

PREFACE:

The Spirit of Erik Wright

Just after midnight on January 23, 2019, the world lost one of its great social scientists—practitioner as well as thinker. He was seventy-one. Tributes flooded in from all corners of the world—from colleagues and students, from activists and politicians, from people who knew him and those who didn't—from so many who had been touched by his sense and sensibility. Rarely do social scientists command such a broad audience or elicit such a devoted following.

Erik Wright was an all-round intellectual. Grounded in history, schooled in mathematics, an enthusiastic musician, a latent philosopher, and a magical storyteller, his chosen vocation was to engage the ills of capitalism. He created two renowned research programs. The first was based on a novel understanding of economic inequality. He began this program in the early 1970s when he was a graduate student and, along with collaborators, he went on to elaborate this program with new questions and new empirical material to the end of his life. In the early 1990s, however, it began to play second fiddle to another major project. If capitalism systematically generated debilitating inequality, then the task must be, he averred, to imagine and then realize a more just world. He set out to discover the embryos of such an alternative world in organizations and institutions embedded in the interstices of actual, existing capitalism—embryos that he called “real

utopias,” embryos guided by the values of democracy, community, and equality.

At the end of his life, Erik created an evolving real utopia around his hospital bed, a real utopia described in the blog that enchanted multitudes of readers across the world. A condensed version of the blog has now become this book. Always an inveterate recorder of his life, whether through photography or writing or both, Erik this time took his diaries public. During his last ten months, he recounted his thoughts on living and dying, memorably referring to himself as among “the most privileged, advantaged, call it what you will, stardust in this immensely enormous universe.” He was of that special stardust miraculously “turned into conscious living matter aware of its own existence.” And then “this complex organization ends, and the stardust that is me will dissipate back to the more ordinary state of matter.”

This book tells of the ups and downs of the battle with the cancer cells that were colonizing his body, and how they would devour the new and defenseless transplanted immune system; he describes his faith in the power of meditation to control pain; he evokes the poignancy of seeing a fellow patient disappear from one day to the next, a fate he knew could catch up with him too; he ruminates on reciprocity in generosity and in love; and his last post is on the art of being goofy. The book traces the trajectory of the disease and Erik’s response, day by day.

But he also tells of nightmares—that his closest and dearest were collectively laughing at his “silly” blog, the fear that life and love had deserted him. He recounts a moving exchange with the head of the hematology–oncology team, a Catholic by faith, who recalled the words of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Although an atheist, Erik now understood the universal significance of these words, which gave voice to the spectre of utter abandonment that haunted his sleep.

But that was by night. By day, Erik welcomed all comers into his real utopia. He wrote of the joy of seeing visitors. Friends and students (past and present) would crowd around his bed as

he energetically engaged their dissertations, discussed politics of the day, or comforted them in their travails. He was especially animated when Skyping seminars from his hospital bed, reflecting on the meaning of socialism or the conundrums of his last book, *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century*. But first place was always family—Marcia, his wife and partner for fifty-three years, now an accomplice in allowing him to live out every second to the fullest; their two daughters, Jenny and Becky, and their three children, Safira, Vernon, and Ida. Erik was devoted to his 100-year-old mother, called her almost every day, but never let on that his own life was in danger. Erik didn't fear death; nonetheless, he desperately wanted to live, to be with his grandchildren who gave him such deep joy. The nearer he approached death, the more energetically he pursued life.

Erik rarely looked back on his enormous accomplishments but instead looked forward, planning for a better world. Until December, he was still hoping to teach in the spring. To the very end he was worrying about the future of his department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison; about the funding and supervision of his students; and about who would be his successor at the Havens Center, now the Havens Wright Center for Social Justice, which he had created.

As he openly acknowledged, the blog was initially launched as a convenience, an efficient way of telling people how he was doing. But it soon became much more. Liberated from any academic pretension, he ranged over so many themes that caught his fancy. The entries gave meaning to his disappearing life and turned out to be a spontaneous archive of his multiple talents. Even in the hospital, he managed to organize a community of associated “producers,” engaging the medical staff—the teams of doctors and nurses who tended to his body—in ongoing conversation about their lives and their work. To the end, nothing escaped his indefatigable curiosity.

