

PREFACE

A personal note: this contribution was prepared for the Erik Olin Wright Festschrift at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in November 2019. My thanks to Dylan Riley, Greta Krippner and Ivan Ermakoff for their constructive criticisms. Thanks also to Marcia Wright for her corrective influence on a paper not easy to balance. For more than forty years Erik was a close friend; we regularly read and commented on each other's work. We spent a lot of time together in Berkeley, Madison and many other places. As I have tried to grasp Erik's trajectory over the last half-century, I have inevitably done so with the partiality of a close companion. We always had our differences, which on occasion appeared publicly, but I don't think they ever affected our relationship. On the contrary, our divergences intensified our engagement with each other, largely because we had a common project. Erik was always the more reasoned and willing to compromise, I the more irrational and unbending. He always tried as best he could to find a rational core to my objections—even if there wasn't one. I, on the other hand, pointed to the non-rational foundations of his transcendent rationalism. In this engagement with his work, I know that Erik would not have wanted me to pull my punches, but he would have also wanted to participate and disagree. I have therefore had to be more cautious than in the past because sadly, for the first time, he is not here to respond. In my attempt to be true to our relationship, and to clarify the standpoint from which I evaluate Erik's life and work, I've used footnotes to present some of our disagreements. Referring to Erik by his first name, unorthodox in such a paper, keeps me focused on him as well as on his work, helps me keep his spirit alive, driving his ideas forward—for he was always oriented to the future.

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A TALE OF TWO MARXISMS

Remembering Erik Olin Wright (1947–2019)

IN 1970, Alvin Gouldner could confidently announce that the golden age of Western sociology was over.¹ The civil-rights movement, the women's movement, anti-war protests and a growing anti-state radicalism had served to deflate post-war American triumphalism and the sociology it had spawned. The proclaimed 'end of ideology'—the notion that the US had overcome the major challenges of modernity—proved to be the 'illusion of the epoch' (a phrase hitherto reserved for Marxism). The shoe was now on the other foot: for the new generation, mainstream sociology was seen as ideology, plastering over the deep pathologies of US society. Demonstrable injustices belied the claims of the dominant 'consensus theory'.²

Gouldner was right to identify the crisis of sociology, but he did not anticipate how the social movements of the 1960s and the ideas they generated—feminism, Critical Race Theory and Marxism—would catalyse a renewal of the discipline. Reflecting on that renewal a decade later in *The Two Marxisms* (1980), Gouldner discerned two opposed but also interdependent tendencies: Scientific Marxism and Critical Marxism.³ In brief, Scientific Marxism begins from a rational understanding of society that postulates the determinism of objective structures. It uncovers historical tendencies leading to socialism when conditions are ripe. Concepts reflect real mechanisms; politics are epiphenomenal; ideology is distortion of the truth. Critical Marxism, on the other hand, starts out from the ubiquity of alienation obstructing the potential for human self-realization. It highlights human intervention against the obduracy of objective structures—history has no pre-ordained end, but is the product of collective mobilization. In the view of Critical Marxism, concepts exist

to interpret social processes; politics is an arena for the realization of ultimate values; ideology is a moral force. In revolutionary times Critical Marxism and Scientific Marxism may form a contradictory unity, but in non-revolutionary times they more easily go their separate ways.

Intended to capture the entangled history of Marxism, these two Marxisms also frame the intellectual biography of Erik Wright. In the 1970s his Scientific and Critical Marxisms were joined, but later they came apart as each developed its own autonomous trajectory. Erik's Scientific Marxism was the programme of class analysis that first

¹ Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, New York 1970. For those interested in an assessment of Erik's work as part of the 1970s and 80s Marxist renaissance in US sociology, see Jeff Manza and Michael McCarthy, 'The Neo-Marxist Legacy in American Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 37, 2011, pp. 155–83.

² The leading exponent of consensus theory—the idea that society is held together by shared values—was Talcott Parsons, the Harvard sociologist whose *Structure of Social Action* (1937) reinvented sociology through a synthesis of the writings of Weber, Durkheim, Marshall and Pareto. The research programme Parsons spearheaded came to be known as 'structural functionalism'; its hypothesis was that the institutions of any society had to perform four basic functions: adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency. This programme dominated post-war American sociology and influenced neighbouring disciplines in a way sociology never has since. Erik himself had been impressed by Parsons's system analysis, taking his course at Harvard. Structural functionalism was also a Cold War sociology, celebrating the virtues of American capitalist society as against the Soviet Union and its 'bankrupt' ideology. But it went into abeyance during the 1970s when Marxism, entirely ignored by Parsons, enjoyed a resurgence, alongside burgeoning demands for social justice.

³ Alvin Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms*, New York 1980. Gouldner (1920–80) came from an older generation of leftists, but he was an instinctive 'real utopian', searching for the emancipatory moments in sociology and the world it described. In his first study, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (1954), Gouldner interrogated the meaning of 'bureaucracy' based on a study of a gypsum plant in upstate New York. Recognizing different types of bureaucracy—'representative' as well as 'punishment-centred' and 'mock' bureaucracies—he problematized Weber's monolithic view of bureaucracy and the pessimism it entailed—a pessimism that suffused the sociology of organizations at that time. In *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* he extended this early critique of the reigning 50s and 60s sociology into a systematic sociology of sociology. Just as he tried to recover the liberatory moment of sociology, Gouldner was quick to identify conservative elements within Marxism. In *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (1979), Gouldner saw Marxism as an ideology of the intelligentsia, leading him to a theory of intellectuals as a 'flawed universal class'.

brought him international fame. Begun in graduate school, it tailed off in the last two decades of his life, when it played second fiddle to the Critical Marxism of the Real Utopias Project that Erik began in the early 1990s. Erik's writings show remarkably little cross-pollination between the two as they each developed independently of the other. *He moves from a class analysis without utopia to utopia without class analysis.* Why did his intellectual life run along these separate tracks, especially given their convergence in the beginning? Are Critical Marxism and Scientific Marxism ultimately inimical, displaying the binary oppositions identified by Gouldner? Or, as I shall argue, do the reasons for the divergence lie in the political context in which he wrote and his changing relation to sociology? The separation is not inevitable. Indeed, at the end of his life there are intimations of a reconnection of science and critique that call for further elaboration in continuing his legacy.

What follows is therefore divided into four parts: Erik's early Marxism, where science and critique are joined; the Scientific Marxism of class analysis; the Critical Marxism of real utopias; and my proposals for rejoining science and critique.

I. EARLY MARXISM

We first have to retrace Erik's path to Marxism. After graduating from Harvard in social studies in 1968, Erik spent two years at Oxford pursuing a second BA degree, imbibing sociology and politics from Steven Lukes and history from Christopher Hill. These were turbulent years with Marxism thriving on both sides of the Atlantic, capturing the minds of a new generation of social scientists. In order to avoid the draft Erik had enrolled in the Unitarian-Universalistic seminary at Berkeley. That was even before he went to Oxford, where he would claim to study religion—the Puritan Revolution in England! When he returned to the US in the Fall of 1970 he enrolled as a full-time student at the seminary. As part of his studies, he organized a student-run seminar called 'Utopia and Revolution'. As he recalled:

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.⁴

Another part of the seminary programme was a field assignment to prepare him for ministerial work. As his site Erik chose San Quentin prison where he became a student chaplain. Just as he recorded and typed up each session of the 'Utopia and Revolution' seminar, so now he assiduously wrote the field notes that he would turn into his first book, *The Politics of Punishment* (1973), with additional contributions from lawyers, prisoners and journalists. Here Erik set out a radical conception of crime and punishment, and a critique of the correctional model as 'liberal totalitarianism', followed by detailed descriptions of conditions in San Quentin. There followed four chapters on the violence, racism and revolt at Soledad Prison in California, written by the head psychiatrist, a prisoner, a lawyer representing the Soledad Brothers and a writer from the Prison Law Collective. The last part of the book has three chapters written by his collaborators on prisoner revolts, legislative changes and the courts. Erik writes a concluding chapter on prison reform, arguing that any meaningful change would require the transformation of society. *The Politics of Punishment* took a radical stance against prisons, and in many ways anticipated the critical standpoint of contemporary incarceration studies. Science and critique were joined in Erik's precocious ethnography of prison life.

Strange though it may seem, the theological seminary became an incubator for Erik's radicalism, already inflected by an embryonic Marxism suffusing the intellectual worlds through which he travelled. As with so many others, his radicalism found a home in the sociology of the time, leading him to enrol in the Berkeley sociology department. He wrote:

Of all the social sciences, sociology seemed to me to be the least disciplinary: it had the fuzziest boundaries. But even more significantly, sociology has valued its own marginal traditions in a way that other social sciences don't. Even anti-Marxist sociologists recognize the importance of Marx as one of the intellectual founders of what has become sociology.⁵

⁴ *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London and New York 2010, p. ix.

