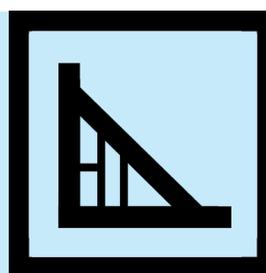
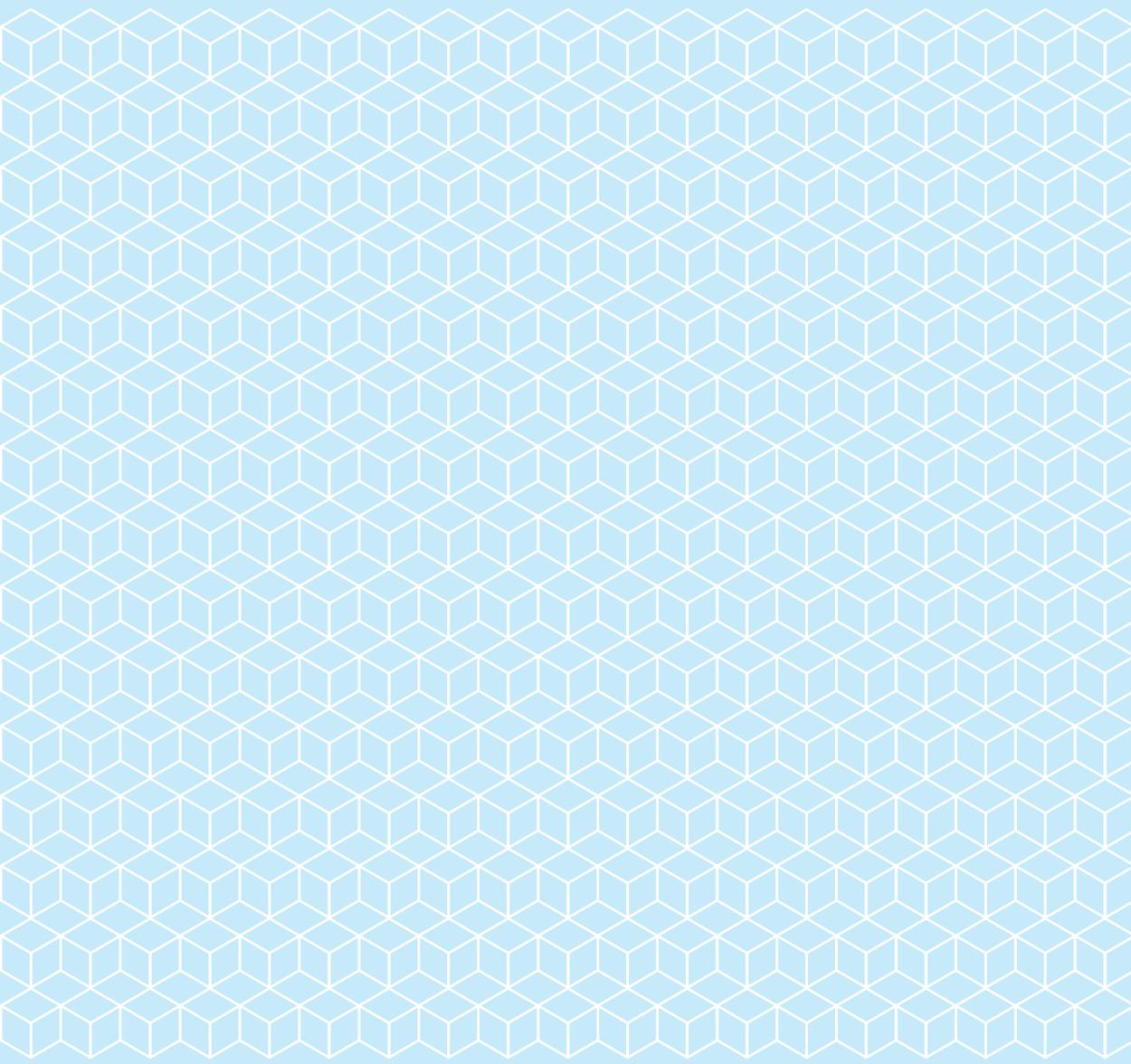
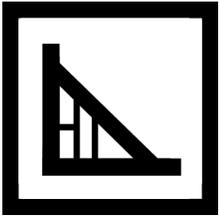


