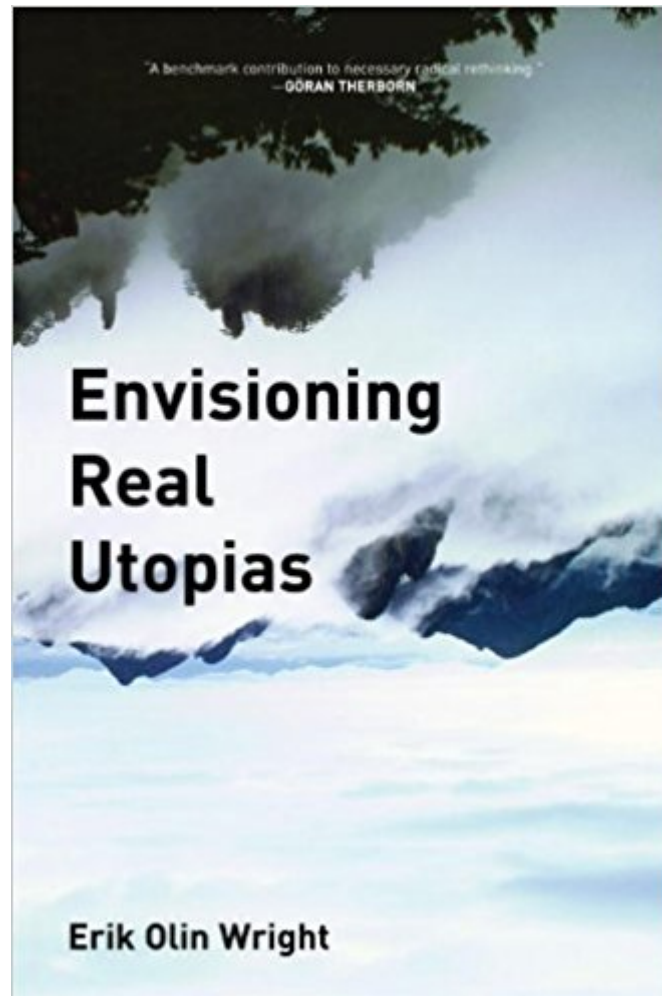




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# Envisioning Real Utopias



## Synopsis

Rising inequality of income and power, along with the recent convulsions in the finance sector, have made the search for alternatives to unbridled capitalism more urgent than ever. Yet there has been a global retreat by the Left: on the assumption that liberal capitalism is the only game in town, political theorists tend to dismiss as utopian any attempt to rethink our social and economic relations. As Fredric Jameson first argued, it is now easier for us to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism. Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* is a comprehensive assault on the quietism of contemporary social theory. Building on a lifetime's work analyzing the class system in the developed world, as well as exploring the problem of the transition to a socialist alternative, Wright has now completed a systematic reconstruction of the core values and feasible goals for Left theorists and political actors. *Envisioning Real Utopias* aims to put the social back into socialism, laying the foundations for a set of concrete, emancipatory alternatives to the capitalist system. Characteristically rigorous and engaging, this will become a landmark of social thought for the twenty-first century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[Wright] builds a strong case for an emancipatory social science."

Kingsolver, *Choice* "A benchmark contribution to necessary radical

thinking." *Guardian* Ian Therborn "Encyclopedic in its breadth, daunting in its

ambition, this is the culmination of Erik Olin Wright's revamping of Marxism ... Only a thinker of Wright's genius could sustain such a badly needed political imagination without losing analytical clarity and precision.

•Michael Burawoy, UC Berkeley

“Hugely rich and stimulating ... An incisive diagnosis of the harms done by capitalism; a masterful synthesis of the best work in political sociology and political economy over the past thirty years; and innovative theoretical framework for conceptualizing both the goals of progressive change and the strategies for their achievement; and inspiring survey of actually existing challenges to capitalism that have arisen within capitalism itself; and a compelling essay on the relation between the desirable, the viable and the achievable. Anyone interested in the future of leftist politics has to read this book.

•Adam Swift, Balliol College, Oxford

“This book is both a manifesto and a guidebook: an argument for taking institutional design seriously, and a guide to how to do that. It's a book that sociologists will want to read, but also, frankly, that everyone in political theory and philosophy should be reading too.

•Crooked Timber

“A fascinating book.

•Guy Aitchison, openDemocracy

Erik Olin Wright is Vilas Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin. He is the author of many books, including *Classes*, *Interrogating Inequality*, *Class Counts*, *Deepening Democracy* (with Archon Fung), and *Envisioning Real Utopias*. For more information on *Envisioning Real Utopias* and the Real Utopias project, and to access book content, please visit [realutopias.org](http://realutopias.org).