⁵ 'Falling into Marxism; Choosing to Stay', in Alan Sica and Stephen Turner, eds, *The Disobedient Generation*, Chicago 2005, p. 338.

Once there, he would later state, it was apparent that Marxism was the only game in town. Indeed, Marxism was flourishing in the Bay Area both in the sociology department and beyond in various discussion groups, including the editorial collective of the journal *Kapitalistate*, led by James O'Connor, the Bay Area chapter of the Union for Radical Political Economics, the socialist-oriented Union of Marxist Social Scientists, and the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*. Erik was active in all of these.⁶

In those days the Berkeley sociology department was in disarray, divided into warring factions by the political dramas on campus.⁷ It is difficult now to appreciate the turmoil at Berkeley that began with the Free Speech Movement in 1964 and reached a peak in 1968–70 with the course given by Eldridge Cleaver (which the Board of Regents tried but failed to stop), the Third World Strike that resulted in the formation of the Ethnic Studies Department, the defence of People's Park that led Governor Reagan to call in the National Guard, and anti-war marches regularly met with police violence. In those years, faculty teaching in the sociology department was in remission, as graduate students organized their own seminars. The

⁶ Sociology attracted Marxists, especially where it was new. Many had a triumphalist vision of taking over the discipline. Writing from Sweden, Göran Therborn concluded: 'What the present study indicates, then, is neither convergence nor synthesis, but a *transcendence of sociology*, similar to Marx's transcendence of classical economics, and the development of historical materialism as *the science of society*. To indicate a task, however, is not to accomplish it. The extent to which these possibilities prove capable of realization will not depend on intra-scientific events alone. The rise and formation of the social sciences were determined by the class struggles of particular historical societies, and so, no doubt, will be their further development or arrested development. Thus the question of a future development of social sciences in the direction of historical materialism remains open—above all to those of us who are committed to working for it.' See *Science, Class and Society*, London 1976, p. 429 (italics in the original). I was in Zambia at the time (1968–72), learning to be a sociologist, where again Marxism was a powerful presence. In those days, in Asia, Latin America and Africa, Marxism challenged and often swamped all the imported social sciences from the Global North. While anthropology and political science had their traditions, sociology was a new discipline, vulnerable to invasions from without but also deeply engaged with Marxism.

⁷ Charles Glock, who chaired the department during those years (1967–68 and 1969–71) wrote: 'The Department's outer office resembled a recruiting station for leftist causes. A portrait of Che Guevara was prominently displayed as were other revolutionary posters. Faculty whom staff considered on the wrong side were catered to with the minimum amount of courtesy and respect that staff thought they could get away with.' Cited in Michael Burawoy and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, 'Berkeley Sociology: Past, Present and Future', unpublished manuscript, 2001, p. 14.

most enduring of those courses was ‘Current Controversies in Marxist Social Science’ that Erik would take with him to Wisconsin, where it became the legendary Sociology 621-622—a course he offered every year, and later every other year up to 2017. Here Erik taught graduate students from all over the world his version of Marxism.⁸

Erik’s approach was laid out in his second book, *Class, Crisis and the State* (1978), published by New Left Books, which brought him international attention. It was based on three essays he had written between 1974 and 1976 in NLR, the *Insurgent Sociologist* and the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*. The first essay was his novel and elegant reconstruction of the Marxist conception of class, the second a historicization of the contradictions and crises of capital accumulation, and the third a juxtaposition of the writings of Lenin and Weber on the durability of bureaucracy. This third essay ends with a disquisition on then current debates about the state—whether it was a ‘state in capitalist society’ that if somehow conquered, even through electoral means, could be wielded in the pursuit

⁸ The course changed over time. Erik first taught it in his second semester at Madison in Spring 1977, when it was based on the original course at Berkeley. In 1979–80 it became Sociology 621-622, a two-semester course—the first semester was called ‘Introduction to Marxist Social Science’ and the second ‘Methodology of Historical Materialism’. The topics were: ‘Classes’, ‘Political Economy of the Capitalist Mode of Production’, ‘Imperialism’, ‘Base and Superstructure’, ‘Ideology and Consciousness’, ‘State, Socialism, and the Methodology of Historical Materialism’. By 1983–84, he had added two topics: ‘Race and Class’, and ‘Marxism and Feminism’. ‘Base and Superstructure’ and ‘The State’ were merged into ‘The Theory of the State and Politics’, while ‘Imperialism’ and ‘Socialism’ disappeared as distinct topics. The syllabus moved from an impressive 38 single-spaced pages in 1979–80 to an even more impressive 46 pages in 1983–84. By 2017, the syllabus was a whopping 87 pages, but the course had been reduced to a single semester, taught every other year. Now the topics were: ‘Setting the Agenda (Marxism as an Emancipatory Social Science)’, ‘Class Structure’, ‘Class Formation’, ‘The Theory of State and Politics’, ‘Ideology and Consciousness’, ‘Theory of History’, ‘Socialism and Emancipation’. Whereas in 1979 there was no need to justify a course on Marxism, as its popularity waned Erik introduced rationales: Marxism offers tools for a radical egalitarian project of social change; Marxism offers an exemplary theoretical framework; Marxism offers a powerful explanatory research programme. In the heady days of the late 70s, Erik had emphasized the ‘explanatory’ aspect, but by 2017 the emphasis was on Marxism as an ‘emancipatory’ social science. The title of the course moved from ‘Marxist Social Science’ to ‘Sociological Marxism’. Throughout, Erik didn’t discard older readings but added new ones as his own perspective changed, hence the encyclopedic syllabus. While he set class analysis and real utopias side by side, I do not believe he married them.

of socialism, or whether it was a 'capitalist state' with its own distinctive 'relative autonomy' that inherently reproduced capitalist relations and therefore had to be smashed and replaced by a socialist state. Erik found both positions wanting, arguing that by conquering the capitalist state with expanding popular support the state could be transformed from within without any 'smashing'. This was a position he would hold to the end of his life. Of the three essays, the one on the dynamics of capitalism was never developed; it was notably absent from his class analysis and the strategies of his Real Utopias Project.

2. SCIENTIFIC MARXISM: CLASS ANALYSIS

The radicalism of Erik's early writing joined class analysis and the utopian imagination in a singular Marxist project, but what relation did this bear to sociology? 'I originally had visions of glorious paradigm battles, with lances drawn and a valiant Marxist knight unseating the bourgeois rival in a dramatic quantitative joust. What is more, the fantasy saw the vanquished admitting defeat and changing horses as a result', he wrote in 1987.⁹ Of the three essays in *Class, Crisis and the State* it would be the one on class that tangled with sociologists.

Marxism, Erik argued, had never successfully wrestled with the limits of Marx's original theory of class polarization. Time and again sociologists emphasized that the signal feature of modern class structures is the rise of the 'middle classes'. It was the most common criticism sociology levelled against Marxism. A common Marxist response was to argue that the rise of the middle classes was an illusion, marking the effectiveness of bourgeois ideology—the majority of the middle class were wage labourers and should be lumped in with the proletariat. Other Marxists refused such subterfuge, instead referring to the middle class as a new class—a new petty bourgeoisie, a service class, a professional managerial class—but few built their arguments systematically into a broader theory of class structure.

⁹ Wright, 'Reflections on *Classes*', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32, 1987, p. 44. Erik would cite these two sentences repeatedly and at different moments in his career. For example, 'Falling into Marxism; Choosing to Stay', p. 338; *Understanding Class*, London 2015, p. 1. Each time it was to suggest how far he had come from his original vision of a valiant struggle. It turned out that his debates with mainstream sociologists were less frequent and less intense than those with other Marxists.

Enter Erik Wright. He argued that there are essentially three fundamental classes under capitalism: capitalists (employers), labourers (wage-earners) and petty bourgeoisie (self-employed). But there also emerged three intermediary positions, situated between the fundamental classes: managers and supervisors (between capital and labour); small employers (between the petty bourgeoisie and capital); and semi-autonomous employees (between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie). These intermediary positions became Erik's famous 'contradictory class locations', positions that shared features of both the adjacent classes. He showed how, using these measures, the size of the working class far exceeds that of competing definitions, especially the one developed by Nicos Poulantzas in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1975). He asked under what conditions those in contradictory class locations adjacent to wage labourers—managers, supervisors, semi-autonomous employees—would join the working class in the pursuit of socialism.

