How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century

Erik Olin Wright

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Erik Olin Wright (1947–2019)

Afterword

by Michael Burawoy

In the early hours of January 23, 2019, one of the great social scientists of our era stopped breathing. At seventy-one, he died at the height of his influence. Tributes poured in from all over the world: from politicians and activists; from collaborators and colleagues; from students, past and present; from people who knew him and those who didn't. Tributes to his humanity as well as his intellectual brilliance.

Erik Olin Wright had been battling acute myeloid leukemia for ten months, balancing his characteristic optimism with a fearless realism. Even as his life was ebbing away, he didn't stop fighting for a better future. He set about writing a long letter to his grandchildren; he was concerned that his students be well cared for, intellectually and materially; he worried about the future of his department at the University of Wisconsin, which had been his academic home for forty-two years. He wanted the Havens Center, now the Havens Wright Center, to outlive him—the center he had founded and directed for thirty-five years, hosting progressive thinkers from all over the world. And, of course, he never lost interest in exploring capitalism's possible futures. He held out hope for a new generation of socialists, encouraged by the youthful

magazine *Jacobin* that had enthusiastically published his paper on anticapitalism. As he was dying, he watched with hope the ascendancy of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Democratic Socialists of America. To that last breath, he remained an optimist and a real utopian. It's all captured in his soulful blog read by hundreds, following the ups and downs of his last ten months.

Before he became a radical Marxist, Erik had been influenced at Harvard by the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons and at Oxford by the political sociology of Steven Lukes and the social history of Christopher Hill, receiving a bachelor's degree from each institution. To avoid the Vietnam War draft, he enrolled as a student at the Unitarian Theological Seminary in Berkeley. There he ran his own seminar on utopia and revolution—a theme to which he would return twenty years later. In 1971, staying in Berkeley, he entered the PhD program in the sociology department at the University of California. For his generation of Berkeley graduate students, Marxism and sociology formed a prickly marriage, at once partners and antagonists. Erik and his fellow graduate students started their own parallel curriculum devoted to Marxist social science, connected to such local journals as *Kapitalistate* and *Socialist Revolution*.

Marxism turned sociology upside down. The study of stratification and status became the study of class relations. Political sociology turned from a fixation on liberal democracy to theories of the capitalist state, and from totalitarian theory to the class character of state socialism; economic sociology turned from the verities of industrialism to the dynamics of capitalism; organization theory turned from hollow generalities to the study of the capitalist labor process; the sociology of education turned from research into learning to the reproduction of class; the irrationality

of collective behavior was replaced by the rationality of social movements; studies of race prejudice and race cycle theories were displaced by studies of racial oppression and internal colonialism; modernization theory gave way to world systems analysis and critiques of imperialism; under the sway of socialist feminism the sociology of the family moved its focus from socialization to reproductive labor, from gender roles to a ubiquitous patriarchy. In short, Marxist theory replaced abstruse structural functionalism; the critique of US society replaced sociology's self-satisfied celebration of American society. In 1970, Alvin Gouldner had correctly anticipated "the coming crisis of western sociology" but what he didn't anticipate was the Marxist renaissance of sociology.

Erik would play a major part in bringing excitement back to sociology. Together with his close Italian friend Luca Perrone, whom he would lose in a tragic diving accident, Erik developed his famous scheme of contradictory class locations that enabled Marxists to go beyond the fundamental capital-labor binary to include petty bourgeoisie, small employers, managers and supervisors, and professionals. He debuted this nuanced breakdown of class structure simultaneously in the leading English-language Marxist journal, *New Left Review*, and the dominant professional sociology journal, the *American Sociological Review*. He then elaborated a fully fledged Marxist rewriting of sociology in *Class, Crisis and the State* (New Left Books, 1978). It was a book that took the disobedient generation by storm—a unique joining of innovative theory, tough empiricism, and logical argumentation. It was a Marxist genre that had not been seen before.

Sociology and Marxism were not only antagonists; they were also competitors. Erik set out to demonstrate that his class schema better explained inequality, in particular

income inequality, than the stratification models of sociologists, the human capital models of economists, and even the Marxist schemas of Nicos Poulantzas, which were much in vogue at the time. Erik's success took on a momentum of its own. Soon he obtained funds to field national surveys and thereby created maps of class structure and measures of class consciousness, inspiring parallel projects in over fifteen countries across the globe. He had used the tools of social science to replace conventional paradigms with novel ways to think about capitalism.