An interview with Erik Olin Wright
By Devi Sacchetto



Autonomy





Autonomy

An interview with Erik Olin Wright

Utopian political thinking does not come about by accident – it springs from a particular social and political impasse: things cannot go on like this and yet there doesn't seem to be any sign of it stopping. It is no surprise then that today we are seeing a resurgence of more or less detailed proposals for alternatives to our impasse(s). The global crisis of work, the accelerating effects of the Anthropocene (or, as Ciara Cremin astutely corrects us: the Capitococene), the housing crisis here in the UK, the general crisis of the welfare state – to name a few – all suggest not merely the desirability of new, large-scale system change but also its necessity.

Utopian blueprints vary wildly from the provocatively absurd to the powerfully coherent, and each expresses to a greater or lesser degree a set of normative assumptions about what a better society should do (and sometimes how we can get there). Often, the values that different utopias propose to realise are the same:

freedom, democracy, happiness, peace, etc. Hence the importance – for the most effective utopian thinking – of rigorous analyses of present problems on the one hand and more or less detailed solutions to these problems on the other. It is perhaps by these yardsticks (the grasp of the present, the desirability of the aims and the practicality of the solutions) that we can measure the nuances of 'good' versus 'bad' utopian thought. Erik Olin Wright's "real utopias" method is an example of the former: it is candid about its ethics, pragmatic in its worldview and radically disrespectful towards the present organization of things. This brief interview gives us a succinct introduction to his work and by doing so it provokes us into following in the utopians' footsteps by constructing models of better worlds ourselves. Many thanks to Devi Sacchetto and Erik Olin Wright for conducting the interview and for making it available via Autonomy.

Will Stronge

Devi Sacchetto: In these last years you have developed a renewed understanding of an alternative to capitalist production. This alternative is connected to “real utopias”. Could you explain us your work on this subject and how this work is going to be developed?

It is always a challenge to say something sensible about alternatives to the world as it exists, especially to something as complex as a social system. Comprehensive blueprints for alternative ways of organizing society always seem contrived, and certainly speculative. This is one of the reasons why Marx was always skeptical of such efforts. Still, without some way of thinking about of alternatives, the world as it becomes naturalized as the only possibility. The idea of “real utopias” is one way of tackling this problem.

The analysis begins by specifying the values one would like to see embodied in our social institutions. I refer this task as elaborating the normative foundations of an emancipatory social science. In my work, I have focused mainly on three clusters of values: equality and fairness, democracy and freedom; and community and solidarity. These normative foundations serve two purposes: First, they provide the basis for a diagnosis and critique of capitalism by identifying the way in which the capitalist organization of an economy systematically imposes deficits on these values. Second, they provide us with a standard for judging alternatives. The emancipatory alternative to capitalism is an economic system embodying the values of equality, democracy and solidarity.

It is one thing to announce the values or principle that animate an alternative, and another to specify the actual institutional design that would best realize those values. We want an economy that is deeply, robustly democratic. But what does that mean in

practice? What institutional designs would best realize the values of equality and fairness? These are hard questions and quite vulnerable to facile answers that are inattentive to complexity and unintended consequences.

I use the idea of “real utopias” as a way of steering a course between the speculative elaboration of comprehensive blueprints for the future and vague visions that talk about emancipation without specifying anything about how institutions would actually work. The “utopia” in real utopia identifies the emancipatory values of such vision; the “real” looks for practical ways of creating institutions embodying those values. This involves two sorts of analyses. First, the study of real utopias involves studying concrete examples in the world that embody, if only imperfectly, anti-capitalist principles congruent with emancipatory values. This includes such things as worker-owned cooperatives, participatory budgeting, the social and solidarity economy, public libraries, intentional communities, and many other things. The key issues are to understand how these institutions work, what dilemmas they face, and what changes in their conditions of existence would facilitate their expansion. Second, the study of real utopias involves looking at proposals for new institutions that could be instituted within capitalist economies and which would expand emancipatory possibilities. This includes such things as unconditional basic income and new forms of democratic empowerment, such as randomly selected citizen legislative assemblies.