Erik argued that the pursuit of the *immediate* interests of those in contradictory class locations might hinder the advance of common *fundamental* class interests, but he never put the occupants of those contradictory class locations into motion as a historical force, even an ambiguous one. Instead, for his PhD dissertation, Erik set his portrait of class structure against sociologists' status-attainment theory and economists' human-capital theory in explaining income inequality.¹⁰ Using existing data, he was able to sustain the view that his novel Marxist model of classes did at least as well as competing models in sociology and economics. Why had he chosen the terrain of quantitative research as a means of adjudicating between Marxism and sociology? First, and most obviously, at that time stratification was at the heart of sociological theory and research. It was argued that stratification as measured in terms of the prestige ranking of occupations or later socio-economic status reflected an underlying value consensus about social hierarchy. It was also the area of a major methodological advance in statistical models, known as path analysis, pioneered by Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan's *The American Occupational Structure* (1967). Erik considered quantitative work to be a way of legitimating Marxism within

¹⁰ His dissertation was soon published as *Class Structure and Income Determination*, New York 1979.

sociology, even demonstrating the superiority of Marxism as a science. At the same time, he conceded, it would also be a way of advancing his career within academia.¹¹

Erik's model of class structure became widely known in both Marxist and sociological circles, but it hardly led to gladiatorial battles; in sociology, it was not perceived as threatening and was instead easily absorbed into the discipline. With disarming honesty, typical of his approach to scholarship, Wright confessed in 1987:

What has been striking over the past decade is how little serious debate by mainstream sociology there has been in response to the outpouring of neo-Marxist research. I have generally been unable to provoke systematic responses to my research among mainstream sociologists, of either a theoretical or empirical kind . . . The main effect of my research on the mainstream, as far as I can tell, is that certain 'variables' are now more likely to be included in regression equations. What I envisioned as a broad theoretical challenge to 'bourgeois sociology' backed up by systematic empirical research has resulted in the pragmatic appropriation of certain isolated elements of the operationalized conceptual framework with little attention to abstract theoretical issues.¹²

Having stripped the politics out of Marxism, having left behind the contradictions of capitalism, having abandoned history—especially history as the history of class struggle—and having reduced class analysis to another set of independent variables, mainstream sociologists were quite at home with Erik's multivariate Marxism. If this was Marxism, then bring it on.

Quantitative work may not have delivered remarkable new findings, but it did have the effect of forcing Erik to develop clearer definitions of

¹¹ Erik wrote: 'I was very ambitious as a young scholar—ambitious in my search for what I considered to be the "truth", but also ambitious for status, recognition, influence, world travel. Embarking on a line of research anchored in conventional survey research thus offered tangible rewards': 'Falling into Marxism; Choosing to Stay', p. 339. But really Erik never got the recognition from the academic establishment that his international reputation, his extraordinary scholarly record and his brilliant teaching deserved. I never heard him complain about this, and I doubt it even crossed his mind. He considered himself excessively privileged and he was, but his self-assured Marxism still rankled many. He was never fully assimilated.

¹² 'Reflections on *Classes*', pp. 44–5.

his class categories. In having to 'operationalize' class, the contradictory class location he had called 'semi-autonomous employees' proved especially difficult to define in a consistent manner. Indeed, wrestling with this ambiguity stimulated him to revamp the basis of his class structure, following the theory of exploitation developed by the budding economist John Roemer.¹³ Erik now reconstructed his own theory of exploitation around the distribution of different assets: labour power, means of production, organization, skills or credentials. Feudalism centred around the control over labour power, capitalism around the control of means of production, statism around the control of organizations, socialism around the control of skills or credentials, while communism allowed for collective control of all assets and elimination of exploitation. An evolutionary history was built into the successive elimination of exploitations, giving rise to a new map of classes under capitalism, now defined by the assets held by employers, petty bourgeoisie, managers, supervisors, non-management experts and workers. This was elaborated in detail in Erik's 1985 book, *Classes*.¹⁴

While Erik disagreed with Roemer that you could define class exploitation without relations of domination,¹⁵ he wanted to emphasize the centrality of exploitation (as opposed to domination, which had been central to the definition of contradictory class locations). Henceforth, he would presume those relations of domination, rather than observing, measuring or mapping them. His revamping of class structure in terms of assets held by individuals brought Erik a step closer to sociology. Just

¹³ John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Cambridge 1982.

¹⁴ Subsequently, Erik further revised his scheme of exploitation, pointing to its limitations and extending the framework to include the temporal dimension of class (class mobility) and the way the effects of class are mediated by such institutions as the family and the state. See 'Rethinking Once Again the Concept of Class Structure', in Erik Wright, ed., *The Debate on Classes*, London and New York 1989, pp. 269–348. It was all part of an endeavour to demonstrate the importance of class as an 'independent variable' that could explain variation in 'dependent variables' (attitudes, behaviours, non-class relations). Erik was still trying to demonstrate the explanatory power of class, once it was correctly defined and its effects contextualized. In his final accounting, *Class Counts* (1997), he melded the old contradictory class locations approach and the newer asset-based approach to exploitation in order to increase the explanatory power of 'class'—the permeability of class boundaries, the effects of class on gender relations in the home and at work, and the effects of class on class consciousness.

¹⁵ Wright, 'The Status of the Political in the Concept of Class Structure', *Politics and Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1982, pp. 321–41.

as his earlier formulations may have indirectly contributed to the atrophy of the status-attainment model, his new scheme prepared the way for the popularity of new notions of class, such as the one based on different ‘capitals’—social, economic and cultural—pioneered by Pierre Bourdieu; a notion of class in which, ironically, exploitation disappears.¹⁶

Erik became a victim of his own success. In a period of Marxist renaissance, his work attracted a lot of attention. Here was a Marxist of unquestionable integrity who combined empirical sophistication, analytical rigour and theoretical innovation. There was nothing quite like it in the world of sociology, although John Goldthorpe became an ardent anti-Marxist competitor. Erik was able to secure funding to conduct national social surveys designed to identify the distinctive dimensions of class structure, based on a combination of exploitation and domination, and measures of class consciousness intended to map out possible class alliances. Erik’s fame spread beyond national borders, as country after country fielded surveys based on his design.¹⁷ Within ten years some fifteen countries had collected data on class structure and class consciousness. For Erik this involved an enormous amount of work—advising, consulting, collaborating and co-authoring papers on comparative class analysis. The final product was a bulky volume, *Class Counts*. It is not clear there was a memorable empirical result, and in the preface Erik admits that he is not sure that ‘the results were worth the effort’—two decades of strenuous work.¹⁸ Again with characteristic honesty, Erik writes:

¹⁶ There is a paradox here. While in *Distinction* (1979) Bourdieu defines classes by positions in social space determined by the addition of economic and cultural capital, elsewhere he rails against the idea of ‘classes on paper’, class categories invented by the theorist, classes given by objective attributes. See, for example, the widely cited article ‘Social Space and the Genesis of “Classes”’, in Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge MA 1991 [1984], pp. 229–51.

¹⁷ Even Soviet sociologists wanted to get in on the act. I went to Moscow with Erik in 1986—the beginning of Perestroika—to develop a survey that could be administered in both the US and the Soviet Union. At the end of a very frustrating—but revealing—ten days, Erik was asked to deliver a lecture to the Academy of Sciences. The room was packed, and the audience was curious to hear this strange animal—a renowned Marxist scientist from the West. In a beautifully crafted talk Erik argued that exploitation on the basis of private property may have been abolished in the Soviet Union, but exploitation based on unequal access to organizational resources remained. The audience became increasingly tense as he unfolded an implicit critique of the Soviet order. Suddenly and awkwardly the talk was shut down, and we were ushered out of the room. Erik had clearly run afoul of the powers that be.

¹⁸ *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis*, Cambridge 1997, p. xxx.

Mostly, the data analysis has served to lend moderate support to particular theoretical arguments about the class structure and its effects, but frequently—as chronically occurs in this game—the results are ambiguous, troubled by noise and weak correlations and thus fail to provide compelling adjudications between rival arguments. There have, of course, been some interesting surprises. I had not expected, for example, to find such pervasive and often dramatic interactions between class and gender. My expectation had always been that class mechanisms would more or less have the same empirical effects for women as for men, but this is simply not the case. But overall it remains the case that direct empirical payoffs of the research have, so far at least, not been spectacular.¹⁹

I don't think Erik ever changed his mind about this.

The upshot was that Erik lost interest in opposing Marxism to sociology, and instead focused on linking dependent variables and independent variables in a massive research programme that reached its climax when Marxism was already in retreat within sociology.²⁰ Accordingly, he began to take a more conciliatory approach to sociology, and a more modest positioning of his own work. In the 2005 collection he edited, *Approaches to Class Analysis*, Marxist class analysis was presented as but one approach among many, including neo-Weberian, neo-Durkheimian, Bourdieusian, rent-based and post-class analysis. From his early enthusiasm for adjudication among competing theories he became more ecumenical. Erik assumed a more defensive posture, upholding a Marxist concept of class alongside and complementary to other approaches to class—which, ironically, had arisen in part out of the space he had created by criticizing the old models of status attainment.

In his last book dealing with class, *Understanding Class* (2015), he introduced a collection of essays written between 1995 and 2015 with an attempt to revitalize class analysis, not through adjudication or pluralism, but through synthesis. He tried to bring together three approaches: class

¹⁹ 'Reflections on *Classes*', p. 42.

