Preface

'You must learn to write in such a way that it will be as easy as possible for your critics to know why they disagree with you.'

Beatrice A. Wright
(circa 1960)

I began work on this book nearly five years ago, fully anticipating that I would finish it within a year or so. In the course of these years several important things have occurred in my life which have had a major impact on the content and schedule of the project.

To begin with, I have had a significant change in what sociologists call my 'reference group', the circle of people whose opinions and evaluations are in the back of my mind as I type away on my word processor. My earlier work on class structure, the state, income inequality and related topics was all basically written or at least launched while I was a graduate student at the University of California in the first part of the 1970s. Up until about 1980 most of my published material was either initially formulated in my student years or developed as a direct spin-off of that period.

My reference group while a graduate student was a circle of Marxist scholars affiliated with the journal *Kapitalistate* and a loose organization called the 'Union of Marxist Social Scientists'. Most of these people were students, most had been radicalized during the heyday of the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, and most were committed to some variety of Marxist approach to social theory. While many of us considered ourselves to be rather unorthodox in various ways, the basic categories of Marxist analysis, from the labour theory of value to the theory of the capitalist state, were more or less taken for granted as points of departure. There was a great deal of fervour and excitement and we all felt that we had a firm grip on the truth.

As it is commonplace to say, times have changed. Many of the students who engaged in the revitalization of American Marxism in the 1970s have subsequently been employed in professional and academic posts, and a good number of the academics have by now received tenure. The feeling of assurance that we had answers to

every question has generally been tempered by a more cautious and nuanced stance. In many cases, in fact, Marxism has become the object of considerable criticism on the academic left, and many radical scholars are identifying with what some have labelled 'post-Marxism'.

On a personal level, I became an Assistant Professor and then a tenured faculty member at the University of Wisconsin. And I have also become more aware of the problems in Marxist theory and the need for a more rigorous and reflective approach. But I have not, I hope, shifted my basic commitment to the project of Marxist theory and to the fundamental insights contained within it.

To sustain that commitment I helped to establish a graduate training programme in the Wisconsin Sociology Department, the Class Analysis and Historical Change Program. That programme, in turn, has become a crucial element in my new reference group. Unlike my student circle in Berkeley, the Class Analysis programme in Madison is ideologically much more diverse and certainly less wedded to a traditional Marxist perspective. As a teacher in the programme, therefore, I have had to defend actively the core theses of Marxism and make them compelling to a sympathetic yet unconvinced audience. In the course of doing so, particularly in the context of arguing with energetic students in a year-long course on the Theory and Methodology of Marxist Social Science which I regularly teach, I have questioned, clarified and reformulated many of the basic ideas that I had earlier taken for granted.

My role as a professor constitutes only one aspect of this change in reference group. Perhaps even more important for the specific intellectual direction which my work is now taking, I have become very involved with a group of leftist scholars of varying degrees of sympathy to Marxism who meet once a year to discuss one another's work. This group includes G. A. Cohen, John Roemer, Jon Elster, Philippe van Parijs, Robert van der Veen, Robert Brenner, Adam Przeworski and Hillel Steiner. The central intellectual thread of the group is what they term 'Analytical Marxism', by which is meant the systematic interrogation and clarification of basic concepts and their reconstruction into a more coherent theoretical structure. The discussions within this group and the exposure it has given me to a range of new ideas and perspectives have had a considerable impact on my thinking and on my work.

If these reference groups define the positive forces I have encountered in the formulation of new ideas, other aspects of my

current situation constitute negative pressures. In the transition from graduate student to tenured professor I have also become integrated into a nexus of rewards that is very alluring. My research on class has led to a series of large research grants which pay parts of my salary and allow me to take time off from teaching to write. As my reputation has grown, I have had numerous opportunities for travel and lecturing in various places around the world. And I have been handsomely rewarded by my Sociology Department and the University of Wisconsin. As a Marxist materialist and class analyst, I cannot suppose that all of this has no effect on me and that by an act of will I can immunize myself from the seductions of the safe and comfortable life of an affluent academic in a liberal-democratic advanced capitalist society.

The privileges bestowed by elite universities have, with good reason, made many radicals suspicious of 'academic Marxists'. Such suspicion may be particularly acute in the United States, where the absence of a cohesive, mass socialist movement, let alone a revolutionary working-class political party, has made it difficult for many academic Marxists to be systematically linked to socialist struggles on a day-to-day basis. Certainly in my own case, I have not been a political activist in recent years. While my work has been informed by social and political events, it has not been forged in direct engagement with popular struggle.

I do not know the ways in which the ideas elaborated in this book have been shaped by these institutional and political realities and choices. I do not even really know whether or not, in the present historical circumstances, the work has benefited or suffered from the particular conditions under which it was produced. The time, travel and intellectual stimulation that my present position gives me may expand the space for critical thought more than the privileges I enjoy erode it. What I do know is that I have been aware of these issues and I have tried to maintain the kind of self-reflective stance that might minimize the negative effects of these material conditions on my work.

Aside from these various professional considerations, my life has undergone one other massive change since I first began work on this book: the birth of my two daughters, Jennifer and Rebecca, now aged five and four. I do not know if my theoretical sensibilities have been altered by the wonderful transformation these two little persons have brought to my life, but I am certain that the

book would have been finished a couple of years earlier if I had not embraced the joys of liberated fatherhood.

In the course of writing this book I have received considerable feedback on specific chapters and arguments from a large number of people. I am particularly grateful to Andrew Levine, who attempted, with some success, to delay the completion of the manuscript by giving me too many difficult comments. Michael Burawoy was very important in helping me to clarify the initial agenda of the book during the exciting year he spent in Madison. The arguments in the book have also benefited decisively from a series of comments and discussions I have had with John Roemer. Robert Manchin, a Hungarian sociologist who spent a year at the University of Wisconsin, contributed greatly to working through the ideas embodied in chapter three. I am also grateful for written comments from Adam Przeworski, Göran Therborn, Perry Anderson, Daniel Bertaux, Ron Aminzade, Richard Lachmann, Philippe van Parijs, Robert van der Veen, Trond Petersen and Sheldon Stryker, and for stimulating discussions of the issues raised in the book with Ivan Szelenyi, Jon Elster, G. A. Cohen, Göran Ahrne and the many students in my courses and seminars who have pressed me continually on these problems. Various technical issues in the empirical chapters were clarified by Charles Halaby, Robert Hauser, Rob Mare and Tom Colbjornson. I would like to thank the research team that worked on the class structure project–especially Kathleen Cairns, Cynthia Costello, David Hachen, Bill Martin and Joey Sprague—for the enormous contribution they have made to the empirical investigations in the book. To my wife, Marcia Kahn Wright, I owe a special debt of gratitude for not letting me get too obsessed with my work and helping me to keep things in perspective. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the financial support for the research and writing that has gone into this project from the National Science Foundation, The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation.

While this book was being written, four people whom I loved have died. My grandmother, Sonia Posner, whose love of learning and life-long commitment to revolutionary ideals deeply shaped my life, died in the spring of 1980. Luca Peronne, whose comradeship and brilliance helped me begin my first attempts at class analysis, died later that year. My father, M. Erik Wright, whose nurturance

and vitality and curiosity will always be with me, died in 1981. And Gene Havens, a *compañero* and colleague who showed me how to be an academic and a serious Marxist, died just before the book was finished in the summer of 1984. To the memory of these four I dedicate this book.

Erik Olin Wright
Madison, Wisconsin
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