

Wright, Erik Olin. 2010. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London: Verso. ISBN: 978-1-84467-617-0. Paperback: 33.50 CAD. Pages: 394.

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This wide-ranging and carefully argued text is Wright's contribution to the Real Utopias project that began under his general editorship in the early 1990s. His ambitious text exemplifies the goal of the project: to identify existing institutions and practices which prefigure a radical alternative to capitalism. The text advances a unified normative argument articulated in three interrelated parts: "Diagnosis and Critique," "Alternatives," and "Transformation."

"Diagnosis and Critique" begins by explaining the systematic ways in which capitalism harms people. In eleven eloquently and non-dogmatically defended theses, Wright supports the conclusion that a socialist alternative to capitalism is desirable because capitalism is systematically undemocratic, oppressive and unequal. The socialist alternative envisaged by Wright is a radically democratic, egalitarian society that combines economic with political justice in ensuring that the material conditions of "human flourishing" are satisfied for each and all. It is radically democratic to the extent that democracy extends throughout all those social institutions, especially, economic institutions, within which the life-horizons of people are shaped.

This reconstruction of the socialist vision maintains the Marxist tradition's commitments to extending democracy into economic life, to providing real opportunities for people to realize their capacities, and to ensuring the satisfaction of their needs, while widening the political roads by which these goals might be reached beyond revolutionary class struggle. The overall normative vision is inspiring and lucidly defended. Still, Wright, like much recent Marxist and left-liberal work (by István Mészáros, Michael Lebowitz, Martha Nussbaum and Thomas Pogge) that also employs the language of need-satisfaction and flourishing does not provide any explicit criterion by which needs might be distinguished from consumer demands or say anything about what limits natural life-support systems might impose upon the projects through which our capacities are rationally expressed in a "flourishing" life. Nevertheless, Wright's normative arguments are a convincing vindication of his thesis that socialism remains a desirable alternative to capitalism.

That socialism is *desirable*, however, does not prove that it is *viable*. The theoretical and practical heart of the book is the second part, "Alternatives," in which Wright examines a variety of existing practices and theoretical models for workable, non-capitalist social and economic institutions and relationships. He begins with a careful examination of the different forms of power—economic, state and social—at work in any society. He locates socialism at the opposite end of a continuum ranging from an ideal-

type market society in which private economic power predominates. A fully socialist society would subordinate economic power to social power, the power of associated citizens and producers, and absorb state power into its radically democratic institutions. In Wright's "real utopia" the realization of either extreme is impossible. Any actual society will be a hybrid of economic, state and social power. The goal of socialists, he rightly contends, is to work progressively to subordinate as much economic and state power to social power as possible.

The alternatives he examines exemplify, to different degrees, the real possibility of building economic institutions which are governed by social power. Some examples illustrate alternative structures of motivation, for example, Wikipedia, whose creators contribute their time because they find the project intrinsically valuable, not because they are paid. Others explore actual democratic economic practices and institutions, like participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, or the Mondragon cooperatives in Spain. The section concludes with critical overviews of two theoretical alternatives to capitalism, Jon Roemer's model of market socialism and Michael Albert's participatory economics. Considered as a whole, this section is inspiring. Its examples of "real utopias" illustrate that not only is another world in the abstract possible, in many respects it is already actual, if only in piecemeal form.

As inspiring as Wright's analyses of these examples are, I could not but be struck by his complete silence as to unarguably the most important experiments in building democratic alternatives to capitalism today, those jointly underway in Venezuela and Bolivia, and the most plausible theoretical alternative to capitalism, Pat Devine's negotiated coordination economy (e.g. Devine 2002). As regards Venezuela and Bolivia, Wright does not even include a footnote explaining why he chose not to include them. It cannot be because he wanted to concentrate on European and North America examples, since Porto Alegre is in Brazil. There are certainly problems and challenges in each of these society-wide experiments in economic democratization, but that cannot explain why there is no mention of them, since Wright is candidly critical about all the examples he studies. He could have discussed one or both as critically as he felt was necessary. To say nothing about either in a book on real alternatives to capitalism is, I believe, a significant shortcoming.

The concluding section, "Transformation," opens with an instructive discussion of how societies, even exploitative and alienating ones, are able to reproduce themselves. While the means whereby compliance with existing norms is ensured are multiple and powerful, no society has proven capable of forever suppressing its contradictions. Social contradictions for Wright are spaces in which social power can grow, either as an alternative to state power, or as a force capable of channelling state power in democratic and egalitarian directions. While Wright is sceptical (but not dismissive) of the possibility of revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society in the West (ruptural transformation) he is more hopeful (but not naively so) about possibilities for interstitial and symbiotic

transformation. Interstitial transformation works within the spaces not yet colonized by economic and state power to build new associative communities and institutions, while symbiotic forms of transformation use state power to solve problems for capital while also advancing social power. Social democracy is the classic example of symbiotic transformations. While there are perhaps still some Marxists who hold out hope for a traditional working class revolution against capital, it is difficult to disagree with Wright's general support for interstitial and symbiotic strategies as most appropriate to the context of political struggle in the developed capitalist world.

Notwithstanding the limitations I noted above, Wright's text is a productive synthesis of theory and practice, classic theories and novel developments, political imagination and clear-sighted realism about the challenges the socialist alternative faces. Overall, *Envisioning Real Utopias* is an important contribution to a most needed debate about what is to be done.

## References

Devine, Pat. 2002. "Participatory Planning Through Negotiated Coordination." *Science and Society*. Vol. 66, No. 1.