²⁰ As a scientific research programme, his class analysis was able to absorb anomalies and resolve contradictions but at the expense of parsimony, and it may be said to have failed the ultimate test, the prediction of novel facts. See Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, Cambridge 1978. Undoubtedly, part of the problem is that he developed his research programme as a brilliant but lone scholar; he did not cultivate acolytes or disciples, although he would write numerous articles with his students, helping launch their careers. The Real Utopias Project, on the other hand, was a more collaborative venture disseminated through conferences and his students, but also through political architects and activists around the world. It has, therefore, had more staying power as a research programme.

as exploitation, as opportunity hoarding, and as individual attributes—broadly speaking Marxist, Weberian and status-attainment approaches, each dealing with a distinct set of problems. He wrote:

A fully elaborated class analysis, then, combines this kind of dynamic macro model of conflict and transformation with the macro-micro multi-level model of class processes and individual lives. In such a model the key insights of stratification approaches, Weberian approaches, and Marxist approaches are combined.²¹

This move toward a synthetic model—‘grand paradigm battles’ to ‘pragmatic realism’ as he would call it—might be seen as a reflection of Erik’s rise to prominence within sociology: he could now afford to accept the validity of other models of class, incorporating them within a Marxist frame. But I do not believe that was the only factor at play. As Marxism became more marginal within sociology, so Erik took a more conciliatory stance, trying to uphold the idea of class by embracing sociological visions that he had hitherto criticized. He was transitioning from what he called a ‘flaw-centred’ critique of sociology to a ‘virtue-centred’ critique, recognizing the explanatory role of each within a broader frame.²² But in the end it meant his class analysis lost its distinctiveness as it was integrated into sociology, alongside perspectives that often did not rely on a notion of capitalism, let alone the transcendence of capitalism. What began as a Marxist challenge to sociology turned into one particular sociology, a *Marxist sociology* that coexisted with other sociologies.²³

Erik’s class analysis was undoubtedly a major intervention—not only his reconceptualization but, even more novel, the dedicated empirical

²¹ *Understanding Class*, p. 14.

²² *Understanding Class*, p. vii.

²³ It should be said that in the beginning Erik and I thought our approaches were complementary—he focusing more on the relations of production and I on the relations *in* production; he the quantitative analyst and I the ethnographer. But I became more critical of the operationalization of his conceptual scheme through survey data rather than through historical analysis. He was always honest about the limitations of the path he had taken, and tolerated my critical stance toward his spurious ‘objectivism’ and distance from the world he theorized. At the provocation of Jeff Manza we debated our different perspectives in the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*. See Wright, ‘Reflections on *Classes*’; Wright, ‘Reply to Burawoy’s Comments on “Reflections on *Classes*”’, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32, 1987; Burawoy, ‘The Limits of Wright’s Analytical Marxism and an Alternative’, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32; Burawoy, ‘Marxism, Philosophy and Science’, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, vol. 34, 1989. The wider debate about Erik’s class analysis appeared in *The Debate on Classes*.

measurement and mapping of class structures that followed. Such an ambitious and successful project gave unprecedented legitimacy to Marxism within sociology. Still, it came at a cost. Rather than questioning the foundations of sociology, Erik competed with existing sociological models on their own terms. He used standard techniques (social surveys and statistical analysis) to demonstrate that his class categories best captured the ‘underlying mechanisms’ to explain a variety of phenomena, from income inequality to different dimensions of class consciousness. In reality the battle of paradigms became an adjudication between models, dragging him onto the terrain of sociology. His Scientific Marxism turned into a Marxist sociology. During the last two decades his most successful empirical research was no longer specifically Marxist—the work with Rachel Dwyer on the changing mix of good and bad jobs in the US occupational structure, debunking the 1990s euphoria of a ‘rising tide lifts all boats’.²⁴

At this point Erik could have left Marxism, like so many others. He would have won accolades for seeing the light, for recognizing the error of his youthful ways. That was not Erik. Instead he reinvented Marxism, suited to the times. Breaking from his class analysis, he recovered his old interest in utopian thinking. His relation to sociology changed: rather than drawing on its positivist tradition he appealed, implicitly if not explicitly, to its emancipatory tradition. From his ‘pragmatic’ Scientific

²⁴ Erik’s analysis of changes in the US class structure itself shifted over time. In 1982, writing with Joachim Singelmann, using the scheme of contradictory class locations, they show that for 1940–70 there is ‘proletarianization’ within sectors, but it is obscured by the movement of people into sectors with lower levels of proletarianization. Erik then shifted from class analysis to a study of employment quality. Stimulated by an optimistic report on job creation by Joseph Stiglitz, written in 1997 when he was chairman of Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisors, Erik and Rachel Dwyer re-examined and extended the data to show that although there were many newly created ‘good’ jobs there were also lots of ‘bad’ jobs, and moreover, the latter were disproportionately occupied by African Americans and Hispanics—a story of a polarizing, racialized division of labour. They continued to work together on the transformation of the job structure, extending the analysis to other countries. Although these were very important accounts of the transformation of the occupational structure and tied into an important policy debate, this research nonetheless displaced the concept of class, now present only notionally. See respectively Wright and Singelmann, ‘Proletarianization in the Changing American Class Structure’, *American Journal of Sociology*, Supplement, vol. 88; Wright and Dwyer, ‘The American Jobs Machine: Is the New Economy Creating Good Jobs?’, *Boston Review*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2000.

Marxism—a *Marxist sociology*, a variant of sociology—he would turn to a Critical Marxism: a *sociological Marxism*, a variant of Marxism.

3. CRITICAL MARXISM: REAL UTOPIAS

The project on real utopias represents an epistemological break akin to the one Louis Althusser identified in Marx.²⁵ However, where Althusser saw Marx's transition as being from a critical or humanist philosophy to a truly scientific theory of capitalism, Erik's epistemological break was in the opposite direction: from science to critique; from a mapping of social structure to the project of social transformation; from the study of real mechanisms to the study of possible futures; from scientific neutrality to explicit value foundations; from measurement at a distance to engagement at close quarters; from ideology as distortion to ideology as a moral force; from politics as epiphenomenal to politics as integral to the advance of real utopias; from the determinism of objective structures to the erosion of capitalism.

To be sure, as with Marx, so with Wright, there are transitional texts. Perhaps the most important was the one Erik would later title 'Marxism after Communism', in which he defined Marxism by three interconnected nodes: class analysis, class emancipation and a theory of history.²⁶ When neither historical trajectory nor class analysis seemed to indicate that capitalism was abolishing itself, the choice was either to abandon Marxism or to consider the project of emancipation on its own terms. Erik drew the same conclusion when he compared the emancipatory projects of Marxism and feminism: in feminism the idea of gender equality was seen to be unproblematic, whereas Marxism had to confront challenges

²⁵ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London 1977.

²⁶ See 'Class Analysis, History and Emancipation', *NLR* 1/202, Nov–Dec 1993, pp. 15–35, which later appeared in revised form as 'Marxism after Communism' in *Interrogating Inequality*, London and New York 1994, chapter 11. The most clearly 'transitional' piece may be the one we wrote together, in which the importance of real utopias stems from the durability of capitalism and the social reproduction of class relations. Class is no longer a transformative force and, *therefore*, the construction of real utopias is necessary. This portended the *disconnection* of class analysis and real utopias. See Burawoy and Wright, 'Sociological Marxism', in Jonathan Turner, ed., *The Handbook of Sociological Theory*, New York 2002, pp. 459–86. Thanks to Greta Krippner and Ivan Ermakoff for pointing to some continuities, notwithstanding the break between Erik's scientific and critical Marxisms.

to the very possibility of a classless society.²⁷ Classical Marxism tried to resolve the problem by demonstrating capitalism's long-term non-sustainability, thereby displacing the question of socialism; yet given the justifiable scepticism about such law-like claims for capitalism's future, Marxists would do well to focus more on the emancipatory project itself. Here lay the beginning of Erik's Real Utopias Project.

The turn to utopian thinking was not entirely new. Erik had run the seminary course on 'Utopia and Revolution' in the early 70s. In 1979, he had joined a group of 'Analytical Marxists', sometimes self-described as the No-Bullshit Marxist Group, which set about hacking the living body of Marxism to death. When asked why he quit, Adam Przeworski, one of its leading members, responded: 'Because I thought we had accomplished our intellectual programme . . . We ultimately found that not much of Marxism was left and there really wasn't much more to learn.'²⁸ It was a testament to Erik's formidable intellectual resilience that he could withstand the onslaught of these brilliant scholars against his Marxism.²⁹ Yet

²⁷ 'Explanation and Emancipation in Marxism and Feminism', in *Interrogating Inequality*, chapter 10. Note the shift from the statistical analysis of the non-effects of class on gender relations to the comparison of gender and class emancipation. Erik was deeply devoted to egalitarian relations in his personal life, not least in his family, and this inspired a long-standing interest in feminism. Gay Seidman, who knew Erik as a close friend, colleague and neighbour, has written eloquently of the evolution of Erik's thinking on gender emancipation. See 'Class, Gender and Utopian Community: In Memory of Erik Olin Wright', presented at the conference, 'Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias: Featuring Erik Olin Wright's Legacy', Coimbra University, 23–24 January 2020.