This book gives us lessons in both dying and living; it shows us how to be a utopian in spirit and in practice, even when death

is on the horizon. But this wondrous ethnography didn't appear from nowhere. To shed light on its origin, all I can do is sketch a short history of Erik's life and intellect.

What was the beginning? It's difficult to say. Maybe it was at the childhood dinner table where each member of the Wright family was asked to give an account of their day's activities. Or was it as a Harvard undergraduate, enticed by the systemic elegance of the social theories of Talcott Parsons? Perhaps it was at Oxford where he studied with the Marxist historian Christopher Hill and with the sociologist and political theorist Steven Lukes.

Perhaps Erik was a utopian all along. His animated film, *The Chess Game*, made in 1968, when Erik was twenty-one, expresses the dilemmas of revolution, dramatically played out on a chessboard. His unpublished manuscript, *Chess Perversions and Other Diversions*, completed in 1974, has a similar quality. It disturbs the vested interests behind the rules that define chess and other games by introducing a series of modifications with transformative consequences. "This book," he wrote in the preface, "is an invitation to that kind of freedom and delight that comes with invention and straying from the conventional path. Running a maze efficiently has its pleasures, as any laboratory rat could tell us. But changing the maze is reserved for the experimenter." Harking back to his youth, perhaps unconsciously, Erik's last book shows how changing the rules of capitalism can, indeed, be a revolutionary move.

Erik himself liked to trace his interest in utopias to 1971 when he was a student at the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, avoiding the draft. It was then that he organized a student-run seminar called "Utopia and Revolution" to discuss the prospects for the revolutionary transformation of American society. He then worked at San Quentin as a student chaplain, joining an activist organization devoted to prison reform. From this emerged his first book, *The Politics of Punishment*, coauthored with San Quentin prisoners and prison rights activists.

This prepared him well to be a graduate student at Berkeley in the heady days of the early '70s. In those times, especially at

Berkeley and especially in his chosen discipline of sociology, students were more concerned about changing the world than advancing their academic careers. The Free Speech Movement, the Third World Strike, the anti-war movement, and the civil rights movement had left faculty at war with each other, opening up spaces for graduate students to demand greater control of their education. Erik and his fellow graduate students put together their own seminars, the most important of which was “Controversies in Marxist Social Science,” a version of which Erik taught almost every year at Madison. Erik was also an energetic participant in the Marxist collective around the journal *Kapitalistate*, a principal organizer of “Commie Camp”—an annual retreat to discuss pressing issues in Marxist theory and practice. Again he took this project with him to Wisconsin, where it became known as RadFest. For Erik, sociology itself became a real utopia.

Thus, Erik became a major figure in an intellectual project that captivated many of us in those days: to bring a Marxist perspective to the discipline of sociology. His dissertation challenged sociology not on ideological but scientific grounds, demonstrating that a reconstructed Marxist definition of class, rooted in the concept of exploitation, could explain income inequality better than then-current sociological models based on socioeconomic status and economic theories based on human capital. At the same time as he was challenging sociology, Erik was reinventing Marxism. The middle class had long been a thorn in the side of Marxism—it was supposed to dissolve, yet it seemed to get bigger and bigger. To explain this anomaly, Erik redefined the middle class as composed of three “contradictory class positions”—managers and supervisors, small employers, and semi-autonomous professionals—lying between the three fundamental classes: capital, labor, and the self-employed.

So Erik began a research program in class analysis, garnering funds to administer his own national survey designed to accurately “measure” his new class categories. His ideas spread, and soon there were teams of researchers in fifteen countries, fielding

parallel surveys. His analysis sparked many invigorating debates about the meaning and measurement of class. Through these debates and in response to criticism, Erik revised his scheme over the years, sometimes with small adjustments, sometimes by shifting its foundations. Erik Olin Wright became a household name in sociology and neighboring disciplines. Five books appeared over two decades, all marked by his limpid style and translated into multiple languages.

