually became the basis for the first book in the project. My former student, Vivek Chibber, has repeatedly reminded me that class struggle and class politics must be at the core of the effort to transform and transcend capitalism even though he (I think) now reluctantly agrees with me that ruptural logics of class struggle are not very plausible in the world today. The members of the Analytical Marxism Group—G.A. Cohen, Philippe Van Parijs,

Sam Bowles, Josh Cohen, Hillel Steiner, Robert Brenner, John Roemer, and Robert van der Veen—might have been discouraging when I first presented the earliest version of the argument of this book to them in 2004, but in the end their reaction was certainly helpful in pushing the issues forward. More importantly, my understanding of philosophical ideas about equality and the conditions for its realization have developed largely through the quarter century of my discussions with the members of this group. Finally, I would like to thank the students in the graduate seminars at Berkeley and Wisconsin who read drafts of chapters of the book and wrote provocative interrogations for each discussion. Their willingness to raise sharp criticisms and express skepticism about many of my formulations has led to many revisions of the text and the addition of many footnotes in which I reply to objections which they raised in class.

A note on the audience for this book

I began writing this book with a broad, relatively popular audience in mind. I somehow hoped that I could deal seriously with these difficult theoretical and political matters and still make the book accessible and attractive to people not schooled in radical social theory or Marxism. As the book expanded and I encountered criticisms that I felt I needed to counter, it became clear to me that I was in practice engaged in a dialogue with a relatively sophisticated audience. One of the hallmarks of “academic” writing is responding to potential criticisms of one’s arguments that will not have occurred to most readers. Still, I wanted the book at least to be readable by people not steeped in academic debates. I have tried to resolve this problem by placing in footnotes the discussions of many of the more academic refinements and responses to objections to the analysis. The main text itself can be read without looking at the footnotes.

There is one other tension concerning the hoped-for audience of the book. I want it to be relevant both to people whose intellectual and political coordinates are firmly anchored in the socialist left as well as to people broadly interested in the dilemmas and possibilities for a more just and humane world who do not see the Marxist tradition as a critical source of ideas or as an arena for debate. This is also a difficult divide to straddle. In engaging people sympathetic to Marxism around the problem of the radical transcendence of capitalism it is important to explore the issue

of revolutionary transformation and the limitations in the traditional Marxist theory of history. People who feel no connection to the Marxist tradition are likely to see those discussions as being largely irrelevant. The use of the term “socialism” to describe the structural aspects of the emancipatory alternative to capitalism also reflects this tension: For people sympathetic to the Marxist tradition, my attempt at rethinking socialism in terms of social power and radical democracy connects with longstanding themes; to non-Marxists the term “socialism” may seem antiquated, and, in spite of my terminological protestations, to have too close a link to centralized statism.

This tension of writing both for people who identify in some way with Marxism and for those indifferent or hostile to Marxism is further exacerbated by my desire for the book to be relevant to people in different countries, where “Marxism” and “socialism” can carry very different connotations. In the United States the word “socialism” lies completely outside of mainstream political life, whereas in many European countries it is an umbrella label for progressive politics rooted in democratic egalitarian values.

I do not know if I have successfully navigated these problems of audience. My strategy is to try to write clearly, define all of the key concepts I use, and carefully present the steps in my arguments in a logical way that hopefully will make the text accessible to people both familiar and less familiar with this kind of discussion.

*Madison, Wisconsin
July, 2009*

INTRODUCTION: WHY REAL UTOPIAS?¹

There was a time, not so long ago, when both critics and defenders of capitalism believed that “another world was possible.” It was generally called “socialism.” While the right condemned socialism as violating individual rights to private property and unleashing monstrous forms of state oppression, and the left saw socialism as opening up new vistas of social equality, genuine freedom and the development of human potentials, both believed that a fundamental alternative to capitalism was possible.

Most people in the world today, especially in its economically developed regions, no longer believe in this possibility. Capitalism seems to them part of the natural order of things, and pessimism has replaced the optimism of the will that Gramsci once said would be essential if the world was to be transformed.

In this book I hope to contribute to rebuilding a sense of possibility for emancipatory social change by investigating the feasibility of radically different kinds of institutions and social relations that could potentially advance the democratic egalitarian goals historically associated with the idea of socialism. In part this investigation will be empirical, examining cases of institutional innovations that embody in one way or another emancipatory alternatives to the dominant forms of social organization. In part it will be more speculative, exploring theoretical proposals that have not yet been implemented but nevertheless are attentive to realistic problems of institutional design and social feasibility. The idea is to provide empirical and theoretical grounding for radical democratic egalitarian visions of an alternative social world.

¹ Parts of this chapter appeared in the preface to the first volume in the Real Utopias Project, *Associations and Democracy*, by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (London: Verso, 1995).