²⁸ 'Adam Przeworski: Capitalism, Democracy, and Science', in Gerardo Munck and Richard Snyder, eds, *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics*, Baltimore 2007, p. 490.

²⁹ Erik and I diverged over the significance of Analytical Marxism. To be sure, some of the early works remain Marxist classics such as G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (1978), and Przeworski's *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (1985), but the group soon lost interest in Marxism. Only Erik sustained a commitment to Marxism, and still remained a key figure in the 'September Group', as it came to be renamed, relishing the intellectual exchange. From the beginning I was sceptical of Analytical Marxism's adoption of methodological individualism and rational-choice theory—and criticized the work of Jon Elster, Sam Bowles, Herb Gintis and Przeworski for forcing Marxism into a methodological straitjacket based on spurious micro-foundations and mythological individualism. This was not the way to reconstruct Marxism, I argued, but to end it. See Burawoy, 'Making Nonsense of Marx', *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 15, no. 5, 1986; 'Should We Give Up on Socialism? Reflections on *Capitalism and Democracy*', *Socialist Review*, vol. 89,

the group did sensitize him to the importance of moral foundations, a driver for the ‘utopian’ side of his real utopias. On the ‘real’ side, Erik was influenced by his colleague and friend Joel Rogers, who arrived in Madison in 1987. They would take walks together almost every Sunday. Joel was an indefatigable propagator of progressive social change at the state and national level, a powerful inspiration and a reality check on Erik’s utopias. Joel and Erik brought the real and the utopian together in *American Society: How It Really Works* (2010), the basis of a course they designed that asked to what extent the US realized five ‘key values’ of American society—freedom, prosperity, economic efficiency, fairness and democracy—and how it might do a better job.

A broader influence on the Real Utopias Project was the political conjuncture of the time. The year 1991 was when the Soviet Union dissolved, two years after the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe. The disappearance of an existing alternative to capitalism, no matter how problematic, would inevitably have consequences for politics in the West; capitalism would no longer need to make political concessions with an eye to ‘cold-war’ competition from the Soviet Union. The unqualified rejection of the Soviet past by the Yeltsin leadership and its equally resolute adoption of a market economy, while it spelled disaster for the majority of Russians, was an enormous fillip for neoliberalism and the proponents of ‘the end of history’. In this context, for those who maintained the possibility of an alternative to capitalism that would guarantee a better life for the majority, it became imperative to discover—or rediscover—imageries of socialism.

This is where Erik came in with his ‘real utopias’. Classical Marxism had an allergy to utopian thinking. In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels subjected the former variant to withering critique as the projection of a blueprint without warrant in reality, endowed with a miraculous power of self-realization. Instead Engels insisted on attending to the ways capitalism sows the seeds of its own destruction, outlining the Marxian argument of intensifying crises of overproduction coinciding with deepening class struggle. It was a compelling theory that nonetheless proved

no. 1, 1989; ‘Marxism without Micro-Foundations: Przeworski’s Critique of Social Democracy’, *Socialist Review*, vol. 89, no. 2, 1989; ‘Analytical Marxism—A Metaphysical Marxism’, *Häfte för kritiska studier*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1989; ‘Mythological Individualism’, in Terrell Carver and Paul Thomas, eds, *Rational Choice Marxism*, London 1995.

to be wrong, not least because of its undeveloped understanding of the state, its flawed concept of class struggle and its absent or naive notion of transition. Erik's real utopias were not based on the laws of capitalist development, but on the discovery of socialist prefigurations within capitalist society. Classical Marxism had underestimated the durability of capitalism. If its collapse was not imminent, then developing a credible imagination of socialism became all the more difficult—but all the more important. The viability of Marxism would hang on sustaining the idea of a 'socialist' alternative to capitalism. But what would it comprise?

Blueprints for a future socialist society were either too remote or risked leading to 'totalitarianism' if realized. So Erik coined the phrase 'real utopia' to refer to actually existing organizations, institutions and social movements which operated within capitalist society, but followed anticapitalist principles. Four favourite examples were participatory budgeting, originally developed in Porto Alegre; Universal Basic Income; Wikipedia; and Mondragon's worker-owned cooperatives. In each case Erik explored the functioning of the 'real utopia', outlined its principles and examined its dynamics and internal contradictions, as well as its conditions of possibility and dissemination.³⁰

Starting in 1992, Erik organized a series of conferences at the Havens Center in which an analytical position paper, focused on a particular 'real utopia', was circulated to a select group of participants who each wrote and presented commentaries. There have been six volumes so far: on associative democracy, led by Josh Cohen and Joel Rogers; on a particular version of market socialism, led by John Roemer; new forms of egalitarianism, led by Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis; participatory governance,

³⁰ The distinction between real and imaginary utopias is admirably illustrated in the debate between Erik and Robin Hahnel, proponent of the 'participatory economy' based on democratic participation in a planned economy. As ever, Erik seeks out the best in Hahnel's design for a socialist future, but the difference is clear: Erik starts from existing institutions and organizations and examines how they could be extended and expanded, whereas Hahnel is in the business of perfecting a blueprint. See Robin Hahnel and Erik Wright, *Alternatives to Capitalism: Proposals for a Democratic Economy*, London and New York 2016. Erik thought of utopias very much in the way that Ruth Levitas sees them—flexible, open-ended, provisional, and above all subject to public debate and democratic decision-making. See Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, London 2013. I'm reminded of Erik's unpublished manuscript, *Chess Perversions and Other Diversions* (1974), where the idea is not to imagine a new game, but to give an old one new meaning by tinkering with its rules.

led by Archon Fung and Erik; redesigning redistribution, led by Bruce Ackerman, Ann Alstott and Philippe Van Parijs; and gender equality, led by Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers. The most recent volume, on democratizing finance, was led by Fred Block and Robert Hockett.

Erik was actively involved in all the conferences and the publication of the papers, first in *Politics and Society* and then in extended book form with Verso. It was not until 2010 that Erik published his magnum opus, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, originating in a paper we wrote together. *Envisioning Real Utopias* begins with ‘diagnosis and critique’, a catalogue of the ailments of capitalism which call for ‘alternatives’.³¹

But what alternatives? Classical Marxists focused on the self-destruction of the capitalist economy—leaving the working class and its representatives to seize power and run the new society in their own image. No need for any utopia. In a second period, the debate around socialism was influenced by the unanticipated constitution of the Soviet Union. The state now figured centrally—you might say this was socialism on earth.³² Our claim was that in the third period, socialism should be defined as

³¹ Burawoy and Wright, ‘Sociological Marxism’. From the beginning I was enthusiastic about Erik’s Real Utopias Project, and we discussed it at length through the 1990s as I was trying to come to terms with the fall of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the Soviet working class (see Burawoy, ‘Marxism After Communism’, *Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2000). On one of Erik’s visits to Berkeley we set about drafting a theoretical framework that brought together his work on real utopias and my view of the history of Marxism in the light of the collapse of communism. This was to have been the basis of a jointly authored book on Sociological Marxism, but I got diverted into a project on public sociology. Erik went on to develop our early formulation in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, with me kibitzing on the side.

³² One of our biggest disagreements revolved around the status of the Soviet Union. Erik tended to dismiss this as a form of ‘statism’ of little relevance to the socialist project, whereas I saw it, with all its warts, as a form of socialism—state socialism—of inescapable relevance. The centrality of democracy to the Real Utopias Project was an implicit reaction to the Soviet Behemoth, but it never led Erik to examine the latter’s form or its source. The Soviet Union was a great and tragic experiment that defined the contours of the 20th century; we ignore it at our peril. Marxists have much to learn from this attempt to put socialism into practice, not least the limits and possibilities of a socialism based on planning, as well as the subaltern struggles for alternative democratic socialisms that opposition to state socialism inspired. Nor can we ignore Soviet Marxism, degenerate though it was, as if the history of Marxism were a supermarket from which you pick out whatever you like. We have to live with the good and the bad—they fortunately and unfortunately shape each other. Erik was never keen on examining the dark side of utopia. See Burawoy and János Lukács, *The Radiant Past*, Chicago 1992.

the collective self-regulation of civil society, expanded in two dimensions: empowerment of the social in relation to the state—deepening democracy through participatory budgeting, citizens’ assemblies, associative democracy—and in relation to the economy through initiatives like Wikipedia, the Solidarity Economy, the Mondragon Cooperative, Universal Basic Income.³³

The third part of *Envisioning Real Utopias* developed a theory of transformation. Erik considered three strategies: ruptural transformation, about which he was sceptical (as he always had been); interstitial transformation, involving the development of autonomous institutions within capitalism; and symbiotic transformation, which returned us to ways in which the state can be used to promote transformative struggles against itself. Here Erik developed the idea of class compromise as a way in which both capital and labour could benefit from struggle—though whether those benefits could ever stimulate struggles that led beyond capitalism was unclear. This was, indeed, a crossover from the class analysis, but where the latter was intensely empirical and definitive, class compromise was highly abstract and conjectural. Class was now a possible strategy of social transformation rather than a meticulous analysis of social structure; this was an entirely different understanding of the term.