At the same time as he began measuring class and its effects, he joined a group of distinguished philosophers and social scientists who called themselves Analytical Marxists. Their purpose was to rid Marxism of so-called bullshit—what they considered to be philosophical mumbo jumbo, leaps of logic, or wishful thinking—to produce a rigorous science, often based on methodological individualism or rational choice theory. Even when most of the members had turned away from Marxism, the modus operandi of this group remained, until the end of his life, indelibly engraved in all that Erik wrote. Early on in the 1980s Erik was greatly influenced by John Roemer, a leading contributor to no-bullshit Marxism, and his innovative theory of exploitation. This led Erik to turn his theory of contradictory class locations into a conceptualization of class around the distribution of different assets: labor power, means of production, organizational assets, and skill assets. If feudalism was based on the unequal distribution of labor power, capitalism was based on the unequal distribution of the means of production; statism on the unequal distribution of organizational assets; and communism on the unequal distribution of skills. This became the basis of his important book *Classes* (Verso, 1985).

At the same time, he agreed to work with sociologists in the Soviet Union, who didn't want to be left out of the burgeoning international comparisons of class structure. So, in 1986 I went with Erik to Moscow and was able to witness the Soviet academics' reaction to what must have appeared to them a very puzzling creature—a Western Marxist with an indefatigable commitment to science. We sat down with the Soviet team to develop a parallel survey instrument that could be fielded in both countries. What strange and frustrating meetings they were, as we stumbled on elementary methodological disputes and struggled to develop questions that would mean the same in both the United States and the USSR. At the end of the visit Erik was invited to address social scientists at the Academy of Sciences. I remember the waves of suppressed panic and elation—these were after all the years of Perestroika and Glasnost—that swept through the packed audience as Erik unfurled his new theory of class. They could see only too clearly that, with his calm and unassuming delivery and the piercing clarity of his language, Erik was unmistakably arguing that organizational exploitation was at the heart of the Soviet order. The talk was abruptly shut down.

As the 1980s wore on, Erik became increasingly aware of being trapped by his very success and by the methods he employed. He had developed what his students called, somewhat ironically, multiple-regression Marxism, using the latest statistical techniques to calculate the influence of objective class position on various subjective orientations—all derived from survey research. The culminating volume in this research program was *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). He inscribed the copy he gave me: "Alas, see what has become of revolutionary dialectics."

Erik would never be totally liberated from the research program on class analysis he had initiated, but in 1991 he began his new journey into real utopias. This, too, was decisively shaped by the critical and foundational thought of Analytical Marxism. The Marxist bubble had already burst, the collapse of the Soviet Union supposedly spelled the end of Marxism—though Erik saw it as the liberation of Marxism from the stranglehold of a degenerate Soviet ideology. Capitalism was riding high in the Western world, and Margaret Thatcher was convincing many that there was no alternative. Erik took this as a challenge to forge a new Marxism—one that defied its historic hostility to utopian thinking.

The idea was to seek out institutional forms based in reality, lodged within the interstices of capitalism, whose organizational principles were at odds with capitalism. In collaboration with the journal *Politics and Society*, with which he had been associated since 1979, Erik sought out authors who possessed an imaginative design for an alternative world. He worked with them to design their own particular real utopia and then organized a conference around the vision. Verso published each conference as a collection Erik edited. So far six volumes have appeared, covering collectively the following topics: associational democracy, market socialism, recasting egalitarianism, deepening democracy, basic income grants, and gender equality. When he died he had been hard at work developing a volume on the cooperative economy, after holding conferences in Argentina, South Africa, Spain, and Italy. Real utopias had become a global project.

In 2010 Verso published Erik's magnum opus, *Envisioning Real Utopias*. It had been twenty years in the making. He called it a research program in emancipatory social science. It sets out from a diagnosis of the ills of

capitalism to call for a better world, a socialism that is both viable and feasible. No longer based on an illusory breakdown of capitalism nor a tyrannical form of state planning, the goal was to restore the "social in socialism"—the empowerment of civil society, first against the state through such institutional designs as participatory budgeting or citizen assemblies, and second against the economy through such programs as universal basic income or cooperatives. Each real utopia is examined for its conditions of existence, possibilities of dissemination, and its internal contradictions.

When it came to the realization of real utopias, he considered three ways forward. First, there was ruptural transformation, which he demoted in favor of symbiotic and interstitial transformations.

Symbiotic transformation refers to the reformist road in which short-term concessions to solve capitalist crises sow the seeds of socialism. An example would be class compromise, which incorporates the working class but plants the idea of collective appropriation of capital, such as the Swedish Meidner-Hedborg Plan. Welfare for all raises the possibility of universal basic income that would create spaces for alternative forms of production as well as challenging capitalist power in the workplace.

Interstitial transformation, on the other hand, refers to the development of alternative institutions within the framework of capitalist society, such as cooperatives or peer-to-peer collaboration in the digital world. Libraries and Wikipedia were among Erik's favorite real utopias.

Erik had originally intended *Envisioning Real Utopias* for a broad audience, but as he wrestled with his critics, it became both more voluminous and more complex, addressing a more specialized audience. As he toured the world, however, speaking about his book he increasingly

commanded the interest of political activists. This was something new and exciting. So, he set about writing a new version, which would appear in two volumes: one a popular manual; the other a more academic debate. He began the first volume in 2016 and by the time he was diagnosed with leukemia had completed all but the last chapter.