The basic strategic thinking around both of these lines of research is that the emancipatory transcendence of capitalism depends on expanding the weight of noncapitalist structures and practices within capitalist economies in such a way that these immanent alternatives could eventually erode the dominance of capitalism.

DS: Do you think that an anticapitalistic strategy could be embedded into workers' movements or do you think we would need other kinds of social movements?

Yes to both parts of the question. If workers' movements aspire to realizing the fundamental interests of workers – creating conditions of life for human flourishing – then those movements need to go beyond what I call ameliorative struggles, struggles which try simply to make things better without regard to the long-term transformation of conditions of life. Ameliorative struggles are valid, of course; but we also need reforms that attempt to create building blocks of a more emancipatory future: deeper democracy in the economy, the state and in civil society. Such reforms are sometimes called “nonreformist reforms” – reforms that expand, rather than cut off, the possibility for future transformations. But here's the thing: such building blocks are also in the interests of a wide range of social identities beyond the working class and are thus congruent with the aspirations of many popular social movements. Anti-capitalism is a way of uniting workers' movements and many other social movements -- movements concerned with the environment and diverse forms of oppression and disadvantage (gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, marginalization) – because in different ways capitalism obstructs social emancipation for all of these identities.

DS: Since the 1980s, with your exception, most of the analysis on labor has no longer taken the question of class into account. Also the recent social movements in the U.S. and in Europe do not seem class-based (Occupy, 15M, etc). Do you think the question of class remains important in the current situation worldwide?

This depends, of course, on what one means by “class.” My view is quite simple here: If capitalism is important for “the current situation worldwide” then class must be important, because one of the defining features of capitalism is its class structure. Class, as I use the concept, is about power relations. Capitalism is a particular way of organizing power over our economic life. In capitalism, the power to allocated investments is, to a large extent, in the hands of wealth holders and their proxies. So, unless you believe that it just doesn't matter that owners of capital have the power to use their wealth as they wish -- to invest and disinvest, to move their capital around the world to maximize their rates of returns, to influence politics – then class remains massively important. This is not the same as saying that the class identity of workers remains as important as in the past. There are all sorts of reasons why working class identity is a less cohesive force in the world. Working class identity as the basis for working class collective action has been undermined, to be sure. And this poses challenges for challenging capitalism. Without going into detail here, I think this is the result both of structural factors (increasing fragmentation and heterogeneity in the specific contexts of employment) and political factors (the individualization of risks as a result of neoliberal policies, especially those around privatization of responsibilities for risk). But this does not imply that class as a structure of relations of power has declined at all as a cause of the conditions of life of people or a determinant of forms of conflict.

DS: In his latest books, Jeremy Rifkin (*The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism*) writes that capitalism is over. The emerging Internet of Things will eclipse capitalism. What do you think about this big technology transformation we are experiencing?

Rifkin has certainly identified an important transformation in the world today, but he grossly exaggerates its impact. The first sentence of his book *The Zero Marginal Cost Society* is “The era of capitalism is over.” To say the least, that is wild hyperbole. The rationale kernel in his analysis is that the informational technology revolution has generated an increasing contradiction – to use a classical Marxist formulation – between the forces and relations of production. Intellectual property rights are increasingly precarious in a digital world, which is what partially explains the desperate efforts by governments to shore them up. I would point to two critical features of the technological changes. First, a dramatic reduction in many spheres of production in the returns to scale. This facilitates decentralized, modular, local production, which in turn makes more democratic organization of production easier. Second, the internet and associated technologies have greatly increased the ease of communication and coordination among large number of people at great physical distance. This opens the possibility for things like Wikipedia and other forms of peer-to-peer collaboration unthinkable only a short while in the past. All of this makes emancipatory alternatives more sustainable if we can transform the power relations within which economic activities are organized. That is a big “if”, of course. Rifkin is simply wrong that those power relations will somehow dissolve under the weight of their irrationality.

DS: In Western countries some critics even speak of “platform capitalism” as a new and more participatory economic model. These firms are apparently without employees. Is platform capitalism changing the form of labour?

Platform economies are part of a more general trend in the neoliberal era of turning the conventional employment relation into various forms of subcontracting. Even before the emergence of digital platforms, in some sectors employers were turning employees into self-employed subcontractors. This is what happened in the US in the trucking industry in the 1980s. Most long-haul truckers with gigantic rigs are self-employed, owning (through complex, and usually predatory leasing arrangements) their own rigs. This is pretty much the same as Uber, but before the digital platform made this easier. This is indeed a new form of oppressive, exploitative domination of labor that makes it much harder for workers to form collective organizations for struggle. This will require political change and new labor legislation.