In the twenty years that Erik worked on this book, he travelled the face of the earth talking about real utopias to scholars, activists and politicians. The eloquence and optimism that he exuded drew enthusiastic supporters; *Envisioning Real Utopias*, bulky though it is, was translated into many languages. But Erik knew it might be more effective if there was a shorter popular version, more like a manifesto. He managed to complete *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* in 2019, before he died. No sooner was it published in English than there were ten translations of the book underway or already completed.

³³ I traced the argument for socialism as the collective self-organization of civil society to the complementary convergence of Polanyi and Gramsci—in the former, from the reaction to the economy; in the latter, from the reaction to the state. See Burawoy, ‘For a Sociological Marxism: The Complementary Convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi’, *Politics and Society*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2004, pp. 193–261. Erik, meanwhile, was working on elaborating and systematizing the relations between state, economy and civil society—or, as he put it, taking the social in socialism seriously. See Wright, ‘Compass Points: Towards a Socialist Alternative’, NLR 41, Sept–Oct 2006, pp. 93–124.

A more straightforward account of the Real Utopias Project, *How to Be an Anticapitalist* shifted the argument and its emphases. Instead of the long and perhaps rather arbitrary list of capitalism's discontents, it built on three normative foundations for opposing capitalism: equality/fairness, democracy/freedom and community/solidarity. Formulating the project in this way had the advantage of appealing to values that are at the foundation of liberal democracies—values that capitalism violates or realizes in only a limited way. Erik now considered five strategies for achieving democratic socialism. He was critical of the first, 'smashing capitalism'—how could one build a new order out of the ruins of the old?—and instead concentrated on *dismantling* capitalism from above, *taming* capitalism (containing its worst effects), *resisting* capitalism and *escaping* capitalism. He envisioned these strategies working in combination to *erode* capitalism and build a future socialism based on the ideas of economic democracy. He offered the familiar set of real utopias that could contribute to that end, building an alternative economy and a more democratic order.

By the time he was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia in April 2018, Erik was near to completing this book, but he had still to write the most challenging last chapter: who would be the agents of such a transformation? For the first time he tackled the question of the collective actors necessary for eroding capitalism. While clear that democratic socialism would not arise without collective struggle, he didn't come down on any one particular agent or combination of agents. Instead he examined the conditions for such a struggle—the importance of *identities* that can forge solidarities, *interests* that lead to realistic objectives, and *values* that can create political unity across diverse identities and interests.

Here Erik came to terms with the conundrum of his oeuvre—his move from class analysis without utopias, to utopias without class analysis. In *How to Be an Anticapitalist*, he argued that it is one thing to be an anticapitalist, but quite another to be a democratic socialist. Class struggle can contribute to the former but it is inadequate to the latter. Where Marx considered an inevitable class polarization would lead to the magical coincidence of the demise of capitalism and the building of socialism, Erik drew the conclusion that, by itself, class was too fragmented and limited a social force to build something new. If 'eroding' capitalism was not to lead to barbarism but to democratic socialism, the transformation would require a moral vision to propel struggles for a better world—the trioka of equality, democracy and solidarity.

There was no singular, pre-given actor, impelled by their social or economic location to engage in class struggle. Erik wrote: 'I won't be able to provide a real answer to the question of where these collective actors are to be found, but I hope to clarify the task we confront in creating them.'³⁴ To use Bourdieu's language, Erik broke with this earlier 'theoretical' notion of class: class on paper.

This 'class on paper' has the *theoretical* existence that belongs to all theories: as the product of an explanatory classification, one which is altogether similar to that of zoologists and botanists, it allows one to *explain* and predict the practices and properties of the things classified—including their propensity to constitute groups. It is not really a class, an actual class, in the sense of being a group, a group mobilized for struggle . . .³⁵

The actor or actors, if they are to appear, are constituted by their adherence to a binding ideology which brings unity to scattered struggles. If before, class preexisted struggle, now struggle preexists class.

This suggests a radical contingency in class formation, occurring through political practice and ideology of which Marxism was one expression.³⁶ Here Erik exemplified a Gramscian vision of political ideology: 'expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorizing, but rather by the creation of a concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will'.³⁷ He left behind the 'learned theorizing' of the classroom, and he was not dreaming up some 'cold utopia' detached from the real world,

³⁴ Wright, *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century*, London and New York 2019, p. 119.

³⁵ Bourdieu, 'Social Space and the Genesis of Classes', pp. 231–2.

³⁶ Apart from Bourdieu there are many other thinkers who start from 'class for itself' rather than 'class in itself'. See, for example, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), who sees class as present in the making of its own history, although still rooted in objective conditions of exploitation. Or Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (1973), where class is an effect rather than a cause, an idea that is elaborated by Adam Przeworski in *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (1985), for whom classes are treated, in part, as the contingent outcomes of electoral strategies of political parties. Instead of the conventional political sociology that groups have pre-given interests dependent on their place in the class structure and will vote accordingly, Przeworski argues that the very meaning of class is constituted in and through politics. As with Bourdieu, classification struggles precede class struggles. In the last chapter of his last book, I believe Erik was moving in that direction, leaving behind his earlier ideas of class.

³⁷ Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, New York 1971, pp. 125–6.

but created a 'concrete phantasy' developed in close connection to the practitioners of real utopias working in the trenches of civil society. He spent time with the grassroots organizers of the participatory budget in Porto Alegre, the cooperatives of Mondragon, the social economy of Québec.³⁸ From the analyst of survey data, Erik became the ethnographer, co-producing an understanding of the principles of real utopias, and the conditions of their existence and dissemination. Over the last two decades Erik's major audience increasingly became political activists around the world. Giving voice to their latent aspirations, he connected them to one another, articulating the elements of a collective socialist project. He effectively became a Modern Prince, a permanent persuader that another world was possible.

4. JOINING SCIENCE AND CRITIQUE

Erik was elected president of the American Sociological Association, and for his 2011 annual meeting in Denver we were treated to a cornucopia of real utopias—three plenary sessions and seventy thematic panels. Sociology itself became a real utopia as Erik moved it away—perhaps only temporarily—from a value-free, objectivist, technocratic discipline toward an engaged, emancipatory science. Influenced as much by philosophers as by sociologists, Erik's turn to value commitments had an elective affinity to classical sociology's foundations. His emphasis on equality, freedom and solidarity recalls the work of Durkheim, especially *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), which built a vision of guild socialism based on occupational groups that would assume ownership of the means of production and the economic direction of society. Durkheim's socialism required equality of opportunity so each had the freedom to find their true place in the division of labour which, in turn, required the elimination of the inheritance of wealth, and power equality between functional groups. Durkheim considered the perfection of the division of labour and, thus, the realization of organic solidarity to be immanent to modern society. He did not think in terms of the obstacles posed by capitalism. Capitalism was not even a category in his analysis.

³⁸ This brings to mind Alain Touraine, for whom the role of the sociologist is to 'conscientize' militants in social movements, that is, help them develop a wider and deeper vision of their project. See Touraine, *The Self-Production of Society*, Chicago 1977; *Return of the Actor*, Minneapolis 1988; Touraine, Dubet, Wierviorka and Strzelecki, *Solidarity: Poland, 1980–81*, Cambridge 1983.

Even though Erik became more Durkheimian as he advanced his Real Utopias Project—that is, more interested in solidarity and shared values—it was always Weber who arrested his attention. His 1974 study of the state in Lenin and Weber, chapter 4 in *Class, Crisis and the State*, was complemented by repeated engagements with Weber’s notion of social stratification. Under Roemer’s influence, Erik also flirted with the methodological individualism at the core of Weber’s sociology; and then there was Weber’s passion for classification. Later, Erik became fascinated by Weber’s ‘Marxist’ exploration of the slave mode of production.³⁹ As compared to Durkheim, Weber was more influenced, if negatively, by Marx and Marxists. He saw capitalism—along with its necessary accompaniment, bureaucracy—as an insuperable obstacle to socialism; but that didn’t mean his sociology was bereft of values. Weber has been widely misunderstood as the prophet of value-free sociology, for he was anything but; he, too, saw the sociologist’s claim to neutrality as bogus. Indeed, he considered his fundamental methodological unit, the ideal type, as a utopia, a one-sided, value-based construction of the real world.⁴⁰ Conservative liberal though he was, even Weber based his sociology on the idea of individual freedom and autonomy, wrestling with the juggernaut of rationalization. This made him suspicious of socialist projects, predicting that a dictatorship of the proletariat would become a dictatorship of officials. In as much as he, too, insisted on value foundations, Erik’s real utopias reconnect to the normative bases of classical sociology.

