

Envisioning Real Utopias
By Erik Olin Wright
Verso 2010

Reviewed by William Davies

The new consensus amongst political elites in Britain is that we have been over-reliant on *both* the market *and* the state. Senior Labour figures, such as Ed Miliband and James Purnell, have used the opportunity of the financial crisis to denounce the myth of the self-regulating market – but at every turn, they have also confessed that New Labour was excessively credulous of the state’s capacity to affect micro-social outcomes and alter behaviour. The Conservatives’ critique of big government is less of a departure, but it is now framed in communitarian terms of promoting a ‘Big Society’, rather than in the neo-liberal language of relinquishing control to the market. Liberal Democrats might, with some justification, claim that this is what they’ve been arguing for all along.

Erik Olin Wright agrees. But he agrees not on the utilitarian grounds that state and market have both failed to ‘deliver’ adequately, but on the radically democratic grounds that neither state nor market (as currently constituted) allow people to exert meaningful power over their own lives. Socialism, for Olin Wright, prioritises “social power” over both “economic power” and “state power”, and the task for socialists is to work strategically on the socialisation and democratisation of both the economy and the state. Social power lies in civil society, and understanding how it might practically be grown and mobilised under conditions of contemporary capitalism is the purpose of *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

It is in many ways the author’s sad, reluctant farewell to a lifelong partner – Karl Marx. The political anger, the frustration and the yearning that fuel this work are Marxist to the core. But analytically and pragmatically, Olin Wright wants to start from scratch. He ditches core tenets of historical materialism – the inevitability of capitalist collapse, the intensification of class processes, the inevitability of socialism – on empirical grounds. Against this, his goal is to provide a “compass” via which to pursue socialist forms of ownership and control that are “desirable”, “viable” and “achievable”. There is a grown-up realism to this project, perhaps even a mildly regretful one. In a chapter ultimately dismissing the benefit and likelihood of a “ruptural transformation” of capitalism, he recognises the idea’s sustained value to younger activists, of which he once was. It’s not you, Herr Marx, it’s me.

How, then, to start from scratch? It is an often laborious process. Stage by stage, the book addresses such vast questions as the particular harms enacted by capitalism, the possible institutional configurations of modern societies, the hybrid and socialist alternatives that are already available, and the genres of resistance and transformation. In an age when even post-modernism feels tired and the loss of grand narratives is no longer even a surprise, this is a piece of resolutely Enlightenment theory, credulous of our collective capacity to think, rationalise and do better.

In contrast to a typical ‘utopia’ – which in Greek means “no place” – ‘real utopias’ are not perfect, but can be practically instantiated with tangible benefits for at least *some* people.

Institutions such as workers' co-ops, union controlled investment funds and a minimum income guarantee (all discussed) do not promise to eradicate inequality and exploitation of all forms and do not, manifestly, represent the death-knell for statism or capitalism. Yet they are each 'desirable, viable and attainable'.

In its vast scope, engulfing the ideal of socialism and the various technicalities of ownership and governance, the book is as much an argument for minor policy experimentation as it is for the design of a better society. Or rather, by showing what policy experimentation might *share* with utopian, modernist ideals, it potentially infuses the former with a socialist zeal that otherwise has few outlets or sources of optimism in an age when, as Slavoj Žižek says, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism". An institution as mundane as a building society or pension fund is cast in a new, politicised light.

A book which seeks greater proximity between the ideal and the real cannot be faulted for lack of ambition. And yet the Herculean scale of this task has certain costs. As a consequence of the thoroughly Platonist nature of its ambition, it employs a deductive analytical style that occasionally sucks the vibrancy and urgency from its material. Sub-headings appear under bullet points under sub-headings, defining exactly how 'social economy', 'social capitalism' and 'market socialism' differ from each other (and overlap). It is pain-staking work, which has been built up over nearly twenty years of articles, seminars, conferences and books, which together made up the 'Real Utopias' project at Wisconsin. When an author opens a book by citing something they themselves said at a draft-dodging seminar at Berkeley in 1970, one senses that they have rather a lot to get off their chest.

One area in which the sheer importance of *Envisioning Real Utopias* gets in the way is its case studies. Olin Wright does an excellent job of opening our eyes to the varieties of socialism that are already around us. But Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting, Wikipedia's user-generated content and Mondragon's co-operative governance structure (three of the book's more detailed case studies) are all now so familiar that they have almost attained the status of 'exceptions which prove the rule'. By contrast, The Young Foundation's *Open Book of Social Innovation*, which collects weird and wonderful examples of new organisational and economic forms, may not match Olin Wright's peerless deductive taxonomy (and is much more politically inert), but it breathes greater enthusiasm, experimental optimism and genuine uncertainty regarding the future.

Olin Wright employs the word 'innovation', but only when bracketed as something that goes on in certain designated zones of the economy. Innovation is valuable, he argues, as long as we mitigate its negative effects, which capitalist societies fail to do. But surely a different and better economy requires *even greater* innovation, in our politics, our institutions and our technology. *Envisioning Real Utopias* is implicitly a call for just this, to colour in its various abstract categories of socialism with more, newer and more exciting examples, but its critical analytical framework too often crowds out any engagement with the unexpected. Anger, unhappiness and critique may indeed be mobilising forces for many on the Left, but as he himself remarks of Marxism, they do not by themselves answer the questions of what and how to do.

In the wake of the financial crisis, British designer Matt Jones mocked up the famous 'Keep calm and carry on' World War Two poster with the words 'Get excited and make things'. This sentiment is an absolutely crucial ingredient in Olin Wright's project, but it is never made explicit in *Envisioning Real Utopias*. My fear is that a book as bold and uplifting as this will be read by the critics and the over-throwers, but not by the institutional architects of future socialisms. Many of those architects will come from outside of the Left, and some may not even feel especially exploited by capitalism. Would they be wrong? Olin Wright's 'socialist compass' is a magnificent intellectual contribution and a 're-booting' of leftwing strategy and goals. The question it throws open for the Left is how it will acquire the imaginative and constructive capacity to act upon it. And 'policy' is only one small part of the answer.

William Davies is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Science Innovation & Society, University of Oxford and an Associate Editor of Renewal