

Socialist vision: Remembering Erik Olin Wright

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Wright will be remembered as an iconic thinker who embodied the socialist vision that he worked so hard to bring forth.



Erik Olin Wright (Aliona Lyasheva, Wikimedia Commons)

Erik Olin Wright, a University of Wisconsin–Madison sociologist and former president of the American Sociological Association, died from acute myeloid leukemia on January 23, 2019. He was 72.

Wright's body of work is voluminous. He began in 1973 with a study of prisons in the United States. From there, he edited and wrote almost two dozen books on class and capitalism. From the "Utopia and Revolution" seminar he initiated and led as a graduate student at the University of California–Berkeley to the book he finished in the intensive care unit of Froedtert Hospital in Milwaukee, Wright developed one of the most sustained understandings of class and capitalism since Karl Marx. Like his forebear, Wright believed in the moral impetus to struggle against capitalism and to envision alternatives.

Decades of research culminated in his 2010 magnum opus *Envisioning Real Utopias*. For Wright, "real utopias" were democratic and egalitarian "real-world alternatives that can be constructed in the world as it is that also prefigure the world as it could be, and which help move us in that direction." Such institutions range from Wikipedia to the Mondragon federation of worker cooperatives in Spain. The short version of Wright's thesis is that the left can erode capitalism with these institutions, while taming capitalism in the political sphere. The long-term result is socialism.

As he built his theory of transformation, Wright—in contrast to Dylan Riley and other thinkers he engaged in argument—was skeptical that capitalism could be smashed in a way that would engender full emancipation. He was critical of the Soviet Union and other states forged by revolution. For Wright, a socialist state is realized when social power—rather than economic power (capitalism) or state power (statism)—dominates. In socialism, individuals have a say to the extent that something affects them. A corporation, for example, cannot build its chemical plant in a neighborhood, unless the people living there agree. And the government cannot subordinate the interests of its constituencies to the interests of its politicians. The so-called socialist states of the twentieth century, like their capitalist counterparts, never achieved this form of political justice.

Wright also believed that socialism must encompass social justice. Unlike a capitalist society where everyone ostensibly has an “equal opportunity” to flourish, social justice requires “equal access” to the resources that allow people to flourish. Social justice also means freedom from social stigma. Children should not get to attend better schools because of how much money their parents have, and racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression need to be overcome so they do not constrain life outcomes.

Wright believed that socialism was compatible with markets, but not the kinds of markets that undermine political and social justice. To work in sync with socialism, markets must be smaller in scale and the power of their participants must be limited. In other words, they should look less like free markets and more like garage sales. Those ideas pushed against Robin Hahnel and other utopian thinkers, and opened Wright to criticism from more orthodox Marxists. Nonetheless, he never abandoned a position because it was unfashionable. But he also was willing to change his mind. Wright revised and discarded his own ideas when he felt that they no longer held water. Before *Real Utopias* was published, Wright introduced his ideas in over fifty talks across eighteen countries. His ideas were debated and refined in the kind of open, deliberative forums that he championed. He continued that work after the book’s publication as president of the American Sociological Association. Under his leadership, the ASA’s international conference convened hundreds of sociologists from around the world to build on Wright’s work.

Wright also ran the A. E. Havens Center for Social Justice in Madison, which brought together scholars and activists devoted to creating a more egalitarian and democratic future. Mike Davis, Barbara Ehrenreich, Nancy Fraser, Arlie Russell Hochschild, Tariq Ali, David Harvey, Theda Skocpol, Noam Chomsky, and grassroots organizers from a number of countries have participated. Under Wright’s guidance, many of the emancipatory projects debated in the Havens Center have been published in Verso’s *Real Utopias* Project series.

Over the course of his career, Wright advised hundreds of students. César Rodríguez-Garavito of Dejusticia, Amy Lang of Health Quality Ontario, University of Michigan associate chair of sociology Greta Krippner, Columbia University sociology chair Shamus Khan, the late Devah Pager of Harvard University, and so many others cut their teeth as Wright’s PhD students. More recently, Wright’s influence can be felt in the work of New York University’s Vivek Chibber, Peter Frase, and other writers who helped to build *Jacobin* and *Catalyst*. This new wave of socialist intellectuals produce work that is characteristic of the “Non-Bullshit Marxism” group that Wright was a part of. Alongside Samuel Bowles and Robert Brenner, Wright emphasized the need for clear, unpretentious writing that is accessible and relevant to the widest audience.

Like his comrade Michael Burawoy, Wright never abandoned his commitment to socialism even when the Cold War made his political stances unpopular in the academy and the general public. He succeeded in spite of it because of the rigor that undergirded his work. In 1981 a number of professors at Harvard tried to recruit Wright despite their “bitter opposition” to his politics. In other years, Wright received calls from Princeton and other universities. When I asked him why he never left the University of Wisconsin, he told me that he “wanted to build something that would last.” He declined higher salary offers and more prestigious appointments to create a Midwest refuge for radical thinkers. In the process, he helped to make Wisconsin-Madison one of the most recognized sociology departments in the world. As Harvard’s Harrison White observes, Wright never let his political commitments get in the way of serious scholarship or conclusions that he did not like. The result was decades of work that pushed forward mainstream sociology and the Marxist tradition, reshaping both in the process.

When I first reached out to Wright in 2017 while planning to apply to graduate school, he was one of the few professors who wrote back. He was the only one who asked me about my work and wanted

to know more about me. That year, we exchanged a number of emails, in which he offered me feedback on a work in progress and encouraged me to come to Madison. Someone of Wright's stature devoting time to exchange emails with a nobody is close to unheard of. Wright even thought to write me the day after he was diagnosed with leukemia to let me know that the future was "more uncertain," and that he did not want me to accept my offer of admission to Wisconsin without knowing that he might not be around to advise me.

This care and concern for the people around him was classic Erik Olin Wright. If you look at the hashtag #EOWtaughtMe trending on Twitter or the comments on his Caring Bridge journal, you'll find an outpouring of affection. From his bicycle tours of Madison to the one-on-one attention he gave to graduate students whenever he visited a university; from the nature retreats that ended his seminars to the incredible love he expressed for his wife, Marcia, his children, and grandchildren; Wright will be remembered as an iconic thinker who embodied the socialist vision that he worked so hard to bring forth.

Adam Szetela

P.S.

- Dissent, January 23, 2019:
<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/remembering-erik-olin-wright>
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