If Erik’s class analysis was absorbed into mainstream sociology, following a realist, objectivist methodology, his real utopias recovered a lost dimension of the sociological tradition, the idea of a moral science built on the institutional realization of declared value commitments. More than that, Erik was engaged in a dialogue with the practitioners of real utopias. The subjects of his science were no longer anonymous respondents to prepackaged survey questions, but activists badly in need of a sustaining ideology.

If real utopias drew on the critical potential rooted in the sociological tradition, what had happened to Erik’s Marxism? His Real Utopias

³⁹ Wright, ‘The Shadow of Exploitation in Weber’s Class Analysis’, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 67, no. 6, 2002.

⁴⁰ “Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy’, in Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Edward Shils and Henry Finch, New York 1949 [1904], p. 90.

Project allies itself with a vision of socialism, but—as with the account of changes in class structure—there was still no theory of the dynamics of capitalism. Doubts about capitalism’s inevitable demise led him away from the study of capitalist tendencies *tout court*. Instead, *Envisioning Real Utopias* listed the *defects* of capitalism, which in *How to Be an Anticapitalist* changed into a set of ‘socialist’ values that cannot be fully realized under capitalism. But real utopias cannot be driven just by an anticapitalist imagination of a future; they are driven by grievances generated by capitalism. In a scientific enterprise, utopias have to emerge from the logic of capitalist development.

Where shall we look for a theory that connects the rise of real utopias to capitalism? One place to begin is chapter 3 of Erik’s *Class, Crisis and the State*, ‘Historical Transformations of Capitalist Crisis Tendencies’. In this abandoned chapter Erik did advance a theory of capital accumulation: the contradictions of capitalism lead to economic crises of overproduction and declining profits, calling for ‘solutions’ or temporary ‘fixes’ that engender new crises, all of which involve the restructuring, expansion and deepening of the market—by extending credit, or seeking out cheaper inputs of raw materials or human labour. How can we connect Erik’s early theory of capitalist development to real utopias?

One answer, I believe, lies in the canonical work of Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944). If Erik’s theory focused on capitalist crises as the driving force behind marketization, Polanyi looked at the—catastrophic—*consequences* of marketization. Having traced the origins of the political crises of the 1930s to the relentless expansion of the market, Polanyi believed that humanity would never again experiment with market fundamentalism. He was wrong, because he thought market fundamentalism was an irrational policy under human control. He didn’t see the expansion of markets as a response to the crises of capitalism—it was a temporary fix, but a fix nonetheless. As long as there is capitalism, there will be crises; and the crises will be contained by markets that, in turn, propel the development of capitalism and new crises.

Polanyi saw one long wave of marketization, from the 1790s to the 1930s, when reaction set in—taking the form of Stalinism, social democracy, the New Deal or, what he most feared, fascism. But once we recognize another wave of marketization beginning in the 1970s, it is possible to discern at least two previous waves, one in the 19th century and the

other in the first part of the 20th century. Each long wave of capitalist development engenders its own crisis which calls forth a corresponding wave of marketization, characterized by the *articulation of the commodification of factors of production*—namely, Polanyi’s fictitious commodities: nature, labour power, money and, today, knowledge. If the commodification of labour power dominated the first wave, and the commodification of money (finance capital) dominated the second, then the commodification of nature and knowledge may be said to dominate the third wave, though not to the exclusion of the (re)commodification of the others.

Each of the three waves of marketization calls forth a Polanyian ‘counter-movement’ to defend ‘society’: the first wave led to movements of a local character; the second led to regulatory states; the third wave, so-called neoliberalism, has generated counter-movements at local and national levels, including both leftist and rightist nationalist regimes. So far there have been only weak efforts to regulate commodification where it is most needed, namely on a global scale—that is, to regulate international finance, climate change, the transnational movement of labour and the global flows of knowledge.⁴¹ Today counter-movements may include local and national reactions, but patterns of commodification under third-wave marketization actually call for an effective global counter-movement, something Polanyi never seriously considered.

How are we to connect these counter-movements to real utopias? In brief, real utopias can be viewed as partial counter-movements to the commodification of these four fictitious commodities. But this requires us to examine the meaning of ‘fictitiousness’ and how it can lead to counter-movements. Here, I believe, there are three answers. First, Polanyi argues that nature, labour, money and now knowledge were never intended to be commodified. Labour is about who we are, nature is about how we exist, money is a means of exchange, knowledge is to improve life. In other words, the commodification of these entities disturbs our *moral compass*, for it violates the essence of their existence. Second, commodification is economically dysfunctional: when fictitious commodities are subjected to unregulated market exchange, they lose their use value, even to the point of being unusable, becoming waste, i.e., ex-commodified. This, too, leads to collective protest. But ‘fictitiousness’

⁴¹ See Burawoy, ‘Marxism After Polanyi’, in Michelle Williams and Vishwas Satgar, eds, *Approaches to Marxism in the Twenty-First Century*, Johannesburg 2013, chapter 2.

has a third significance, under-emphasized by Polanyi. It is not just the *consequences* of commodification that are so destructive, but also the very *production* of a fictitious commodity, that is, the process of disembedding nature, labour, money and knowledge from their social integument—a process that others have called *dispossession*.⁴² The counter-movement is then collective action inspired by some combination of moral opprobrium, the production of waste and dispossession.

Here lies the significance of real utopias. They are an index of Polanyi's counter-movement to commodification, or, to put it more positively, an index of processes of de-commodification. Universal Basic Income—or, better, universal provision of social services to meet basic needs—is a response to the commodification of labour power, which involves the subjugation of women and the crisis of care, just as unregulated commodification generates high levels of precarity.⁴³ Public banks and participatory budgeting are a reaction against the commodification of money, of making money from money, of finance capital. Agricultural and housing co-ops are a response to the commodification of land and water, while environmental-justice groups organize against the plundering of the atmosphere on the way to its commodification through carbon trading. Wikipedia and peer-to-peer collaboration are a counterpoint to the commodification of knowledge through surveillance capitalism. The institute that Erik developed over thirty years—the Havens Wright Center for Social Justice—with its collective form of organization, can be seen as a counterpoint to the commodification of knowledge in the university. This appropriation and reconstruction of *The Great Transformation* is one way to recover the contradictory unity of Critical and Scientific Marxism that appeared so spontaneously at the beginning of Erik's career, a half-century ago.

Real utopias cannot stop the expansion and deepening of the market, but they can provide the basis of a counter-movement to the commodification of everything—a commodification that is neither conjunctural nor contingent but systematically generated by capitalism, so as to contain the crises

⁴² See, for example, David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, New York 2003; Michael Levien, *Dispossession without Development*, New York 2018; Klaus Dörre, Stephan Lessenich and Hartmut Rosa, *Sociology, Capitalism, Critique*, London 2015.

⁴³ See Nancy Fraser, 'A Triple Movement? Parsing the Politics of Crisis after Polanyi', *NLR* 81, May–June 2013; Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, New York 2012; Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, New York 2011.

of accumulation. Erik's real utopias thus signify something organic to capitalism, namely the reaction to commodification. If capitalism depends on deepening commodification, a move toward de-commodification conducted across all fictitious commodities has the *potential* to be anti-capitalist—but there are no guarantees. First, a counter-movement to commodification is as likely to save capitalism from itself as to abolish it. Second, a Polanyian counter-movement can easily assume an authoritarian form, as in the right-wing populism of today and the fascism of yesterday. That's the rub—how to turn a Polanyian 'counter-movement' into a Gramscian 'counter-hegemony'; for de-commodification can only lead beyond capitalism if it inspires a socialist movement. Hence the importance of Erik's engagement with particular real utopias and their practitioners, linking them together in an anticapitalist movement that gives direction to a democratic-socialist project.⁴⁴

This would be my response to critics who label Erik's project 'neoliberal socialism' or 'neo-Tocquevillian Marxism', or who call for an 'intermittent revolution'.⁴⁵ Real utopias have to become part of a Gramscian 'war of position' in civil society. The key premise is that struggles no longer revolve around 'exploitation' but around 'commodification'.⁴⁶ Who will be the agents in such struggles? Clearly class, however defined, is a likely candidate, for the moral outrage and destructive material effects

⁴⁴ An interesting contrast to Erik's approach is Wolfgang Streeck's *How Will Capitalism End?* (2016), which sees falling growth, rising debt and increasing inequality resulting in chronic decay and anomie—whereas Erik, focusing on the durability of capitalism, conjures up real utopias.