DS: In the last thirty years many scholars described capitalism with the idea of a global value chain and global network of production. Do you think that these categories are helpful to understand the new structure of capitalism?

There is no doubt that production is organized in a complex structure of global value chains and networks. Any given final product is assembled from inputs – raw materials and parts – made from around the world. This is clearly important in terms of understanding the dynamics of the system as a whole as well as the potential for different kinds of resistance. But it is also important not to overstate the impact of globalization in these terms. A lot of economic activity remains local and locally

rooted. There is often more room to maneuver than people think, especially on taxation. In the heyday of social democracy, most taxation that was used to fund the welfare state came from redistributive taxation among wage earners, not transfers from capitalist profits to the state. Taxation on mobile assets has always been pretty limited. The critical issue was the level of solidarity among wage earners and their willingness to see their quality of life as dependent on what could be called the social wage rather than just their private wage.

DS: One of your powerful categories of analysis has been that of working class power and the distinction between structural and associational power. More recently some scholars have been questioning it. They have underlined that in a situation of weakening unions, workers are using more and more their mobility power and social power, i.e. by organizing support from outside the workplace. Is this a form of social power, or is it something else?

Social power is power that comes from the capacity for collective actions connected to voluntary association. That is why labor unions were such a pivotal source of social power. It is certainly the case that the erosion of union power has weakened working class associational power, and so far at least, social power rooted in civil society associations outside of the workplace has not been able to compensate for this decline. The result is what could be called more broadly a decline in popular power. I do think this is a very serious issue. Even though my perspective on anticapitalism gives considerable space for initiatives from below that do not confront the state – what I have called interstitial transformations – the effectiveness of these strategies to cumulatively have much effect on eroding capitalism does depend on state actions of all sorts, and these are unlikely without new forms of popular power.

DS: What do you think of the working class movement in China? Do you think it will be able to impact Western working class movements?

I don't have a refined enough sense of working class movements in China to say much about these. I would like to think that there is an increasing sense of class identity among workers in China that is being translated into collective organization and collective struggles. There are certainly many instances of protests and disruptions. But I don't really have a sense of whether or not this is having a cumulative effect on stable, collective organization and power.

DS: Working class movements in Western countries appear to be very weak in our time. They have been hit by the offshoring of production, but also by a strong segmentation based on gender and race issues. In recent times in the U.S. and Europe some of the most important protests have been supported by migrant workers. Do you think migrant workers coming to the West will be able to change the Western working class movements?

In the US, migrant labor is so vulnerable to deportation that it is hard to see it as a kind of vanguard. I suspect that is true in Europe as well. Also, migrant labor protests often feed into the racial and ethnic divisions, and so it isn't clear that this by itself would foster the kinds of new solidarities needed for a regeneration of working class movements. But I would also say that any sustainable rejuvenation of working class movements has include migrant labor – this divide has to be bridged. This has happened in the past in some places. In the United States in the 19th and early 20th century, at least some immigrant groups saw as a central task building solidarity across immigrant communities and with the native-born American workers. This was especially notable in those immigrant groups influenced in the 20th century by Marxism, like the Finns. But just as frequently such efforts fell apart.

The interview was translated into Italian for Il Manifesto in June 2017: <https://ilmanifesto.it/utopie-reali-in-attesa-del-sole-dellavvenire/>

Erik Olin Wright is Vilas Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin. He is one of the United States' foremost Marxist sociologists of class and the author of many books, including *Classes*, *Interrogating Inequality*, *Class Counts*, and *Envisioning Real Utopias* (part of the Real Utopias project).

Devi Sacchetto is a researcher of Sociology of Work at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Padua. He is one of Italy's leading sociologists of work and the author of numerous books including *Ai margini dell'Ue: Spostamenti e insediamenti a Oriente* (a cura di, Carocci 2011) and *Fabbriche galleggianti: Solitudine e sfruttamento dei nuovi marinai* (Jaca Book 2009).

.....

Autonomy Research Limited
info@autonomy.work
@Autonomy_UK