When working with developing society this book is food for thoughts. He's description of how worker cooperatives are some of the real utopias is so real and it's amazing that so few know of this way of doing business in a responsible way.

Great book, great author

Among the recent books that try to answer "what is to be done?," I believe Wright's is the most comprehensive and from which one can most benefit. Nonetheless, two aspects were unsatisfactory. First, the book is written mostly with advanced capitalist countries in mind. Thus, it does not treat adequately issues pertaining most of the world's population, and where most anti-capitalist transformative experiments have taken place at national levels. His dividing of strategies into ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic logics is an extremely useful framework. However,

he immediately discards ruptural strategies, recognizes it is clear interstitial strategies will by themselves never cumulatively transform the system, and recognizes symbiotic strategies have actually strengthened capitalist hegemony more than undermined it. From his exposition, it is clear (in my opinion) that the solution is to combine symbiotic/interstitial strategies while applying phases of rupture. Nevertheless, he doesn't seem to tackle the messy issue of how to combine the three logics, when, and where. In any case, he is asking the fundamental questions, provides insightful answers, and is a must read for both activists and academics. Even if one disagrees with some of his conclusions, as I do, it is certainly a worthwhile read.

Erik Olin Wright has done a great service with his latest, ENVISIONING REAL UTOPIAS. He applies his analytical powers (Wright is a founder of "analytical marxism") to the question of how to move beyond capitalism. This 373-page book continues the Real Utopias Project which Wright began with others in the early 1990s after the collapse of the USSR, which has so far led to six books from Verso and this new one. According to Wright, what he and his collaborators "...wanted to achieve was a clear elaboration of workable institutional principles that could inform emancipatory alternatives to the existing world." One of Wright's contributions is to separate socialism from statism, so that capitalism becomes one of three possibilities. Not only the right, but the left as well, has come to conflate socialism and statism, and it is a crucial step toward mental as well as social emancipation to stop reinforcing the right-wing's narrative by supporting this conflation. Here is the table of contents: 1) Introduction: Why Real Utopias? 2) The Tasks of Emancipatory Social Science (a) Diagnosis and Critique (b) What's So Bad About Capitalism? (c) Alternatives 3) Thinking About Alternatives to Capitalism 4) The Socialist Compass 5) Real Utopias I: Social Empowerment and the State 6) Real Utopias II: Social Empowerment and the Economy 7) Transformation 8) Elements of a Theory of Transformation 9) Ruptural Transformation 10) Interstitial Transformation 11) Symbiotic Transformation Conclusion: Making Utopias Real Ruptural transformation is basically revolutionary or Leninist, interstitial transformation is basically anarchist, and symbiotic transformation is basically social democratic. Wright does not advocate one or the other, but analyzes the obstacles, potential benefits and limitations of each. Clearly he leans toward symbiotic or social democratic transformation, but he is aware that so far it has not led beyond capitalism. He concludes by calling for creative and energetic experimentation guided by the "socialist compass" of social empowerment. Russell Jacoby threw a tantrum and called it a review of this book, but that's his problem. If you think that simplistic emotionalism is going to do the job of replacing capitalism with an egalitarian world, then this is not your book. If you think, to the contrary, that it is going to be

difficult and might require some serious thought, then do not be dissuaded. (Jacoby also attacked sociology in its entirety, and I am a sociologist, so I am not inclined to take him seriously. He's just a historian and an essayist.) This book is of great potential value for anyone on the left trying to think about how to move forward in the 21st century!

I would advise that you do NOT read Russell Jacoby's review in Dissent. It's a mean-spirited and purely ad hominem attack by a crank who just complains about the book's "jargon," which is like shooting fish in a barrel when it comes to academic sociologists. Wright and his colleagues have been doing research all over the world (not just for this book, but for a whole series of Real Utopias) on how people have experimented with alternative forms of social organization and political participation. When our current non-democratic system of un-free market capitalism comes crashing down, we're all going to be thankful that they did this research so we can learn how to start living like human beings again. Look people, sometimes reading involves learning a little jargon.

I have to agree with Louis Proyect on this. If Jacoby doesn't like a book, it is almost certainly worth reading. Wright keeps changing his mind as he learns more and that seems admirable.

We really need to believe the world can be other one, and Erik's words make us 'envisioning' it.

This book is ideas muddled within bad writing. Wright loses all credibility for his theories amidst the cheesy metaphors that are drawn on for twelve sentences.

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