⁴⁵ Marion Fourcade, 'On Erik Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*', *Socio-Economic Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012; Dylan Riley, 'Neo-Tocquevillian Marxism: Erik Olin Wright's *Real Utopias*', *Socio-Economic Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012; Cihan Tugal, 'Intermittent Revolution: The Road to a Hybrid Socialism', *Socio-Economic Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012.

⁴⁶ I'm using the word 'exploitation' in the technical sense used by Marx: the extraction of surplus value in production. Marx himself said that it was hidden from both labour and capital, as workers appear to be paid for all the labour they expend. Following Przeworski, Erik advanced a theory of class compromise based on the capacity of capitalism to grant economic concessions that turned struggles around exploitation into struggles for reform. Finally, third-wave marketization has stripped the working class not only of the interest but also the capacity to effectively challenge capital. Whether commodification offers greater opportunities to challenge capitalism is still an open question. My argument rests on the claim that commodification, rather than exploitation, corresponds to the discontent of the majority of the world's population.

of commodification are skewed against lower classes, be they peasants or wage labourers. But alliances across classes are also possible, since the commodification of nature, money, labour and knowledge affects everyone; no less important are the different and unequal effects by racialization and gender. There are many potential movements and alliances, but it is also likely that struggles against commodification will tend toward fragmentation and localization. Only a powerful 'counter-hegemonic' ideology can make the market an object of socialist struggle, given its capacity to naturalize its own working. Erik not only provided the basis for such an ideology; he was also a charismatic propagator.

The Real Utopias Project demands that we return to Erik's early Marxism, in which science and critique were joined. It cries out for a scientific basis to identify the forces behind real utopias, as well as the possibilities for successful political engagement. Erik's trajectory took him from Scientific to Critical Marxism, but now the latter requires an infusion of science—a theory of the dynamics of capitalism and how they are experienced—as well as a more elaborated ideology to unify fragmented struggles. This is the problem Erik left us with—a problem I would tackle by linking real utopias to decommodification, and analysing decommodification as a reaction to marketization, which is itself impelled by successive crises of overproduction and profitability.

5. CODA: SOCIOLOGICAL MARXISM

In *Reconstructing Marxism* (1992), Erik and his co-authors, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober, set out to clarify the foundations of Marxism—addressing its theory of history and related issues in the philosophy of science. Their idea of 'reconstruction' was analytical rather than historical. Applying conventional positivist views of objectivist science, they dispensed with the history of Marxism, the examination of iconic texts and the political and economic context of their authorship. To Erik, such a historical view smacked of religion and dogma. Unencumbered by the heavy weight of the Marxist tradition, Analytical Marxism offered a new beginning. Yet it also threatened to mark the end of Marxism. Indeed, Erik was the only Analytical Marxist to maintain an identification with Marxism. Why? No doubt there are different answers to this question; here I emphasize one—his connection to sociology.

Analytical Marxism was dominated by philosophers, economists and political scientists. Erik was the only representative from sociology, which, I believe, sustained his commitment to Marxism. To be sure, he used to say he was not particularly interested in sociology, but spending forty years in a leading sociology department, reading the work of students and colleagues, reviewing for sociology journals, directing sociological dissertations, teaching sociology to undergraduates, locked in arguments with sociologists—with all these engagements he could not but absorb sociology's distinctive world-view. In the last decade of his life his engagement with sociology became more self-conscious and deliberate, especially after he was elected president of the American Sociological Association. He may not have married class analysis and real utopias, but he did marry sociology and Marxism—an unequal marriage dominated by Marxism. In the final analysis, that's why his legacy is a sociological Marxism rather than a Marxist sociology.⁴⁷

As we have seen, there were three borrowings from sociology. His first was methodological, turning the tools of survey analysis and statistics against the theoretical framework of sociology. He had to confront the challenge, famously defined by Audre Lorde, that the master's tools 'may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will

⁴⁷ My own approach to 'reconstruction' was rather different. In wrestling with the fate of Marxism in the post-Soviet period I had to confront the history of Marxism found in Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976), which sought to recover revolutionary theory from the political retreat of Western Marxism; in George Lichtheim's *Marxism* (1961), a pessimistic history which saw Marxism dissolving with the Russian Revolution, and petrifying as soon as it becomes academically respectable; and in Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* (1978), a three-volume history that degenerates into an assault on the New Left when it comes to the contemporary period. Perhaps the most significant contribution to the Marxism of Marxism remains the *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci. Unique among classical Marxists, he was concerned to develop a theory of intellectuals, and thus the political and economic context for a flourishing Marxism. Inspired by Gramsci I have tried to combine the historical and the scientific by regarding Marxism as an evolving scientific research programme, following Lakatos's 'post-positivist' philosophy of science. The taken-for-granted 'hard core' assumptions are rooted in the writings of Marx and Engels, out of which evolve successive belts of auxiliary theories, responding to the contradictions and anomalies that arose in particular historical conjunctures. I used the metaphor of a tree with roots, a trunk and progressive and degenerate branches. See Burawoy, 'Marxism as Science: Historical Challenges and Theoretical Growth', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 55, 1990.

never enable us to bring about genuine change'.⁴⁸ Addressing this very issue, Erik wrote in my copy of *Class Counts*—the culmination of his comparative class analysis—'Alas, see what has become of revolutionary dialectics . . .' Erik's second borrowing was from sociology's standpoint of civil society, a borrowing elaborated in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, where the struggle for socialism is based on the collective reorganization of civil society. Real utopias were to empower the social, restore the social to socialism. Erik's third borrowing was from sociology's moral foundations, its commitment to universal values: equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, solidarity/community. Already present in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, they became central to *How to Be an Anticapitalist*. Real utopias were not only about the empowerment of the social but the institutional realization of shared values which could never be realized in their full form under capitalism. It was a curious, critical but unconscious return to where Erik began, with the work of Talcott Parsons; only now Parsons's euphoria about US society was projected onto a future, so far unrealized, socialism.

Threading through Erik's work, therefore, is not just a bifurcation between Scientific and Critical Marxism, but a productive engagement of Marxism with sociology. As Gouldner wrote, however much they are engaged in mutual polemic, Marxism and sociology are like Siamese twins: 'The demise of one presages the demise of the other. They have a common destiny not *despite* the fact that they have developed in dialectical opposition, but precisely *because* of it.'⁴⁹ Sociologists have every reason to keep the Marxist flame alight, as a large part of their *raison d'être* lies in opposing Marxism. By the same token, as Erik shows, Marxists can also borrow, fruitfully, from sociology. Marxism has a special place in the history of sociology and, I wager, in its future.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley 1984, p. 112.

⁴⁹ 'Sociology and Marxism', in Alvin Gouldner, *For Sociology: Renewal and Critique in Sociology Today*, New York 1973, p. 401.

⁵⁰ This view of sociology is not the conventional Marxist perspective. Writing in 1976, Perry Anderson tracked the displacement of revolutionary Marxism by a Western Marxism that had been diluted by bourgeois thought, including sociology. In this rendition, sociology is an ideology that hides or justifies bourgeois rule. It has no emancipatory moment. Ironically, Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism* won the distinguished book award of the American Sociological Association—indicating, perhaps, sociology's antagonistic attachment to Marxism.

The balance between sociology and Marxism shifts with the political context, reflecting the ebb and flow of the times. Throughout all this, Erik stood firm. Even when Marxism was in retreat, Erik never wavered. He did not passively wait for its renaissance but actively reconstructed Marxism, turning from his class analysis to his project on real utopias, eagerly appealing both to a new generation of socialists entering the academy, and to a growing community of activists across the planet. Behind Erik's reconstruction of Marxism lay his abiding commitment to truth, to clarity, to dialogue, community and social justice. In his dying days he elevated a fourth dimension of human flourishing: to equality, democracy and solidarity he added love, an intense emotion of mutual recognition and interdependence.⁵¹

Erik was not just an architect of the theory of real utopias; he also put that theory into practice. Possessed of rich and varied abilities himself, he orchestrated participatory communities wherever he went, whether with children, family, friends, neighbours, students or colleagues, thereby empowering others to realize their own distinct potentialities. In practice as well as theory he was committed to a future in which everyone would have access to the conditions of their flourishing—conditions that his privileged existence allowed him to enjoy. He lived under capitalism as though he were in socialism, setting an often impossible example to follow, but always instilling an imagination of what could be. Two Marxisms, yes; but only one Erik Wright.

⁵¹ During the last ten months of his life, liberated from writing for a professional or political audience, Erik recorded his reflections on life and death, based on daily events in the cancer ward—his multiple relations with others, his hopes and despairs for humanity, even as the disease consumed his body. Made available on the blog site Caring Bridge, it was read, discussed and admired across the globe. A condensed version will be published by Haymarket Books, *Stardust to Stardust*, Chicago 2020.