In recognition of a scholar of such global renown, the University of Wisconsin awarded Erik a distinguished professorship, and in 1984 he was given his own center for critical social science that he named after his close colleague, Gene Havens, who also died of cancer. Erik was able to capitalize on an international prominence that drew in countless visiting scholars, activists, and luminaries to make the Havens Center a unique hub for left-wing thought. These visitors will remember Erik not only for his incisive intellectual contributions but for his hospitality—and perhaps also his specialty dishes such as “Leeks in Red Wine” or his “Coqless Coq au Vin.”

In 1981, Erik joined a group of brilliant international social scientists and philosophers, advancing what they called “Analytical Marxism” or, more colloquially, “No Bullshit Marxism.” Their goal was to clarify the foundations of Marxism in a no-holds-barred grilling of each other’s work. Over the last four decades, the composition of the group has changed and drifted from its Marxist moorings, but Erik remained a stalwart but open-ended Marxist in its midst. It became a second intellectual home and one source of inspiration for his turn to the moral foundations of Marxism.

The changing historical context was a second inspiration for the real utopias project, which began in 1991, the very year the Soviet Union collapsed. Whatever one thinks of the Soviet Union and its satellites—and Erik was very dismissive of them—they did provide an ostensible alternative to capitalism. The dramatic collapse both encouraged and demanded a new imagination of

socialism that was democratic, free, and egalitarian in character. When Erik referred to “real utopias,” he was not thinking of some blueprint that emerges *deus ex machina* from the head of a political dreamer, to be realized in an unknown future, in an unknown place, by some unknown people. Instead a “real utopian” is an anthropologist who scours the earth for institutions and organizations that are potential challenges to capitalism, putting each of them under an investigative and analytic microscope, studying their conditions of existence, their dynamics and internal contradictions, the possibility of dissemination. Some of his favorite examples were participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil; the cooperatives of Mondragon in Spain’s Basque Country; the collective self-organization of Wikipedia; and plans for universal basic income grants. The public library was one of his favorite illustrations of socialism—you borrow what you need to develop your abilities and return it when you’ve finished. The library doesn’t have to be limited to books—and what goes in can be subject to public discussion.

Erik realized that by itself each “real utopia” is as likely to be an aid to capitalism as an alternative, and so it was important to link them to one another in a broad anti-capitalist movement with a common language and vision. He offered both a science of possibilities and a political direction. In the last decade of his life, ever since the publication of his magnum opus, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Erik spent much time traversing the world talking to activists who became keenly interested in hitching his framework to their own grassroots projects. Here was a brilliant intellectual paying tribute to their often-invisible labors, encouraging them to struggle for social justice, often against all odds, including enduring insults and reprisals.

His critics attacked him for his Panglossian view, but Erik would respond by saying that today we need optimism of the intellect as well as optimism of the will. “It is easy to be a pessimist,” he would say. It’s hard work to be optimistic and realistic under

the crushing sinews of capitalism. His genius was to uphold both the optimism and the realism.

Erik leaves us with both a way of thinking and a way of being. I know of no one who thought more lucidly, more cogently, more speedily, more effortlessly than Erik; no one who so effectively cut to the heart of any issue, any paper, any book. Always gentle and cogent, his manner was both elevating and intimidating. He took your own claims, arguments, and facts more seriously than you did yourself. When he argued with others, he never resorted to exaggeration, distortion, or over-simplification. Instead, he zeroed in on the best in his opponents' arguments, usually better than what they could offer themselves. Such was his generosity of spirit. He brought all these gifts to the legions of students he taught and the audiences he addressed across the globe, calling on them, too, to be logical, rigorous, and imaginative—but no less important, by his example, to be decent and honest, and to give others the benefit of the doubt.

The values he espoused—equality, freedom, community, and, I think he would now add, love—were not only the substrata of a new society; they were moral principles to follow in our daily lives. We can't wait for the future; we must demonstrate our faith in that future by our actions in the here and now. Erik sought to be egalitarian in his dealings with all, regardless of status or rank. There was not an evil bone in his body, nor a jealous fiber in his soul.

He was a permanent persuader and an indefatigable builder of community, enabling people around him to flourish, or, as Marx would say, to develop their rich and varied abilities. We can't be just like Erik, but we can be inspired by his many virtues and try to follow in his footsteps, guided by his vision and refashioning it as we move forward.

—*Michael Burawoy, September 10, 2019*