How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century recaps, in succinct and incisive language, many of the arguments of *Envisioning Real Utopias*, but it also represents a shift in his thinking. Erik begins forthrightly with four theses: first, another world is possible; second, it could improve conditions of human flourishing for most people; third, elements of this world are already being created; and, finally, there are ways to move from here to there. As in *Envisioning Real Utopias* he advances a diagnosis of capitalism's ills, only instead of an arbitrary list of defects, he organizes the critique of capitalism around the violation of three pairs of values: equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, and community/solidarity. Together, these values form the normative foundations of democratic socialism.

From here he turns to the strategic logics of anticapitalism. Again, he frames this differently than in the previous book. He dismisses "smashing the state"—you can never build the new out of the ashes of the old—but he does embrace "dismantling" capitalism (installing elements of socialism from above) and "taming" capitalism (neutralizing its harms). These strategies from above are complemented by strategies from below: "resisting" capitalism and "escaping" capitalism. It is the articulation of these four strategies that brings about the "eroding" of capitalism—his reformulation of the transition to democratic socialism.

We live in a capitalist ecosystem composed of a variety of capitalist and noncapitalist organizations and institutions.

Capitalist relations dominate, but don't monopolize the ecosystem. The transition to a democratic socialism involves deepening the noncapitalist elements and turning them into anticapitalist elements that include the familiar list: unconditional basic income that creates space for other forms of production—the solidarity economy and the cooperative economy; disempowering capital through the democratization of the firm and the creation of public banks; nonmarket economic organizations such as the state provision of goods and services and peer-to-peer collaborative production.

This strategy of erosion, this rearticulation of the different constituents of the capitalist ecosystem, necessarily involves the state, being as it is the cement of the whole social formation. Here, too, Erik departs from the Marxist orthodoxy that treats the state as a coherent object wielded by the capitalist class or a coherent subject that somehow always acts in the interests of capitalism. Instead, he presents the capitalist state as a heterogeneous, internally contradictory entity, one that reflects the diversity of the capitalist ecosystem. There are fissures and tensions within and among the agencies that can act as a lever for deepening democracy.

After being diagnosed with cancer, Erik had still to complete the last chapter of this book, the most difficult chapter, tackling the question everyone had been asking him. Who is going to forge the path to democratic socialism? Just like Marx, who died still stuck on the question of class, so, in his last months, Erik would wrestle once again with the question of human agency. While he is very clear that democratic socialism will not arise without collective struggle, he doesn't come down on a particular agent or combination of agents. Instead, he analyzes 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. He cannot identify any one particular agent of transformation.

Here lies the answer to the conundrum of Erik Wright's oeuvre: namely his move from class analysis without utopias to utopias without class analysis. *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* offers an answer to this puzzle. It is one thing to be anticapitalist, he argues, but it is another thing to be a democratic socialist. Class struggle can contribute to the former but is inadequate for 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 draws the conclusion from his own class analysis that by itself class is too fragmented and limited a social force to build something new. If "eroding capitalism" is not to lead to barbarism but to democratic socialism, the transformation will require moral vision to propel struggles for a better world. He backs the troika: equality, democracy, and solidarity.

But who will be gripped by such values? One of Erik's most remarkable traits was the capacity to persuade through logical argument. Famous for the speed and clarity of his mind, Erik achieved a rare following—for an academic—among activists, who saw in his real utopias affirmation for their arduous projects. Possessed of an unlimited capacity to render his ideas precise and simple, without diluting them, Erik gave activists a vision of a collective project to which each could contribute. Given the resurgent interest in "socialism" among a new generation of critical thinkers and activists, Erik had an ever-increasing following. Although he's no longer around to make the argument for socialism in person, there are

still many of his videos on YouTube, and now there's a powerful manifesto in *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century.* Unlike *The Communist Manifesto*, it does not prophesy or prefigure who will make a better—more equal, more democratic, more solidary—world but rather itself will shape and inspire activists to forge such a new socialism. The concrete phantasies he points to will create their own agents of realization.

Erik's last book reminds me of classical sociology. Emile Durkheim ended his sociology-defining text *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) with the following words:

> In short, our first duty at the present time is to fashion a morality for ourselves. Such a task cannot be improvised in the silence of the study. It can arise only of its own volition, gradually, and under pressure of internal causes that render it necessary. What reflection can and must do is to prescribe the goal that must be attained. That is what we have striven to accomplish.

Durkheim embraced variants of the same values as Wright—freedom, justice, and solidarity—goals to be achieved through a form of guild socialism. But Durkheim offers no understanding as to how his socialism would be realized because he never conceived, let alone studied, the obstacle that is capitalism. By thematizing capitalism and the strategies for its transformation, by delineating concrete institutions that could carry us forward, Erik Wright gave us a Marxism that was sociology's final conclusion and ultimate critique, a practical and theoretical project that would invite everyone to forge a better world.

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